

Communities of practice in sociolinguistic description: Analyzing language and identity practices among black women in Appalachia

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the identities of eight women who share similar demographic profiles but exhibit different language practices. These middle-aged and older women belong to two social groups which, we argue, constitute two communities of practice within a small black Appalachian community in the Southern United States. From interview data, we analyze six diagnostic sociolinguistic variables (third singular -s absence, copula absence, rhoticity, consonant cluster reduction, habitual be) and also examine productions of /u/ and /o/. The groups differ significantly in their use of the morphosyntactic and syntactic variables and in their vowel productions, but not the consonantal features. Combining our quantitative findings with qualitative data, we suggest language is one of several vehicles the women use to transmit symbolic messages to others and thereby construct identities for themselves and their groups, whose members adhere to different language ideologies, religious norms, notions of feminine decorum, and educational standards.

KEYWORDS: AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH, APPALACHIAN ENGLISH, COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE, BLACK APPALACHIAN, AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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Introduction to the study

To conceptualize how the study of sociolinguistic variation has evolved, Penelope Eckert has delineated three waves of analytic practice (2005: 1). The first wave examined the relationship between linguistic variation and major demographic categories within large populations in the urban centers of America (e.g., Labov 1966; Wolfram 1969). The second wave adopted a more ethnographic approach concerned with analyzing social structures in local context (e.g., Milroy 1987; Nichols 1983; Rickford 1986). Building upon findings from the first and second waves, the third wave has initiated a focus on how structures are locally articulated, with more attention to individual style.¹ These studies (e.g., Eckert 2000; Ochs 1992) typically question the idea of speech communities as being homogeneous entities in which individual speakers are indicative of broader social types. Third wave researchers no longer take the perspective that language variants function as identity markers of the groups that use the forms most often. Rather, variants are viewed as being fluid and as functioning together to index qualities and stances, which in turn construct the social categories they have been believed to index.

Eckert (2005: 16) sees the primary strength of the third wave as being its concern with connecting the local to the structural, often through the use of a community of practice (CofP) approach which, as its name suggests, centers fundamentally on social practice. According to Wenger (1998: 76), a CofP consists of a loosely defined group of people who are mutually engaged in a particular task and who have 'a shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time'. As such, Wenger (1998) specifies three criteria (all or some of which may overlap) for the identification and classification of a CofP: mutual engagement of members, a jointly negotiated enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Some examples of a CofP are a friendship group, quilting group, sports team, devotional group, etc. Within CsofP, some individuals may be core members, whereas others may play only more peripheral roles. Members may belong to many different CsofP, which may nest or overlap. In this framework, people are aware of what is necessary to be a member of their CsofP, and they can participate in them to varying degrees (Meyerhoff 2002: 533).

As Lave and Wenger (1991: 52–3) summarize, this approach 'suggests a very explicit focus on the person, but as person-in-the-world, as member of a sociocultural community'. As individuals engage in shared social practice within CsofP, their actions, including common ways of speaking, shape and are shaped by their social identities. As specific social, including linguistic, practices index local meanings within the CofP, it becomes a site for understanding connections between these practices and broader social structures (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999). These structures are created, enacted,

and challenged over time by agents according to relevant social constraints and perceptions of what is appropriate within CsofP. At the same time, social ideologies and collective representations endemic to social structures (and reinforced in interaction) affect the perceptions and experiences of individual agents in ways that interact in their influence on group and individual identity (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999: 191). Thus, every individual is a member of many social groups as well as a member of society, which impacts individuals and groups alike, via ideologies and socialization mechanisms.

Nowhere in quantitative and qualitative sociolinguistic traditions have third wave and CofP studies been as salient as in the subfield of language and gender (e.g., Bucholtz 1999; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999, 2007; Ehrlich 1999; Ostermann 2003). Yet, there remains a gap in both the language and gender literature and the CofP literature with regard to studies of the language of girls and women of color from various class and/or regional backgrounds – despite the overwhelming prevalence of African American English (hereafter, AAE) as a topic of sociolinguistic inquiry (Foster 1995; Morgan 2004). In the small body of sociolinguistic research on African American women, scholars emphasize the need to investigate complexity and heterogeneity (with regard to internal as well as external factors) in the language use of this group. The early work of Mitchell-Kernan (1972), Houston (1985), and Nichols (1983) revealed that the language of African American women should not be thought of as solely a more standard version of men's. Indeed, there is considerable variation in their linguistic practice, as Foster (1989, 1995), Lanehart (2002), Morgan (2002, 2007), Scott (2000), Troutman (2001), and Wilkerson (2004) have more recently noted.

In this study, we examine language variation among rural Appalachian black women. We build on the variationist research tradition by analyzing the language of these speakers not only by traditional demographic variables but also with regard to how these factors interact in social practice. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, we analyze the speech of two social groups of women who, we argue, constitute distinct CsofP, each its own instantiation of the intersection between Appalachian and African American identity.

The setting, data, and methods

In the American imaginary, the region known as Appalachia is typically envisaged as a rustic, poverty-stricken place where hardened families – poor, white mountaineers – live by old-fashioned values. Social judgments about the dialect spoken by Appalachians are similarly stereotypical, with Appalachian English (hereafter, AE) being variously cast as quaint, backwards, 'Elizabethan,' and 'bad' English (Montgomery 1998; Hazen and Fluharty 2006). Yet, despite being stereotyped as an area with little racial or ethnic diversity (Beaver and Lewis

1996; Hayden 2004; Ostwalt and Pollit 2001), non-white communities have persisted in Appalachia since its early settlement period. One such community is the independent black settlement known as Texana, North Carolina.

Texana is the largest black Appalachian community located west of Asheville, North Carolina; its location in the Appalachian region of the US is indicated in Figure 1. Details about Texana are few and far between, documented only in some local histories. The most consistently documented part of the Texana story is how the community got its name. Around 1850, a black family from a neighboring part of the state settled in the area and named the developing community after their daughter, Texana. Currently, around 150 residents live in Texana, in approximately 65 households. Many Texana residents have African, Cherokee, and Irish-European ancestors, which is the case for most Appalachians of color (Dunaway 2003). As a result of their mixed ancestry, many Texana residents feel that their heritage is often more diverse than the single term 'African American' denotes. As a result, many Texanans call themselves 'black,' which they say is a designation based on the color of their skin rather than on any one ethnic identity.²



Figure 1: Location of Texana, North Carolina, within the Appalachian region of the US

As colleagues who shared interests in both AE and AAE, we (the authors) were intrigued by what the linguistic crossroads of regional and cultural identity might look like in this unique community, and we decided to pursue a socio-linguistic study of Texana. To date, a relatively small but expanding body of literature has begun to investigate ethnic variation in AE. Anderson (1998) examines phonetic variation within the language of Native Americans living in Appalachia and considers the relationship to local white Appalachian speech. Similarly, Mallinson and Wolfram's (2002) study of the tiny community of Beech Bottom analyzes data from a small corpus of multiethnic speakers in relation to the surrounding white community.

As two white Southern American women in their mid-twenties, our own subjectivities as researchers proved both helpful and challenging. During time spent in the community, we often heard ourselves referred to as 'you girls' or 'them two white girls' by Texana residents. These references suggest how our identities were intersectionally perceived by Texana residents, with regard to our race, gender, and age. With regard to race, debate remains in sociolinguistics as to whether black fieldworkers are better suited to collecting vernacular speech data from black informants (see, for example, Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994, but see also Cukor-Avila and Bailey 2001). The question remains what kind of different experience black fieldworkers might have had in Texana, and whether the experience would have helped or hindered data collection – both with regard to language data, as well as qualitative data about the community, its history, and its dynamics. With regard to gender, being young women proved invaluable in aligning us with women residents in the community. They gave us access to their social networks, invited us to some of their events and activities, and ultimately provided us the insight into the two CsofP that formed the basis for this study. As fieldworkers, we also drew on our identities as young Southerners, who were familiar with the local area as well as with North Carolina, Southern culture, and Appalachian culture more generally. Being able to discuss familiar topics with residents, like local news and sports, undoubtedly helped us gain rapport.

From May 2002 to June 2005, we made 19 research visits to Texana. We began by contacting a local folklorist, who worked at a school that employed two middle-aged women from Texana: Emily and Michelle.³ We met them on our first visit, explaining that we were working on a project about language and culture in different North Carolina communities. We recorded our first interview with Emily and Michelle and then took their advice to call Gail Ann, who they said knew a lot about Texana. These three women became our key informants, along with Zora, Emily's sister-in-law and Gail Ann's close friend.

To obtain conversational speech data for linguistic analysis, our primary method of data collection was conducting interviews. We chose a casual, unstructured interview style that was intended to allow interviewees to talk at length on their own terms and minimize the effects of the 'observer's paradox' (Labov 1972). In total, we collected 40 interviews of 60 to 90 minutes with 49 community members (Childs and Mallinson 2004). We also observed residents' behaviors, styles, and habits. The sociolinguistic perspective entails situating linguistic data within the context of the community, and these qualitative data about speakers' statuses, norms, and attitudes became relevant to our study.

The major components of our research strategy – interviewing and observing – are characteristic of the qualitative research technique of naturalistic inquiry. Less in-depth than long-term participant observation, naturalistic inquiry still entails attending to individuals' spontaneous behavior in their natural setting (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen 1993). A strength of naturalistic research is that it provides a means to develop an understanding of locally meaningful categories. As Lippi-Green (1989: 213) maintains, 'it is possible to account for variation in speech communities – particularly small or rural ones – on the basis of social and cultural factors once the relevant community structures have been identified'. The community-specific information that most shaped our understanding of local social categories in Texana was coming to view two groups of women as constituting CsofP. Ultimately, the selection of speakers for this research was dictated by the social configuration of these two groups, since identifying the women members and understanding their social and linguistic practices depended on interpreting data gathered during fieldwork, just as being able to interpret the linguistic and social data we gathered depended on our understandings of the women's social dynamics.

The decision to examine two CsofP in Texana was made during the early stages of fieldwork, when we began to notice social divisions among several women. In July 2002, Gail Ann invited us to attend an evening meeting at the Texana church, where she and other women gathered weekly to discuss devotional readings and catch up on local events. In this way, we met the core members of the group of middle-aged women we came to call the 'church ladies'.⁴ At nearly the same time, we noticed the habits of another women's group. In June 2002, we were invited by Michelle and Emily to join one of their group's evening front porch visits. The interactions of the 'porch sitters' are exclusively informal; they meet when they get off work and visit together for a few hours – talking, laughing, gossiping, and monitoring the goings-on in Texana for a few hours – until they decide to go home.

Once we had identified these two groups as being potential CsofP, we observed them more closely and interviewed them in a variety of configurations, locations, and contexts. Both the church ladies and the porch sitters were interviewed once as a group at its usual place of interaction (at the devotional meeting and on the porch of the trailer, respectively). Each group member was also recorded either in a solo interview, a dyad, or a triad interview. Some members were interviewed in every possible combination (solo, dyad, triad, and CofP). During the solo, dyad, and triad interviews, locales varied to include the homes of the women while they were visiting one another, their front porches and patios, and kitchens. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, which yielded 3 to 6 hours of conversation with each of the women.

The communities of practice

The church ladies

The church ladies consist of four women: Gail Ann, Zora, Joan, and Gina (ages 70, 48, 72, and 49 at the time of the group interview). During the most concentrated period of field visits in Texana (2002–2004), the group met Wenger's (1998: 76) criteria of having members who are mutually engaged in a jointly negotiated enterprise and who have accumulated a shared repertoire of resources. Gail Ann was a founder of the women's weekly devotional group. In 2002, she invited us to attend their meeting, which occurred weekly at the Texana church.⁵ Although as many as 21 participants attended since it began in 1998, Gail Ann, Zora, Joan, and Gina were 'regulars.' After their meeting, we interviewed these four women and two other members for an hour; we then set up subsequent interviews with Gail Ann, Zora, Joan, and Gina.

On the one hand, it could be possible to see the church ladies as being a kinship group, or a small social network (Milroy 1987). Yet, we contend that either analysis would be limited. For one, it could be argued that the entire small Texana community represents a social network with 'dense, multiplex ties.' Second, in Texana, many women are related to each other and are even 'double kin.' For example, Gina said there are only about three families in Texana to which she is not related. Among the church ladies, Gina, Gail Ann, and Zora are all first or second cousins. Furthermore, the church ladies are also variously related to the porch sitters; for example, Zora is a cousin of all of the porch sitters. Finally, kinship and membership in the same small community/network does not necessitate social interaction; that is, just because the church ladies are variously related to each other does not mean they would necessarily choose to spend time together.

Perhaps the best evidence of the church ladies as comprising a CofP is the story of how they disbanded from the local church. In 2004, unhappiness over leadership in the Texana church prompted the church ladies to leave (which also ended their participation in the devotional group). The fights within the church also caused schisms in the broader Texana community – family members no longer talking, friendships ending – that the church ladies said, with great chagrin, nearly tore Texana apart. In a sense, the church ladies' difficult decision to break with the church confirmed the church ladies as a CofP. By leaving as a group, they underscored their shared ideologies and differentiated themselves from other women who attend the Texana church as well as from factions within Texana at large.

In this research, we primarily gathered data from interviews with the church ladies while they were still members of the church. Also included, however, are two interviews with Gail Ann and one with Zora after the split, in which the woman talked openly about the schism and its after-effects. The feud, which had begun to dissipate by the end of our period of fieldwork in 2005, emphasizes the significance of local politics (in the form of alliances, alignments and realignments) in a small community. The situation in Texana echoes other research on small communities, such as that by Watkins (1997). She critiques the trope of the tight knit, supportive rural village by pointing out that the community is just as capable of building differences and marginalizing those who are different as it is at building unity.

The church ladies' demeanor and style were relatively formal during the interactions we had with them. For one, the women used honorifics to refer to each other, frequently calling each other 'Miss Joan' or 'Ms. Gina' in conversation. In addition, they also occasionally used each other's double (first and middle) names – a particularly Southern American habit. These address terms and honorifics thus mark the church ladies' regional orientation and their relative formality (at least, in the contexts in which we were present). The church ladies also typically dressed more formally, wearing dress pants or skirts, jumpers, blouses, and flats or canvas tennis shoes. None of church ladies had African-influenced hairstyles like braids, and none of their hair fell past the nape of their necks. Joan's and Gina's hair typically was worn in small, close-cropped curls, while Zora's was relaxed and wavy, often dyed a coppery bronze or blonde, with short bangs.

Behaviors that the church ladies highlighted, as well as those that they hid, also reveal these women's underlying personal and group ideologies. For example, the church ladies often apologized for or covered up their undesirable habits, such as smoking. The women also talked frequently about housework and manners. Gail Ann invariably apologized for the state of her house and

for her appearance. On one occasion when we were interviewing her husband, she interrupted to say, 'I bet y'all think I'm filthy, but this is that dog's feet. I just looked down and I said, 'cause I put this shirt on clean this morning, I said that's where [that came from]!' The church ladies also celebrate proper manners, just as they do proper housekeeping. For example, Gail Ann reported that Gina's son is very well behaved, while Gina reported that many of her son's friends are not as mannerly. '[One kid] just walked in the house, went straight, I thought where are you going, went straight to my refrigerator, got him a soda out, and went on out the door! ((laughter)) And I thought, did I just now see what I just saw?'

Three of the four church ladies are relatively well-off, financially. Three of them live in relatively spacious brick or wood houses and have worked in steady, so-called 'pink-collar' jobs that center on service, care work, and education (e.g., in the state Forest Service office, for the Department of Social Services, for Head Start, and with the developmentally disabled). These jobs do not require advanced degrees; one of these women has a nursing certificate, but the others have no formal training beyond high school. Gina, however, does not have a solid financial situation. She is a single parent and is the only church lady to have mentioned that she has worked blue-collar jobs. Gina's economic position exemplifies the idea that subjectivities related to status are locally as well as materially constructed. Gina holds status in the community via church involvement and association with the other church ladies, which maintains her social and cultural capital, despite having less economic capital. Through their styles, behaviors, and ideologies, all the church ladies create a lifestyle that centers on distinctions related to economic and cultural capital.

Another avenue that the church ladies pursue to strengthen their community is to engage in community social action. According to Hill (2005: 30), African American women have often worked to strengthen their families and communities and achieve racial uplift through community work and activism in the areas of health, education, housing, and economic development. The church ladies belong to community development organizations, are involved in oral history projects, help host annual Martin Luther King, Jr. breakfasts at the community center, lead the youth choir, teach Vacation Bible School, and implement heritage day at the Texana church. The church ladies say these practices are vital if Texana's history is to be kept from dying out. As Zora summed up, 'I think just getting, trying to get back to the basics and you know, I think that's what our black community need to go, we need to go back to the basics.' Getting 'back to basics' ties into the church ladies' general vigilance, circumspection, and wariness toward change in Texana. They contend that

outsiders bring with them the habits of the 'city life' – in particular, drug use. As Zora explained, 'What trouble we're having now is a lot of people that's come in. ... it's been like drugs and, you know, bringing that kind of thing in'. More generally, the church ladies dislike that outsiders are moving into Texana from the large metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia ('the city'). The church ladies posit a fundamental difference between themselves and city folk – in mentality as well as in attested personality traits, morals, and standards. They use these traits as the basis for a rural/urban dichotomy employed to identify residents whom they deem positive members of the community versus those who are not.

As has been described, the church ladies project a sensible and feminine style, espouse moralistic and religious ideologies, and engage in status displays that center on middle class values of propriety. In addition to their self-presentation, the church ladies also define other women in part by how they talk. In one interview, Zora brought up the image of the renowned woman boxer, Leila Ali: 'She's a lady, she's really a lady, you know? When you see her on talk shows and stuff? She really carries herself well and she speaks well, you know'. Even in the face of Ali's participation in a violent sport, Zora still views her manner and speech as being feminine and estimable. For the church ladies, status is indicated by 'good language,' just as by proper manners and demeanor.

The porch sitters

The porch sitters consist of four women – Emily, Michelle, Debbie, and Melissa (age 44, 47, 41, and 65 at the time of the group interview). During our most concentrated period of fieldwork (2002–2004), the porch sitters similarly met Wenger's (1998: 76) criteria of a CofP. They had been gathering together since Michelle and Emily started working together, and few other women ever joined them.

Much like the church ladies, the porch sitters also underwent a sudden change in early 2004; theirs was due to Michelle passing away from cancer. Following Michelle's death, the remaining women now only gather once a week, usually on Sunday afternoons and not always on the porch. The CofP has dissolved, as the women are no longer mutually engaged in the joint enterprise under which the CofP formed.

In this paper, we draw data primarily from interviews that were collected from the porch sitters when Michelle was alive, as well as two conducted with Melissa and Emily about six months after her death. Analyses are primarily based upon the porch sitters with Michelle included, not only because she was

part of the CofP when most of the fieldwork was conducted, but also because she was perhaps the most dynamic member of the group.

In our first interview with the porch sitters as a group, we joined them one evening on their usual turf – the small deck of Melissa's small ('single-wide') mobile home. The atmosphere at their gatherings was overwhelmingly casual, and these women presented themselves as laid-back and informal. Their typical clothing style entailed wearing t-shirts or sweatshirts, shorts and windpants, and flip-flops or sports sandals. Three of the four porch sitters wore more elaborate, trendy, and African-influenced hairstyles, including corn rows, short braids, and micro braids – an intricate style that features many small, long, delicate braids. One of the porch sitters, Debbie, kept a short, natural, Jeri-curl hairstyle that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s. The hairstyles favored by the porch sitters – braids and Jeri-curl – are typically not available to white women; as Jacobs-Huey (2006) suggests, African American women's use of more traditional African or natural hairstyles may be seen as challenging and resisting Eurocentric standards of beauty.

In keeping with their informal and familiar style, the porch sitters all use family nicknames for each other, like 'Ladybug' and 'Puff'. The porch sitters came from humble origins and grew up near or with each other. In fact, the four porch sitters comprise a near-kinship group at the same time they comprise a social group. Melissa, Debbie, and Michelle are sisters, and they share several points of connection to Emily (as cousins, work colleagues, neighbors, and sisters-in-law). With the many interconnected kinship ties among these four women, it would be possible (as with the church ladies) to classify the porch sitters as being a kinship group or a small social network. But again, we contend that either analysis would be limited. For one, as noted earlier, the entire small Texana community could be viewed as a social network (Milroy 1987). Second, kinship and membership in the same small community/network does not necessitate social interaction. For example, Debbie, Michelle, and Melissa do not hang out with their other two sisters, both of whom live nearby, which indicates that families in Texana are not impenetrable social groups. Similarly, Zora and Emily are sisters-in-law and neighbors, yet they have markedly different social circles. The porch sitters' *choice* to engage in regular, sustained social interaction with each other seems to be the source of their group identity and shared linguistic norms, rather than kinship or work relationships. Yet, at the same time, this classification illustrates that CsofP can overlap and may not be discrete.

The women live in small mobile homes or apartments, and most of them have worked in food service and in plants – labor that sociologists call the most 'alienating' (Crowley 2006). One of the porch sitters is married, one is divorced,

and two have never been married. Three have children, and two have raised a child of one of their siblings. All the women are invested in the activities of their children and/or nieces and nephews, particularly with regard to sports. They often travel to watch high school and college games; as Debbie put it, 'I got to go and watch the football'. At the same time, the porch sitters claim to like the freedom acquired from children leaving home. They say they want their children to be independent and say they allow their children freedom, within limits. Michelle, for example, told us the story of how she took her son to Atlanta, Georgia, to get a tattoo because 'he wasn't old enough to get a tattoo on his own'.

Partying came up as a frequent topic of conversation among the porch sitters. The women professed to enjoy parties, by which they seem to mean the social activity of hanging out with folks who are drinking alcohol. Most of the porch sitters' talk about partying centered on gatherings at a house directly across the street, visible from Melissa's elevated porch. In one interview, Emily pointed out, 'We set here and we can see fine, we ain't got to go up there, we KNOW what's going on'. A clear vantage point to see across the street, Michelle explained, is necessary because something gossip-worthy inevitably happens over at that house on weekends. The porch sitters often pass time with other family members, friends, and children inside Melissa's home as well. Once, we stopped by on a Sunday afternoon and stayed while Debbie, Michelle, and two of their brothers ate snack foods and played cards. In the midst of playing a hand, Michelle stopped to rhetorically ask why someone would want to get up early on Sunday and spend time in a church service that lasts late into the afternoon, rather than sleeping in and playing cards. These observations both confirm that church attendance is not a habit for the porch sitters and also suggest that they find intrinsic enjoyment in all their casual get-togethers, not just those centered on drinking.

Like the church ladies, the porch sitters appreciate Texana as a good place to live and do not want to move out of the community. Rather than being concerned with threats to the community from outsiders, however, the porch sitters talk most about problems with local whites, distinguishing between local whites in general and the 'rednecks' or 'crackers' who are most antagonistic toward Texanans. According to Michelle, the people in Texana 'get along good now' with local whites, except when 'the rednecks come up here' from a tiny all-white community near Texana – which, Michelle said bluntly, is a 'no black man land'. Debbie concurred that 'you better not go' to that community: 'Ohh, no no no. Keep the windows up'. In their discourse the porch sitters clearly mark rednecks as being different from most whites (namely, whites in general or whites they

know personally); rednecks are associated with prejudice, ignorance, and low class status. In clear contrast, the term 'redneck' was never used by the church ladies, who were also much more reticent about discussing racial tensions with whites in their interviews with us.

In sum, the qualitative data we have presented reveal two groups of women who are distinguished by their degree of investment in the community, affiliation with institutional (educational, religious) norms, and different adherence to ideologies about femininity. The church ladies project a conservative style, tend to hold higher-status jobs, and engage in status displays, such as going to church, talking about manners, dressing more expensively, and talking about housekeeping, that portray themselves as good, middle-class black women. The porch sitters project a more casual style. Their jobs afford them less access to economic, cultural, and social capital, and they communicate little concern about adhering to institutional expectations or norms. Turning from these data, which reveal patterns in the social practices of the two CsofP and their group-differentiated standpoints, we now turn to examine the church ladies' and porch sitters' linguistic habits and patterns.

African American English and Appalachian English in the communities of practice

Morphosyntactic, syntactic, and consonantal data

In this section, we reveal how the church ladies and porch sitters employ different rates of diagnostic linguistic variables in ways that parallel the social meanings they construct through their talk and habits. We examine five sociolinguistic variables, listed in Table 1 with examples.⁶ For each of these, we tabulate a rate of usage based on a ratio that divides actual occurrences of the variable by all of its potential occurrences, as is typical in variationist sociolinguistic research. These features are all well-documented as regionally, ethnically or socially stratified variables of American English (Bailey 2001; Cukor-Avila 2001; Rickford 1999; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006). Some of these variables, such as 3rd singular *-s* absence, are associated with AAE, while others, like past tense *be* leveling (Cukor-Avila 2001), are associated with both AAE and AE. The range of variables selected for analysis is deliberately inclusive of both types of structures in order to assess dialect alignment for the two groups of Texana women. In addition, we present findings on a sixth feature, habitual *be* (as in, *Those dogs be barking all the time*) (Bailey and Maynor 1985; Green 2000; Rickford 1986).⁷

Table 1: Five sociolinguistic variables

Variable	Example	Associated variety
3 rd singular -s absence	She <i>like</i> to eat	AAE
Copula absence with <i>is</i> and <i>are</i>	<i>She nice,</i> <i>They running</i>	AAE with <i>is</i> and <i>are</i> ; AE with <i>are</i>
past tense <i>be</i> leveling	We <i>was</i> running, We <i>wasn't</i> home	AAE and AE
prevocalic syllable-coda consonant cluster reduction	<i>bes' one</i> for <i>best one</i> , <i>wes' end</i> for <i>west end</i>	AAE
postvocalic <i>r</i> lessness	<i>brotha</i> for <i>brother</i> , <i>cah</i> for <i>car</i>	AAE

Third singular -s absence

One dimension of subject-verb concord is the optional attachment of -s to 3rd singular verbs, as in the sentence *The dog bark* (for the standard form, *The dog barks*). This feature is a well documented characteristic of AAE (Baugh 1983; Walker 2001) but surfaces rarely in AE.⁸ Thus, in Texana, the question is whether its speakers accommodate more toward the AE pattern – which tends to show very low levels of 3rd singular -s absence, regardless of whether the AE speakers are white or non-white (Wolfram and Christian 1976; Mallinson and Wolfram 2002) – or whether the speakers show the higher levels of 3rd singular -s absence that are characteristic of the supraregional AAE pattern.

Table 2 gives figures for the use of 3rd singular -s absence in the speech of the church ladies and the porch sitters. The church ladies have an extremely low rate for 3rd singular -s absence (less than five percent), whereas the porch sitters exhibit this feature at about 50 percent. Results from a Chi-square test showed a significant difference between the two groups' use of this feature ($\chi^2(1, N = 296) = 71.67, p < .001$). Whereas the porch sitters accommodate more to the typical African American realization of 3rd singular -s absence, the church ladies hardly use this feature at all, at levels more similar to those generally found in other Appalachian communities (cf. Wolfram and Christian 1976; Mallinson and Wolfram 2002).

Table 2: Third singular -s absence by community of practice

Community of practice	Absent/Total	Percent
Church ladies	6/129	4.65
Porch sitters	84/167	50.30

Copula absence

In the study of AAE, the analysis of the copula structure has received tremendous attention (see Baugh 1980, 1983; Fasold 1972; Labov 1969; Rickford 1997, 1998, 1999; Wolfram 1969). High levels of *is* and/or *are* absence – that is, the absence of copula and auxiliary for contractible forms of *is* and *are*, as in *She nice* for *She's nice* or *They running* for *They're running* – have been found by Labov (1969), Wolfram (1969), Fasold (1972), and Baugh (1983) for African American speakers in New York City, Detroit, Washington DC, and Los Angeles, respectively. As such, copula absence (particularly with *is*) has been amply documented as a structural trait of AAE. However, this feature is only found to a limited extent in white Southern varieties, including AE (Feagin 1979; Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Wolfram 1974; Wolfram and Thomas 2002). When it does occur, the absence tends to be with *are* rather than *is*.

Table 3 gives figures for copula absence by CofP.⁹ The church ladies have a significantly lower rate of copula absence than the porch sitters do, for both *are* absence ($\chi^2(1, N = 175) = 61.85, p < .001$) and *is* absence ($\chi^2(1, N = 364) = 76.07, p < .001$).¹⁰

Table 3: Copula absence with *are* and *is* by community of practice

Community of practice	Absent/Total	Percent Absent
Church ladies		
<i>are</i>	24/99	24.24
<i>is</i>	1/193	.52
Porch sitters		
<i>are</i>	64/76	84.21
<i>is</i>	59/171	50.30

Linguistic constraints on copula absence typically include the form of the copula (full, contracted, or deleted), the subject (noun phrase versus pronoun), and the type of predicate complement (predicate nominative, predicate adjective, locative, verb-*ing*, *gonna*) (see Baugh 1983; Labov 1969; Rickford 1997).¹¹ Table 4 gives the results of multivariate analysis conducted using Goldvarb 2001 (Robinson, Lawrence, and Tagliamonte 2001). A binomial step-up/step-down analysis revealed that community of practice, copula type, and following grammatical environment had significant effects on copula absence. An assessment of the relative strength of each statistically significant factor group by considering weights within each factor group reveals that the most strongly weighted factor group is community of practice, followed by copula type, followed by

following grammatical environment. In short, the findings suggest that while both the church ladies and the porch sitters are sensitive to the norms of AAE, the church ladies tend to avoid the use of AAE features (though not categorically), while the porch sitters do not.

Table 4: Multivariate analysis of copula absence for church ladies and porch sitters

Factor group	Factor weight		
Community of practice			
Church ladies	.188		
Porch sitters	.847		
Copula type			
<i>is</i>	.308		
<i>are</i>	.854		
Following environment			
Adj/nom/locative	.407		
<i>-ing/gonna</i>	.716		
Subject type			
Noun phrase	[.525]		
Pronoun	[.489]		
		Input probability	.152
		Log likelihood	-186.648
		Significance of run	.000***

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Past tense 'be' leveling

Due to the irregularity of person-number concord in the past tense of English, the verb *be* is highly vulnerable to leveling with plural subjects, a common process in vernacular varieties (Tagliamonte and Smith 1999; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006). Past tense *be* leveling is both a feature of AAE (Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968; Wolfram and Fasold 1974) and a feature of AE (Feagin 1979; Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Wolfram and Christian 1976), with both dialects leveling to *was*. Thus, in positive contexts, we find constructions such as 'Back when we was going to school'; *was*-leveling also occurs in negative contexts, as in 'We wasn't expected to know how to do it'.

Table 5 gives the raw figures and percentages for past tense *be* leveling in positive contexts (e.g., *we was*) and negative contexts (e.g., *we wasn't*) by CofP. As shown, the porch sitters exceed the church ladies in rates of leveling to *was* and *wasn't*, and Chi-square test results confirmed significant differences for the two women's groups ($\chi^2(1, N = 141) = 38.81, p < .001$ for leveling to *was*, and $\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 6.09, p < .05$ for leveling to *wasn't*).¹² As the analysis of past tense *be* leveling reveals, both the church ladies and the porch sitters use this vernacular feature. However, the porch sitters level to *was* and *wasn't* significantly more, and leveling to *wasn't* is favored overall. Since leveling to *was* and *wasn't* is a general vernacular structure, the results indicate that the porch sitters are generally more nonstandard than the church ladies.

Table 5: Leveling to *was* and *wasn't* by community of practice

Community of practice	Nonstandard/Total	Percent
Church ladies		
Positive (<i>was</i>)	29/86	33.72
Negative (<i>wasn't</i>)	11/18	61.11
Porch sitters		
Positive (<i>was</i>)	48/55	87.27
Negative (<i>wasn't</i>)	12/12	100.00

Postvocalic r-lessness

The first consonantal variable, postvocalic *r*-lessness – as in *motha* for *mother* or *cah* for *car* – plays a dual role as a marker of regional and ethnic dialect norms. On the one hand, AE is an *r*-ful dialect (Wolfram and Christian 1976), as is standard American English more generally. On the other hand, *r*-lessness, particularly in postvocalic positions, is often characteristic of AAE (Bailey and Thomas 1998; Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968; Wolfram 1969). We analyze postvocalic *r* in the speech of the church ladies and the porch sitters in three environments: in an unstressed syllable as in 'mother', as coda of a stressed syllable as in 'car', and as a component of a rhotacized vowel serving as a stressed nucleus as in 'hurt'. Each instance of potential postvocalic *r*-lessness was classified impressionistically as present or absent.¹³

Table 6: Postvocalic *r* by community of practice

Community of practice	Absent/Total	Percent
Church ladies		
Unstressed	15/145	10.34
Stressed	11/242	4.55
Nuclear	1/10	10.00
Porch sitters		
Unstressed	11/157	7.01
Stressed	6/220	2.73
Nuclear	0/9	0.00

Table 6 gives the raw figures and percentages for postvocalic *r* presence and absence in the three phonological contexts. Chi-square tests confirmed no significant differences in the church ladies' and porch sitters' rates of postvocalic *r*-lessness in unstressed ($\chi^2(1, n = 302) = 1.067, p = .314$), stressed ($\chi^2(1, N = 462) = 1.075, p = .333$), and nuclear ($\chi^2(1, N = 19) = .95, p = .999$) environments. As the data also suggest, overall levels of *r*-lessness among these Texana women are quite low – under around 10 percent in all contexts – and their *r*-lessness is generally limited to unstressed syllables, where it is the least salient perceptually. High levels of rhoticity are atypical of speakers of AAE, which suggests the church ladies and the porch sitters are accommodating to the regional dialect pattern for this feature.

Prevocalic syllable-coda consonant cluster reduction

The reduction of clusters of syllable-coda stops that share the feature of voicing (e.g. *west, cold, find, act*, etc., but not *jump, want, think*, etc.) is the second consonantal variable analyzed. Varieties of AAE are known for having extensive prevocalic cluster reduction in monomorphemic environments (as in, *The mis' is heavy* for *The mist is heavy*) and in bimorphemic environments (*He miss' another one* for *He missed another one*) (Fasold 1972; Guy 1980; Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968; Wolfram 1969; Wolfram, Childs, and Torbert 2000). In contrast, white vernacular varieties, including AE (Wolfram and Christian 1976), typically have no, or only trace amounts of, prevocalic consonant cluster reduction. Table 7 provides the percentages and raw figures for the church ladies' and porch sitters' rates of prevocalic cluster reduction, by morphological status of the consonant cluster. As can be seen in the chart, the church ladies and porch sitters have low rates of monomorphemic cluster reduction, and lower levels of bimorphemic cluster reduction. Their rates of reduction indicate greater alignment toward the norms of AE than those of AAE.¹⁴

Table 7: Prevocalic cluster reduction by community of practice

Speakers	Monomorphemic clusters		Bimorphemic clusters	
	Reduced/Total (%)		Reduced/Total (%)	
Church ladies	10/49	20.41	1/44	2.27
Porch sitters	12/41	29.27	4/63	6.35

To determine whether the church ladies and porch sitters differ significantly in their rates of consonant cluster reduction, we conducted a multivariate analysis using Goldvarb 2001 (Robinson, Lawrence, and Tagliamonte 2001). Results are given in Table 8. The analysis only included tokens in the prevocalic phonetic environment (e.g., *wes' end* for *west end*) since this type of reduction is the most diagnostic.¹⁵ In the analysis, we included two factor groups – community of practice and morphological status of the consonant cluster.¹⁶ A step-up-step-down binomial analysis revealed that only morphological status of the cluster had a significant effect on the occurrence of prevocalic cluster retention ($p < .001$), with bimorphemic clusters favored. The non-significance of community of practice as a factor group indicates that the church ladies and porch sitters do not differ significantly for this feature, and thus that the groups do not differ significantly in their alignment toward broader norms of AAE for this feature.

Table 8: Multivariate analysis of prevocalic syllable-coda consonant cluster reduction for church ladies and porch sitters

Factor group	Factor weight		
Morphological type			
Monomorphemic	.278		
Bimorphemic	.691		
Community of practice			
Church ladies	[.552]		
Porch sitters	[.452]		
		Input probability	.898
		Log likelihood	-67.217
		Significance of run	.000***

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Habitual be

Standard English has no way of distinguishing habituality for the verb *be*, but rather marks habituality with the present tense form of the copula (*is* or *are*) plus a word like *usually*, *typically*, *often*, or *regularly*. In contrast, AAE has developed the grammaticalized feature often called habitual *be* because of its ability to convey the aspect of habituality (see Alim 2003 for an overview). In our corpus, the porch sitters used habitual *be* eight times. Some of these instances include *When I be here through the day, I be listening to the radio* (Emily), *There all over them woods they be hunting* (Melissa), and *Town be full on Friday and Saturday nights* (Michelle). Emily even used one instance of what appears to be a past habitual *be*, in the phrase, *Whenever she did be in school*. In contrast, the church ladies had zero instances of habitual *be* from the hours of conversational data collected from them. Although these data are limited, it seems possible that the church ladies' non-use of this canonical feature of AAE is connected to the standard language ideologies they espouse – particularly their stigmatization of the 'slang' that they see as characterizing urban African American speech.¹⁷

Acoustic vowel data

We now analyze acoustic vowel data from the church ladies and the porch sitters, using an integration of sociolinguistic and acoustic phonetic methods. For the purposes of this study, we focus on /u/ and /o/, which have been noted as crucial sites for variation in world Englishes.¹⁸

The first vowel discussed here is /u/. The fronting of /u/ is one of the sound changes that comprises the so-called 'Southern Shift' – one of the two main vowel patterns of American English (Labov 1991; Thomas 2001). The Southern Shift – a series of sound changes that is generally considered to be completed among Southern white speakers – is characterized by the raising of short front vowels, the backing and lowering of high front vowels, the fronting of the back vowels in the words BOOT, PUT, and BOAT, and glide reduction of the /ai/ vowel as in BITE and BIDE.

While this sound change pattern encompasses the South as traditionally defined, the spread and advancement of the change is not uniform throughout the region. The Southern Shift is more advanced and widespread in its rural areas, and less so in its more urban areas. At the same time, considerable debate exists in the sociolinguistic literature as to whether African American speakers (living in the South or in Northern communities after having migrated from the South) participate in the Southern Shift and/or in local vowel patterns. As a result, research examining the vowel patterns of African Americans in and

outside the South has been a highly active area of sociophonetic investigation in recent years. Multiple studies (e.g., Anderson 2003; Fridland 2003; Mallinson and Wolfram 2002; Wolfram and Thomas 2002) now indicate that many African American speakers do participate in regional vocalic patterns, but they may also show mixed vocalic alignment – adapting pronunciations in ways that still align with local or regional patterns but that also reflect a speaker's ethnic status.

In the sample of speech collected from the church ladies and the porch sitters, we examined /u/ in pre-alveolar, pre-velar, and pre-labial environments. For the church ladies, 98 tokens of /u/ and 228 tokens of its counterpart /i/ were collected, by phonetic context (front and back counterparts of the vowel space are used to establish distance metrics for each vowel and speaker). For the porch sitters, token counts of /u/ and /i/ were 82 and 204, respectively. From the average values for the production of /u/ and /i/ seen in Table 9, we find that both groups are fronting /u/, but the extent differs, with the church ladies showing more fronted productions of /u/.

Table 9: /i/ and /u/ F2 values (in Hertz) at midpoint and offset for church ladies and porch sitters

CofP	/i/	/u/	Difference	/i/	/u/	Difference
	mid.	mid.	/i/-/u/ mid.	off.	off.	/i/-/u/ off.
Church ladies	2108	1638	470	2085	1665	420
Porch sitters	2206	1412	794	2190	1441	749

ANOVA tests were then performed to test whether there was a significant difference in the F2 distance metrics for /u/, accounting for not only the effect of CofP membership on F2 values, but also for phonetic context. Additionally, a separate ANOVA analysis was performed for both the midpoint and offset to insure that any significance was attributable to the entire vowel segment. F2 distance by CofP was significant at the midpoint ($F = 15.15, p < .01$), as well as the offset ($F = 10.75, p < .01$). Phonetic context was not significant as a single variable at either the midpoint or offset, nor was the interaction between CofP and phonetic context significant at the midpoint or offset. Finally, duration was considered, and results showed a significant difference in the duration of /u/ by CofP ($F = 8.03, p < .01$), with the church ladies having a mean /u/ duration (167 ms) longer than the porch sitters (139 ms). In sum, though all of the women used fronted /u/ variants, CofP membership was a significant indicator of the degree of /u/ fronting, with church ladies displaying fronting of /u/ more frequently, and of longer duration.

Similar to /u/, the vowel /o/ is important in this study because the /o/ fronting process, like other aspects of the Southern Shift, has been thought to best characterize the vocalic patterns of white speakers (Thomas 2001). Other work has also illuminated other social factors that seem to be at work in the fronting process, such as the interaction of gender and younger age (Eckert 2000; Hall-Lew 2004). In order to obtain a distance metric to quantify the fronting of /o/, the F2 value of /o/ is subtracted from the F1 value of /e/, /o/'s front counterpart (mean values are given in Table 10). This analysis of /o/, like that of /u/, considers the phonetic environments following /o/ in order to account for coarticulatory effects that following consonants may have on the fronting of /o/.

Table 10: /e/ and /o/ F2 values (in Hertz) at midpoint and offset for church ladies and porch sitters

CofP	/e/	/o/	Difference	/e/	/o/	Difference
	mid.	mid.	/e/-/o/ mid.	off.	off.	/e/-/o/ off.
Church ladies	2122	1418	704	2127	1478	649
Porch sitters	2052	1181	871	2136	1202	934

For the church ladies, 87 tokens of /o/ and 60 tokens of its counterpart /e/ were collected in pre-alveolar and pre-word boundary positions. For the porch sitters, token counts of /o/ and /e/ were 112 and 88, respectively. Like the analysis of /u/, large distance measures for the F2 distance between /e/ and /o/ were indicative of a more backed variant, while smaller distance metrics indicated a fronted variant. From the average F2 values for /o/ and /e/ at midpoint and offset for each of the communities of practice, it was determined that the porch sitters have the largest distance between /o/ and /e/ at both temporal locations, indicating they have a more backed variant of /o/ than the church ladies (that is, the church ladies front /o/ more). An ANOVA test was performed to determine whether there was a significant difference in the F2 distance metrics for /o/ among the church ladies and porch sitters. Results showed a significant effect for CofP in the F2 distance metrics between /o/ and /e/ at the midpoint ($F = 5.97, p < .05$). The data followed the same pattern for the offset, finding CofP to be the only significant factor ($F = 8.59, p < .05$). Unlike the analysis for /u/, duration was not found to significantly affect the production of /o/ for the church ladies or the porch sitters.

As the analyses of /u/ and /o/ indicate, there were subtle yet significant differences in the production of these vowels for the church ladies and the porch sitters, and Figure 2 represents these differences graphically. Ultimately,

although all of the women fronted /u/, the church ladies used more fronted variants than did the porch sitters. In addition, the church ladies also used /u/ variants that were significantly longer in duration than those of the porch sitters. This vocalic variation among the women is what is of interest for this study. The church ladies' use of an extreme fronted /u/ variant that is generally more characteristic of AE than of AAE seems to underscore their affiliation and identification with the local landscape. In contrast, even though the porch sitters use a fronted /u/ variant, their lack of participation in the extreme fronted productions that the church ladies use may be a linguistic means to distance themselves from the church ladies and/or the local community.

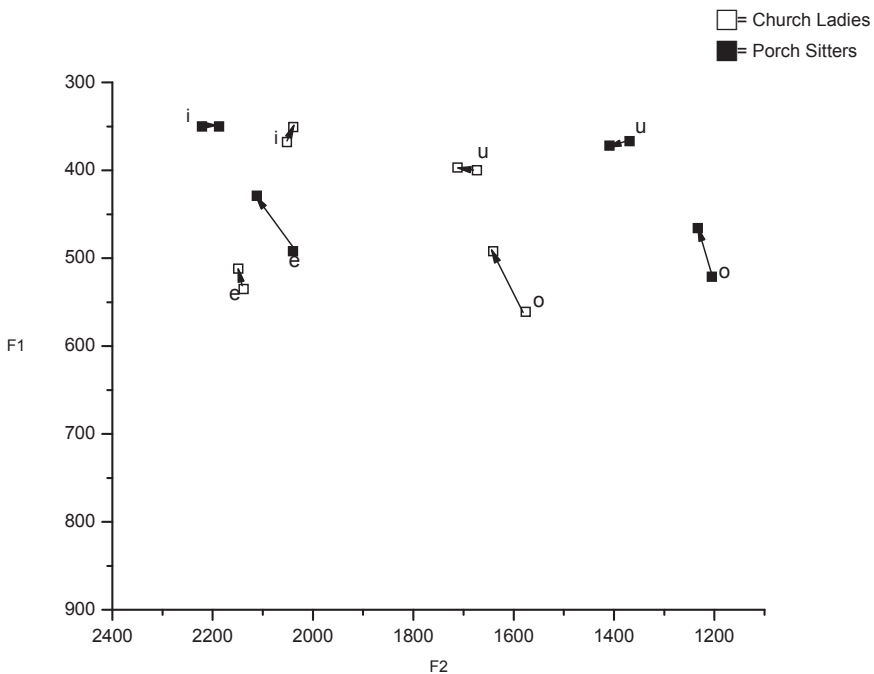


Figure 2: /u/ and /o/ vowel plots by community of practice

The fact that the church ladies are using fronted variants of /u/ and /o/ is of further interest, given expectations for the vowel productions of African American speakers from the sociophonetic literature. On the one hand, we might expect that both groups of women would front /u/, given the influence of AE on their speech and given the tendency for back vowel fronting to occur in nearly all English varieties around the world. On the other hand, the sociophonetic literature would predict that these women should be resisting high-back and mid-back vowel fronting due to their ethnicity (Labov 1994, 2001). Yet we find, as do Fridland (2001), Thomas (2001), and Anderson (2003),

that African American speakers may indeed adopt regional vocalic patterns, and that the extent to which they do so may be affected by other social factors, like social group membership. In this case, the Texana women's use of more or less fronted /u/ and fronted versus backed /o/ variants seems to reflect different orientations toward the community and local linguistic norms. The church ladies use variants that align more closely with those expected for Southern white speakers (Thomas 2001) and express disdain for what Zora and Gail Ann call 'slang' and 'city talk'. In comparison, the porch sitters use variants more expected of African American speakers (Thomas 2001), which may reflect this group's greater acceptance of extra-local norms and affiliation with the ideals of broader (urban) African American culture.

Discussion and conclusions

As our qualitative data has shown, the church ladies and the porch sitters are comprised of middle aged and older, rural black Appalachian women. All the women are in some way connected to each other via kinship ties, and the women generally work or have worked in blue- and white-collar jobs in the service sector. A focus solely on these objective similarities, however, would obscure the distinctions in social practices and ideologies that divide the women into discrete groups. Linguistic practice is one of the many social mechanisms at play as individuals and groups display status and create social distinctions and divisions. Since the church ladies hold standard language ideologies and are invested in the institution of education, and are also locally oriented and are resistant to outsider and urban influence, it is not surprising that they resist using AAE and nonstandard features that are used by the porch sitters. We thus begin to see a picture that suggests the porch sitters are significantly more nonstandard and also more aligned toward norms of AAE than are the church ladies.

With regard to the consonantal variables (prevocalic consonant cluster reduction and postvocalic *r*-lessness), however, the speech of the church ladies and the porch sitters do not differ significantly. As Wolfram (1969: 204) points out, grammatical variables generally show sharp stratification, while phonological variables show gradient stratification. A similar pattern is evident in the speech of the church ladies and the porch sitters, whose consonantal productions are similar. These data thus show that it is possible for speakers (in this case, the porch sitters) to align toward locally based phonological norms while at the same time accommodating to external morphosyntactic norms. Finally, with regard to data from /u/ and /o/, the differences in production by the church ladies and porch sitters highlight the importance of social affiliations in language practices

and further speak to the range of variation that exists within communities – even small, rural communities like Texana.

To summarize these findings, Table 11 reviews the social and linguistic practices of the church ladies and the porch sitters.¹⁹

Table 11: Positive and negative identity practices of church ladies and porch sitters

	Positive identity practices	Negative identity practices
CHURCH LADIES		
Linguistic		
<i>Phonological</i>		More fronted /u/ and /o/
<i>Morphosyn.</i>		Avoid nonstandard AAE forms (copula absence, etc.)
<i>Syntactic</i>		Avoid habitual <i>be</i>
<i>Lexical</i>	Use honorifics, double names	Avoid/stigmatize dialect features
Social		
<i>Personal</i>	More formal clothing Older hairstyles Talk about housekeeping Attend church	Avoid public smoking
<i>Group</i>	Attend devotional group Lead in church/community Are interested in genealogy	Resist outsider/urban influence
PORCH SITTERS		
Linguistic		
<i>Phonological</i>		Less fronted /u/ and /o/
<i>Morphosyn.</i>	Use nonstandard AAE forms (e.g., copula absence)	
<i>Syntactic</i>	Use habitual <i>be</i>	
<i>Lexical</i>	Use nicknames	Avoid honorifics
Social		
<i>Personal</i>	Informal clothing More elaborate/African hair	
<i>Group</i>	Attend/talk about parties	Do not lead in church or community Stigmatize racist whites

Positive identity practices are those individuals employ to orient themselves toward a favored identity, while negative identity practices are those they employ to distance themselves from rejected identities. As this chart indicates, linguistic and social differences abound for the church ladies and porch sitters. Both groups of women have differing social orientations; their linguistic repertoires draw upon a variety of social and linguistic symbols as resources to mirror, construct, and reinforce these social identities. Alignment along multiple social and linguistic axes ultimately allows for a constellation of factors to be used as vehicles in differentiating as well as creating solidarity and identity among members. Thus, sites of conscious grouping (such as communities of practice) may be particularly important groups for sociolinguists to study, although these groups may, in some cases, only be uncovered when considerable amount of time is spent in the community or other local settings. In these groups, not every variable shows difference (e.g., in this study, the consonantal variables) while others may differ strikingly (e.g., in this study copula absence).

In this study, we have added to the scant body of literature that investigates the language and cultural practices of African American women (and, more specifically, of black Appalachian women). We have analyzed the habits and language of the church ladies and porch sitters in their own right (rather than in comparison to urban African American men or women, or to black men in Texana, or to local white women) in ways that other sociolinguists and sociologists have advocated (Bucholtz 2003; Collins 2000; Hill 2005; Morgan 2002). By focusing on two groups of black women, we have also allowed for more nuanced variation of within-gender groups.²⁰ Mills (2003: 196) attests to this strength of the practice-based approach: it 'allow[s] for variations within the categories 'men' and 'women,' and allows for the possibility of contestation and change, while also acknowledging the force of hypothesized stereotyping and assumptions about linguistic community norms'. At the same time, we have resisted reifying differences between the church ladies and the porch sitters. Though the women comprise different CsofP, they also share many similarities, such as attachment to family, affinity for the Texana community, and many regional dialect patterns (particularly phonological). Finally, we have also contributed both to the growing body of literature on variation within African American English with regard to regionality and rurality, and to the emergent body of literature on ethnic variation in Appalachian English. Among these groups of Texana women, we see a dual orientation toward norms of AAE and AE. As our study suggests, the history and trajectory of language variation and change are not generalizable across ethnic or regional lines but rather are embedded in underlying values about culture and identity.

As Hill (2005: 11) points out, uniform populations rarely reside within categories that lump people together based on demographic variables, and broad

categories may mask the diverse experiences of the people in each group. We have found this assertion to be true among these Texana women. Despite objectively sharing many demographic traits (like race, gender, regional background, and middle/older age), and despite sharing ‘dense, multiplex ties’ (as, arguably, all residents do in the small Texana community), the church ladies and the porch sitters still show considerable differentiation in their linguistic behavior that is better explained by the CofP construct, which centers on observable realizations of people’s shared sense of affiliation and subjective experience. As this study reveals, individual and group-level identity formation is neither the ‘fallout’ of external categorization, nor even solely of social networks. Rather, individuals and groups negotiate identities and group membership dynamically, by drawing on many symbolic markers in ways that are informed by the broader ideologies and structures of race, class, gender, and language. As sociolinguists refine our studies of the social backdrop against which we interpret sociolinguistic data, we can continue to avoid generalist, deflationary, and loosely defined approaches to ‘identities’ and situate linguistic practice more fully as a primary mechanism in the dynamic construction of social locations and social relations.

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Notes

- 1 Eckert’s three ‘waves’ do not encompass all sociolinguistic research. Historically-oriented studies (e.g., those concerned with the origins of AAE) and those oriented toward structural issues (e.g., studies of linguistic constraints on vowel shifting) do not fall under the ‘third wave’ schema.
- 2 Accordingly, we use the term ‘black’ when referring to Texana residents, though we use the term ‘African American’ when referring to this general demographic group and to other related sociolinguistic work.
- 3 All names of residents are pseudonyms.
- 4 Our familiarity with Emily, Michelle, Zora, Gail Ann proved important for understanding social categories in the community, both the one they identified (the church ladies) and the one we identified (the porch sitters).

- 5 There is only one church in Texana, the Mount Zion Missionary Baptist church.
- 6 See Mallinson (2006) for an analysis of other variables for these CsofP.
- 7 Habitual *be* is not treated statistically as with the other morphosyntactic and phonological variables, due to small token counts and the difficulty of systematizing the occurrences of this feature.
- 8 When it does, is typically restricted to lexical items such as the verbs *seem* and *don't*. Accordingly, this analysis excludes the use of *don't* for *doesn't*, since this third person singular form is lexicalized and idiomatic.
- 9 Although different procedures may be used in tabulating the incidence of copula absence, we tabulated tokens of deleted forms of *is* and *are* out of the total number of contracted forms (e.g., *She's nice*), contractible full forms (e.g., *She is nice*), and deleted forms (e.g., *She nice*) forms. Criteria for 'don't count' cases of copula absence or presence are based on Blake's (1997) guidelines.
- 10 The porch sitters' rates of *is* and *are* deletion are considerably higher than what Wolfram and Thomas (2002) found. In their study, middle-aged and older working class Southern African American speakers deleted *is* at rates of around 15 percent and deleted *are* at rates of around 45 percent.
- 11 Due to limited tokens for the full range of cross-product permutations in terms of these factor groups, we restrict the division of complement structural types in only two categories, combining verb-*ing* and *gonna* into one category and the predicate nominative, adjective, and locative into another. In essence, this decision distinguishes the copula and auxiliary functions of *is* and *are*.
- 12 In terms of linguistic constraints, prior studies of past *be* leveling have shown that the feature can be sensitive to polarity and subject type (Tagliamonte and Smith 1999). To analyze the effects of different internal linguistic constraints on past tense *be* leveling, a multivariate analysis was conducted using Goldvarb 2001. A binomial step-up/step-down analysis revealed that only one of the two factor groups – polarity, but not subject type – has a statistically significant effect on the occurrence of past tense *be* leveling ($p < .05$). However, we note that the token count of past tense *be* with plural subjects in the speech of the church ladies and porch sitters is 171 – slightly less than the minimum N of 200 recommended for multivariate analyses.
- 13 The accuracy of impressionistic tabulation of phonological variables such as postvocalic *r* has been debated. In this corpus, however, the tokens of *r* were reasonably easy to judge, and questionable tokens were double-checked with two other sociolinguists.

- 14 Rates of consonant cluster reduction for the church ladies and the porch sitters are comparable to the rates of monomorphemic (17 percent) and bimorphemic (five percent) cluster reduction that Wolfram and Christian (1976) found among working class white Appalachian speakers. In contrast, among working class Southern African American speakers in Wolfram and Thomas's (2002) study, speakers reduced monomorphemic clusters at rates of 72 percent and bimorphemic clusters at rates of 36 percent.
- 15 None of the many studies of syllable coda consonant cluster reduction has found significant ethnolinguistic differences in prepausal or preconsonantal positions (Wolfram, personal communication).
- 16 Myriad other studies discuss linguistic and social effects that may affect variability in cluster reduction (Fasold 1972; Guy 1980; Wolfram, Childs, and Torbert 2000).
- 17 It is possible that the church ladies use this feature in casual contexts or only with friends. Yet, by the end of our fieldwork in Texana, we were relatively familiar with all of the members of the CsofP and had recorded many conversational interviews with them. Gail Ann, for example, has no instances of habitual *be* in approximately seven hours of recorded conversation and in many more hours of observation. Second, Zora, whom we interviewed in three different contexts for well over an hour each and interacted with extensively outside of an interview context, uses no habitual *be* at all – though her mother uses this feature extensively.
- 18 Acoustic measurements for each vowel using Praat were taken for F1, F2, and F3 at two temporal locations (midpoint and offset), and the duration of the vowel was recorded. Vowel measures were taken from FFT spectra using a 25ms Gaussian window. LPC was used if there was difficulty in choosing a formant. Measurements were taken in all phonetic contexts, except for tokens that occurred before nasals, /l/, and /r/, since these environments exhibit the greatest coarticulatory effects. The following phonetic context was noted for each vowel to account for any coarticulatory effects. The analysis of the vowel data followed Anderson's (2003) design, which uses distance metrics to quantify the production of each vowel for each speaker in each phonetic context (see also Childs 2005). To arrive at distance metrics, the front counterparts of each of the vowels are analyzed. Distance metrics are then calculated on a speaker-by-speaker basis for each environment for each vowel pair by subtracting the F2 value for the back vowel from that of the front vowel (e.g., /i/ pre-alveolar F2 – /u/ pre-alveolar F2). By creating a distance metric for each vowel in each environment, it becomes possible to discuss fronting among the speakers, and vowel normalization is not necessary since the distance metrics are derived from each speaker's own vowel space.
- 19 This table is modeled after a similar table in Bucholtz (1999), which displays the positive and negative identity practices of the 'nerd girls'.

- 20 We have also shown the construct of ‘community of practice’ to be efficacious for analyzing variation in older age cohorts. Bergvall (1999) questions whether the CofP framework is most applicable to analyzing language variation among adolescents, as in Eckert’s (2000) study of the Jocks and Burnouts, but we have not found the construct to be limiting in this regard.

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