The Variable (th) in Dallas African American Vernacular English

Virginia C. Vinton

1. Introduction*

It is well-known that African American Vernacular English (hereafter AAVE) displays regional variation. In the case of the (th) variable, Wolfram (1969) found that AAVE speakers in Detroit used the nonstandard variants [f], [t], and Ø. In New York City, Labov (1972a) observed the use of [t] and [tθ] as the nonstandard variants. In both of these studies conducted in the northern U.S. the variants used by speakers were stratified differently with regard to social factors. Given regional variation of this sort, we might well expect further interesting differences in southern cities of the U.S. The present study, conducted in early 1993, attempts to describe and explain sociolinguistic variation in AAVE in the area of Dallas, Texas. In particular, speakers’ use of the voiceless interdental fricative (th) was observed using Labov’s rapid and anonymous survey technique (Labov 1972b:43-50). Once these data were gathered and analyzed, a test of language attitudes was conducted to aid in interpreting the results. This paper consists of three parts. First, the sociolinguistic variable study of (th) is presented, followed by a description and analysis of the language attitude test, and finally conclusions are offered, based on findings from both parts of the investigation.

2. Sociolinguistic variable investigation

2.1 Scope of study

As noted above, in sociolinguistic studies of AAVE throughout the U.S., it has been found that the linguistic variable (th) is prone to different realizations (Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Dillard 1972). Further, it seems that these differences occur in different speech styles. Upon interviewing African

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American speakers in Dallas, I observed that variation occurred word initially, medially, and finally. Word initially, the allophones of the voiceless interdental fricative (th) consist of [θ] and [t]. Word finally, the variable has four allophones: [θ], [t], [f], and Ø. Word medial contexts were not studied in depth.

Based on the oft-observed tendency for standard and nonstandard variants to be socially stratified (Labov 1972b), I hypothesized that the (th) variable would be externally conditioned by sex, age, and social class — specifically, that female speakers would use the nonstandard forms less often than male speakers, older subjects would use them less than younger speakers, and speakers of a higher socioeconomic class would use the nonstandard forms less often than those of lower socioeconomic classes. In addition, I hypothesized that all speakers would use fewer nonstandard forms in a more careful speech style.

2.2 Collection of data

To collect data for this study, I conducted a rapid and anonymous survey of speakers in an informal situation following the technique introduced by Labov in his study of post-vocalic r in three New York City department stores (Labov 1966). By so doing, I was able to obtain natural, unstilted speech, and seemingly to avoid the observer’s paradox. It may be that speakers spoke in a more formal way than usual in addressing me, as a white female, but if so, this was not evident in the responses I received.

2.2.1 Design of the survey

The survey was conducted in downtown Dallas in March 1993. Approximately ten hours were spent surveying the city and informally gathering data. The goal of the survey was to elicit from each African American speaker two words — one in which the (th) variable occurred word initially, and a second in which it occurred word finally. The easiest and most natural way of eliciting such data, it seemed, was to ask directions of individual speakers. In giving directions, they appeared unaware that their speech was being analyzed, and this resulted in natural responses. I asked for directions to the city of Fort Worth, located about 25 miles west of Dallas. Almost invariably, in their descriptions, speakers would repeat the words Fort Worth, yielding a token of the variable in the word-final context desired. In addition, most speakers would mention the name of a nearby interstate highway, either Thirty or Thirty-five, resulting in the use of (th) word initially. In this way, I was able to elicit both contexts of the variable (th) from a significant number of speakers in the space of a few hours. In order to obtain a more careful speech style, I waited until the end of speakers’ descriptions and asked them to repeat the number of the highway. Subsequently
the words *thirty* or *thirty-five* were repeated in a more carefully pronounced way, providing the more careful speech style desired in word-initial position.\(^1\)

### 2.2.2 Selection of subjects

The selection of subjects for the study was somewhat random as access to detailed information regarding each speaker was necessarily sacrificed to the type of survey employed. My goal in gathering data was to elicit speech samples from speakers of both the working and middle classes, both male and female, and of various ages. In determining social class speakers were judged according to two criteria, occupation and dress. By going to different places of business, including law firms and courthouses for middle class speakers, and fast food restaurants and small clothing stores for working class participants, and by noting how well-dressed participants were, judgments were made as to the social class of each speaker. Age was a somewhat subjective decision, and for this reason I have distinguished only two age groups in the analysis to follow: younger speakers, ages 20-30, and older speakers, ages 35 and up. In the end, fifty-four adult speakers participated in the survey, thirty males and twenty-four females.

### 2.3 The analysis

A statistical analysis of the data was done using GoldVarb (Rand and Sankoff 1988), a logistic regression package for the Macintosh computer. The data were coded for social factors including social class, sex, and age. In addition, phonological environment and speech style were examined. The data consist of 132 tokens, of which 48% are realizations of the standard variant \([\theta]\), and 52% realizations of the nonstandard variants.

When the entire data set was analyzed together, the most influential factor in the use of the standard variant was the phonological environment in which the variant occurred, with the word-initial environment favoring use of the standard variant. However, I have chosen to analyze the two environments separately for two reasons. First, the data set is not completely balanced, in that speech samples of both environments were not available from every speaker. Second, the nature of the variation is different in the two environments, in that all four variants did not occur in both positions.

Table 1 illustrates the factors that have been found to be significant for each environment — sex and social class.\(^2\) While age has not been included, further investigation of this factor will be undertaken in section 2.3.3. In the word-initial position, speech style also had an influence on the use of the standard variant, but was not found to be statistically significant.

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\(^1\) Of course, some participants did not initially say *Interstate Thirty* in their descriptions, so a more careful style was unobtainable. In such cases, I entered only their pronunciation of (th) word-finally in the analysis.

\(^2\) Significance is taken at the level \(p \leq 0.05\).
Table 1. Contribution of sex and social class to the use of the standard variant [θ] for all speakers (VARBRUL analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Word Initial</th>
<th>Word Final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the following sections, a more detailed description of these findings is offered.

2.3.1 Social class

In examining social class, it was found, as predicted, that middle class speakers used nonstandard variants of (th) less often than working class speakers. Table 2 illustrates this. Examining the standard variant in the word-final context, we find that 71% of middle class speakers used this variant, while only 30% of working class speakers used it. Of the nonstandard variants, working class speakers used [t] and Ø just as often as the standard [θ], as each is used by 30% of speakers. In the word-initial context, middle class speakers used only the standard variant, while 32% of working class speakers used the nonstandard [t].

Table 2. Social class results for all respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social class</th>
<th>WC</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>WC</th>
<th>MC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[θ]</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[t]</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[f]</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The VARBRUL analysis indicates that social class is the most influential factor in the use of the standard variant in word-initial position.³ Word finally, social class was found to be influential as well, its significance second only to the sex factor.

³ Because 100% of the middle class speakers interviewed used the standard variant in the word initial position, the first VARBRUL run resulted in a knockout value for this factor. In order to determine the significance of this factor, it was necessary to incorporate one token of middle class usage of [t] into the data set, which yielded significance of .001.
2.3.2 Sex

A striking difference was found between the variants used by male and female speakers, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Sex results for all respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Fort Worth M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Thirty M</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of respondents</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[θ]</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[t]</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[f]</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In examining the standard variant in word-final position, we find that while 73% of female speakers used this variant, only 27% of male speakers did. This difference is not as strong in a word-initial context, but the difference remains, nevertheless. In examining the nonstandard variants, we see that male speakers used a high percentage of [t] and Ø. In fact, they chose these nonstandard variants as often or more often than the standard [θ]. Women also used the nonstandard variants, but with far less frequency than male speakers.

According to the VARBRUL analysis, sex is the most influential factor on [θ] use in word-final position. Word initially, it is second only to social class.

2.3.3 Age

I had originally predicted that older speakers would use the standard variant more often than younger speakers. However, the results are not as clearly stratified as the original hypothesis had predicted. In fact, the results appear somewhat anomalous at first glance, as shown in Tables 4a and 4b.

Table 4a. Age results for female speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Fort Worth 20-30</th>
<th>35+</th>
<th>Thirty 20-30</th>
<th>35+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of respondents</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[θ]</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[t]</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[f]</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4b. Age results for male speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fort Worth</th>
<th>Thirty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35+</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>35+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[θ]</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[t]</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[f]</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examining female speakers' use of the standard variant word finally in Table 4a, we find that 83% of older women used this variant, as compared to only 60% of younger women. For male speakers, this trend is reversed, as seen in Table 4b. While 42% of younger speakers chose the standard form, only 14% of older male speakers used this variant. While the VARBRUL analysis did not show age to be a significant factor influencing (th) use in Dallas, when combined with the other two factors, patterns emerge. In figure 1, age and sex have been illustrated together. In this illustration, we see that while younger men and women were found to use the [θ] variant somewhat similarly, older speakers are polarized in their use of the standard variant. However, when social class is considered along with sex and age, we find a complex relationship emerging, as illustrated in Figures 2a and 2b. Middle class speakers follow the predicted pattern, moving toward use of the standard as their age increases. Working class speakers, however, polarize in their use of the standard as they get older. Possible explanations for these trends will be pursued in section 4.3.

Figure 1. Age and sex results for the standard variant
In examining speech style, it was found that African American speakers in Dallas do use nonstandard AAVE variants less often in a more careful speech style. Table 5a illustrates the results based on speech style and sex.
Table 5a. Speech style and sex results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Informal</th>
<th>Formal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of respondents</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[θ]</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[t]</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that while 74% of male speakers used the standard variant in informal speech, 83% used the variant in the more careful speech style, representing a gain of 9%. Women were consistent in using the standard variant in both styles, with the exception of one woman, comprising the 5%.

The VARBRUL analysis did not find speech style to be a significant factor influencing [θ] use. Nonetheless, as described above and illustrated in Tables 5a and 5b, there is a tendency for speakers to use the standard form more often in the more careful speech style.

3. Language attitude test

3.1 Scope of study

In order to help interpret the results of the preceding analysis, a test of language attitudes was conducted toward the variable under study in the Dallas area. A direct method was used, in which speakers were asked about their attitudes toward the variants under study. Specifically, subjects were asked to reveal their attitudes toward each of the four variants in word-final position in the word Worth. They were asked to rank the four variants with respect to correctness, which they use, and which sounds most natural in informal speech. The variants were ranked in each of these categories on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being the highest.

3.2 Methodology

The test was administered to two groups of students. The first was a freshman psychology class at the University of Texas at Arlington, where 58 participants, including both African American and White students, responded. Because a limited number of African American students participated at UTA, the test was given a second time to a group of freshmen at El Centro Community College.

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4 Arlington is located approximately 15 miles from downtown Dallas, where the original (th) interviews were conducted.

5 At UTA, the test was given as an optional activity for students at the end of a class period. Because of the test’s optionality, many students did not participate.
located in the center of downtown Dallas. Twenty-one students were surveyed at El Centro, all of whom were African American.

The responses of the two groups were first analyzed separately, to determine if any major differences existed between the attitudes of the two groups. I found that, for the most part, their responses were comparable and based on this finding, I combined their responses. After this, the numbers were averaged to obtain a score for each variant. The responses of the participants were divided into groups based on race and sex. Of the 43 white participants, 17 were male and 26 female. Of the 29 African American participants, 15 were male and 14 female.

2.3 Analysis

The results for white male and female respondents are illustrated in Figures 3a and 3b. In these figures, each of the four variants has been ranked according to the three criteria listed along the bottom of the charts. The fact that the lines do not cross shows that speakers consider them to be ranked in the same order in all three categories, with the exception of [t] and [f] in the “naturalness” category, which male speakers rank as equal. For the White respondents, we find the standard variant [θ] judged as much more correct than any of the others, used more frequently and sounding more natural. When averaged, the second choice of these speakers is the variant [t], again in all three categories. The variant [f] is ranked just lower than [t], and Ø is judged as the most incorrect, unnatural and unused form of all.

![Figure 3a: Language attitude test results for white male respondents](image)
African American females report the same overall ranking of the four variants in each of the three categories, as seen in Figure 3c.

However, these speakers report using more of the nonstandard variants [t] and [f] than do the White speakers, and considerably less of the standard variant [θ]. With regard to naturalness, African American females report attitudes which are

Figure 3b: Language attitude test results for white female respondents

Figure 3c: Language attitude test results for African American female respondents
similar to those of the White speakers for the nonstandard variants [t] and [f], while their attitudes toward the standard variant [θ] and the nonstandard Ø are considerably different. They report [θ] to be less natural than did the White respondents, while the Ø variant is judged by this group as more natural in informal speech. These rankings suggest that African American females are aware of more nonstandard speech than their own, including that of male friends and family members. African American females reported usage of each variant is consistent with their opinions concerning naturalness, as each of the variants differs by at most .2 in these two categories.

These results help to explain the results found for female African American speakers in Dallas. Before considering this, it is necessary to identify exactly what group was involved in the language attitude survey. The female respondents were all between the ages of 18 and 23, corresponding to the younger speakers in the Dallas (th) study. In addition, these students reported that their parents hold fairly prestigious jobs, including positions as managers, supervisors, a judge and a small business owner. This, combined with the fact that the respondents are college students, leads me to conclude that most of the students responding were members of the middle class. Hence, in the language attitude survey, young African American middle class female speakers were surveyed.

The results of the Dallas (th) study for speakers belonging to this particular group are displayed in Table 6. If we surmise that the speakers interviewed in Dallas have similar attitudes to those who responded to the language attitude test, we find that African American female speakers in Dallas use the variants which they perceive as more correct and more natural; namely the standard [θ] and the nonstandard [t].

Table 6. Results of (th) study for young, middle class female speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fort Worth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[θ]</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[t]</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[f]</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The [f] and Ø variants, considered less correct, natural choices by the students who responded to the language attitude test, were not found to be used at all by the corresponding group interviewed in the Dallas (th) study.

The attitudes of the African American male participants are displayed in Figure 3d. In this graph, we find the same order of correctness and use as seen in the other groups, with [θ] judged most correct, and most used, then [t], [f], and finally Ø. The specific rankings reported by this group for correctness are similar to those reported by both male and female White respondents, and African American females. However, the male respondents report a slightly different use of the variants than do the female African American respondents, in that [f] is reported as being used somewhat less often, and Ø and [θ] used more
often than by the female speakers. In response to the question of naturalness, African American males report the standard [θ] as most natural, closely followed by [f] and [t], and finally Ø.

![Graph showing language attitude test results for African American male respondents](image)

*Figure 3d. Language attitude test results for African American male respondents*

When we examine the actual findings for African American male speakers in Dallas, these results appear inconsistent, as this group was found to use the nonstandard variant [t] most often, closely followed by [θ] and Ø, and finally [f]. However, as with the African American female respondents, the male subjects were young (ages 17-29) and members of the middle class. When this specific group of speakers is considered, the results of the language attitude test are found to be more consistent with the findings of the Dallas (th) study. Table 7 displays (th) use for this particular group of Dallas speakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fort Worth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| [θ]        | 40%  
| [t]        | 20%  
| [f]        | 40%  
| Ø          |   — |

The attitude test respondents’ high regard for [θ] and [f] is consistent with the Dallas subjects’ persistent use of these variants. The [t] and Ø variants, judged as less natural by the attitude test respondents, were found to be used less frequently by the young, middle class male Dallas subjects. The findings of the

language attitude test shed light on the results for young middle class speakers in Dallas. It would be of interest, in the future, to survey the attitudes of older subjects, as well, in order to compare their attitudes to the variants used by older speakers in Dallas.

Perhaps the most striking finding of this test is the clear difference between the attitudes of the White respondents and those of the African American respondents. In particular, in the naturalness category, White respondents were found to stratify the four variants very clearly, as shown in Figures 3a and 3b. Further, the standard deviation of each response was found to be consistently lower than that of the corresponding African American response. The White respondents seem to have a clear perception of how the variants are ranked with respect to one another. The responses of African American participants, on the other hand, are grouped more closely together, indicating a less clearly defined preference for one variant over the others, as shown in Figures 3c and 3d. In addition, the standard deviations of their responses were found to be comparatively high, indicating less agreement on the part of speakers as to the order in which the four variants are ranked.

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1 Social class

The most significant social factor influencing the use of the (th) variable in Dallas has been found to be the social class of individuals. This finding is not uncommon in sociolinguistic studies, as social class is often found to be influential in determining speakers’ linguistic choices (Labov 1972b; Macaulay 1977; Trudgill 1974).

Generally, it has been found that speakers belonging to higher social classes use more standard forms, while those of lower social classes prefer nonstandard forms. The reasoning behind use of standard forms by middle class speakers is fairly straightforward. These speakers are identifying with standard norms, seeking a kind of overt prestige which is associated with education and prestigious, white-collar jobs.

Working class speakers’ use of nonstandard forms has been addressed by several authors (Coates 1993:80; Fasold 1990:98). A key concept which has been offered in explanation for this nonstandard speech is that of covert prestige. It seems that vernacular speech norms hold a type of prestige which attracts members of the working class. By using nonstandard variants, speakers gain prestige while identifying themselves as part of the working class community. Furthermore, by using these variants they mark the social distance between themselves and the middle class, further establishing themselves as part of their working class social group.
4.2 Sex

One of the more intriguing findings of this study is the very high percentage of African American females who were found to use the standard variant. In accounting for the standard speech used by these female speakers, Cheshire (1984) suggests that women are more conscious of the social significance of standard versus nonstandard speech, resulting in the use of more socially prestigious speech forms. Trudgill (1983) offers two specific hypotheses related to this idea of heightened social consciousness.

First, he suggests that because child rearing is done by women in many cases, they are more aware of the importance of using prestige norms (1983:167-8). In addition, Abrahams (1976:70) reports that in African American communities, children invariably follow the maternal figure in learning tasks. This tendency would place even more responsibility on women and perhaps lead them to use standard speech more often than their male counterparts.

A second explanation for the phenomenon is offered by Trudgill (1983:168). Through the years, women have been rated more on how they appear, while men have been rated on their abilities and occupation. Therefore women have come to use other signals of status, including prestige speech norms, since they have not found status in their jobs and abilities. Abrahams (1976:104) states that African American women often use sweet talk, a way of speaking which is closer to standard English than the speech of men, in many cases. Their use of this type of speech enables them to have acceptance in the wider community, resulting in increased social mobility.

A third explanation, and perhaps the most pertinent to this study, has been offered by Abrahams (1976:59-80). In the Black community, respectability is of utmost importance to women and shapes their behavior. Respectability is often expressed in one’s style of communication, resulting in the expectation that women will use more standard speech than men. The home is the center of this sense of respectability, causing mothers constantly to monitor their own speech and the speech of their children (1976:70). Even outside the home, Black women frequently remark on one another’s control over the standard speech which is appropriate to their family-centered lifestyle (Abrahams 1970:101).

In accounting for the male speakers’ persistent use of [t] and Ø, a general explanation has been offered by Trudgill (1983:177). In his analysis of white speakers, Trudgill has suggested that male and working class speakers invoke solidarity among themselves by using nonstandard variants in speech, which then take on a form of ‘covert prestige’. Cheshire (1984:43) suggests that nonstandard speech sounds “rougheer” and “tougher” than standard speech, and that this is a quality sought after by male speakers in western societies, resulting in the use of nonstandard forms. This hypothesis can be extended to the working class African American males described in the present study.
4.3 Age

While middle class speakers of both sexes move toward the standard as they get older, the speech choices of working class men and women polarize with age. Two theories can be suggested to account for the differences in speech between younger and older speakers. The first is that a change is currently in progress toward the use of the standard variant. If this is the case, it appears that this change is being led by the women in this study who are presently aged 35 and over. Middle class men and younger speakers follow in this change, while working class men continue to use nonstandard variants.

According to Trudgill (1974:99), women lead changes in the direction of the standard more frequently than do men. In fact, he states that in some families it is possible to identify three different stages. The first group involved is mothers and sisters, who use the standard form more often than any other group; second, sons, who are more standard in their speech than their fathers, but less standard than mothers and sisters; and third, fathers, who continue to use the nonstandard forms they have always used. The results of the Dallas study fit this pattern with two exceptions. First, if older women lead the change, then younger female speakers should use the standard form more frequently than they do. This follows from the generally accepted nature of a change in progress, with the second generation more completely incorporating the change begun by the first generation. However, this prediction is not borne out in this study, as younger female speakers were not found to use the standard [θ] more often than older women. Second, the theory does not explain the fact that middle class men follow the women in the change, while working class men do not.

The second possible explanation for different speech among younger and older speakers is age grading, in which speakers’ usage changes throughout their life span. Abrahams (1976:28-31) reports that at adolescence, Blacks seek independence from their home life, including its values and constraints. During this period they learn jive, a way of speaking which signifies their entry into the peer group. They reject their home and mother, including the more standard speech norms she represents. Black mothers scorn the jive style, regarding it as rude and sensing it as an attack on them (Abrahams 1970:101). They may become bitter and cleave even more strongly to their speech norms, a reaction that could account for the more standard speech forms used by women aged 35 and up in the present study (Abrahams 1976:27). Meanwhile, both male and female adolescents use the nonstandard speech associated with the street until the “playing years” come to an end, and speakers begin to return to the values and speech norms learned in the home. While women readopt these values and speech norms rather quickly, men often persist in their routine for several years (1976:28). Eventually, however, they too return to the standard speech learned in the home. This theory accounts for the nonstandard speech of younger speakers and the more standard speech used by older speakers. However, it does not explain the very nonstandard speech of older working class speakers,
who seem to embrace the vernacular as they grow older. It would appear that these working class men seek covert prestige more strongly as they grow older, especially as their female counterparts move toward the standard. While the reasoning for this behavior is uncertain, the age grading theory seems to account for the findings of this Dallas study more satisfactorily than does the change hypothesis, especially since age grading has been found to occur in many African American communities (Abrahams 1976).

4.4 Conclusions

In conclusion, part of the original hypothesis of this study, that sex would have an effect on the use of (th) by African American speakers, has certainly proven to be the case. The results of the study strongly support the Sociolinguistic Gender Pattern (Fasold 1990:92) which has been identified in other studies (Labov 1966; Levine and Crockett 1966; Milroy 1980; Cheshire 1982). In this pattern we find female speakers using more standard forms than male speakers.

The second part of the hypothesis, that older speakers would use fewer nonstandard forms than younger speakers, was found to be true among women, but untrue for men. Third, it was found that middle class speakers of AAVE use fewer nonstandard forms than working class speakers, as predicted. Last, speakers were found to use more standard forms in careful speech.

While these general trends of sex, class and style stratification are not new in themselves, the specific ranking of the variants involved differs from those of past studies of the (th) variable in AAVE. In Wolfram’s study of Detroit speech (Wolfram 1969), the same variables were observed to occur, but they were stratified differently. In particular, [f] was found to be the most frequently used nonstandard variant, while [t] and Ø occurred only in very limited contexts. The Ø variant, which was observed to occur very frequently in Dallas AAVE, was consistently the least frequently occurring variant for all social classes.

In Labov’s (1966) study of AAVE in New York city, [t] was found to be the preferred nonstandard variant, while the Ø variant was not observed to occur at all. These findings suggest that southern AAVE may be different in other, as yet unsuspected ways, from that spoken in northern cities, and as such merits serious further study.

Virginia Vinton received her M.A. in Linguistics from the University of Texas at Arlington in May 1994.
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