Ethnic Varieties of American English

Just as oceans and mountains separate people and may eventually lead to distinct speech patterns, so social boundaries also promote distinct speechways. Perhaps the most notable social varieties of American English are ethnic varieties. Ethnicity is sometimes racial and sometimes not. For example, differences in the speech of Jewish and Italian New Yorkers have been noted, and the variety of English influenced by Yiddish speakers who settled in America is sometimes called “Yinglish.” But the social separation that leads to ethnic varieties of language is particularly noticeable in the characteristic speech patterns of urban African Americans. In Philadelphia and other cities, the speech of African American residents is becoming increasingly distinct from the speech of white residents.

Such a distinction between social groups is also noticeable in the characteristic speech patterns of other ethnic groups. Spanish-speaking immigrants in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Miami, and elsewhere have learned English as a second language, and their English is marked by a foreign accent. The children and grandchildren of these immigrants acquire English as a native language (and many are bilingual), but the native variety of English that many Hispanic Americans speak identifies them as being of Hispanic ancestry or growing up in neighborhoods with children of Hispanic ancestry.

The discussion that follows identifies certain characteristics of African-American English and Chicano English. Both are bona fide varieties of American English like any other regional or social variety. Both have complete grammatical systems overlapping to a great degree with other varieties of English. And, like standard American English, both have a spectrum of registers. While both varieties share many characteristics with other varieties of American English, they also exhibit certain distinctive features and a set of shared features that taken together distinguish each of them from all others.

Like all other social varieties, these two have rules that determine what is well formed and what is ill formed. Rules govern the structures and use of all dialects, and no dialect exists without phonological, morphological, and syntactic rules. All the language universals described in Chapter 7 apply to African-American English and Chicano English as well.

African-American English

Not all African Americans are fluent speakers of African-American English, and not all speakers of African-American English are African Americans. After all, people grow up speaking the language variety around them. In an ethnically diverse city such as Los Angeles, you can meet teenage speakers of African-American English whose foreign-born parents speak Chinese or Vietnamese. The variety of English spoken by these Asian-American teenagers reflects the characteristic speechways of their friends and of the neighborhoods in which they acquired English. To underscore an obvious but often misunderstood fact, the acquisition of a particular language or dialect is as independent of skin color as it is of height or weight.

The history of African-American English is not completely understood, and there are competing theories about its origins and subsequent development. But there is no disagreement concerning its structure and functioning. It has characteristic phonological, morphological, and syntactic features, as well as vocabulary of its own. Like all other social groups, speakers of African-American English also share characteristic ways of interacting. In this section we examine some phonological and syntactic features of African-American English, but not lexical or interactional characteristics.

Phonological Features

We examine four characteristic pronunciation features of African-American English (AAE).

1. Consonant cluster simplification. In AAE, consonant clusters are frequently simplified. Typical examples occur in the words desk, pronounced as “dēs” [deis], passed pronounced as “past” [past], and wild pronounced as “wild” [waɪld]. Consonant cluster simplification also occurs in all other varieties of American English. Among speakers of standard English, the consonant clusters /sk/ in ask and /kl/ in wild are also commonly simplified, as in “asthm” [əsthm] for ask them and “bule” [bəlu] for told. But consonant cluster simplification occurs more frequently and to a greater extent in African-American English than in other varieties.

2. Deletion of final stop consonants. In AAE, final stop consonants, such as /t/, may be deleted in words like side and borrowed. Speakers of AAE frequently delete some word-final stops, pronouncing side like sigh and borrowed like borrow. This deletion rule is systematically influenced by the phonological and grammatical environment:
   a. Whether a word-final stop consonant represents a separate morpheme (as in the past tense marking of followed and tried) or doesn’t represent a separate morpheme but is part of the word stem (as in side and rapid). Final [d] is preserved much more frequently when it is a separate morpheme.
   b. Whether word-final stops occur in a strongly stressed syllable (tried) or a weakly stressed syllable (rapid)—note that the second syllable of rapid is not as strongly stressed as the first syllable. Strongly stressed syllables tend to preserve final stops more than weakly stressed syllables do.
   c. Whether a vowel follows the stop (as in side angle and tried it) or a consonant follows it (as in tried hard and side street). A following vowel helps preserve the stop; in fact, it appears to be the most significant factor in determining whether a final stop is deleted.
3. Existential it

Another feature of African-American English is the use of the expression it is where standard American English uses there is, as when after hurricane Katrina a resident of New Orleans reported, It's nothing left. Below are two more examples of existential it:

AFRICAN-AMERICAN
Is it a Miss Jones in this office?

STANDARD AMERICAN
Is there a Miss Jones in this office?

She's been a wonderful wife and it's nothing too good for her.

She's been a wonderful wife and there's nothing too good for her.

4. Negative concord

A final illustration of the distinctiveness of this ethnic variety is provided by the following examples of what is technically called negative concord but is better known as double negation or multiple negation:

AFRICAN-AMERICAN
Don't nobody never help me do my work.

STANDARD AMERICAN
Nobody ever helps me do my work.

He don't never go nowhere.

He never goes anywhere.

The African-American English sentences contain more than one word marked for negation. In AAE, multiple-negative constructions are well formed, as they are in many other varieties of American English and as they were more generally in earlier periods of English. The fact that these constructions are not well formed in standard English today has no bearing on their grammaticality or appropriateness in other varieties.

Chicano English

Another important set of ethnic dialects of American English are those called Latino English or Hispanic English. The best known variety is Chicano English, spoken by many people of Mexican descent in major U.S. urban centers and in rural areas of the Southwest.

As with African-American English and all other varieties of English, certain features of Chicano English are shared with other varieties, including other varieties of Hispanic English, such as those spoken in the Cuban community of Miami and the Puerto Rican community of New York City. Chicano English comprises many registers for use in different situations. Some characteristic features doubtless result from the persistence of Spanish as one of the language varieties of the Hispanic-American community, but Chicano English has become a distinct variety of American English and cannot be regarded as English spoken with a foreign accent. It is acquired as a first language by many children and is the native language of hundreds of thousands of adults. It is thus a stable variety of American English, with characteristic patterns of grammar and pronunciation.

Phonological Features

One well-known phonological feature of Chicano English is the substitution of “ch” [ʃ] for “sh” [ʃ], as in pronouncing she as [ʃe] instead of [ʃi], and shoes as [ʃu] (homophones with choose) instead of [ʃu], and especially as [ʃeʃai]. This feature is so distinctive that it has become a stereotype. There is also substitution of “sh” for “ch” as in “preach” [prəʃ] for preach and “shok” [ʃok] for check, though this feature seems not to be stereotyped. Other phonological features of Chicano English are consonant cluster simplification, as in [ʃ] for its, “kine” for kind,
"ole" for old, "bes" for best, "un-erstan" [un'erstan] for understand. Much of this can be represented in the phrase, It's kind of hard, which is pronounced [it kənd hər]. Another major characteristic of the phonological system of Chicano English is the devoicing of /t/ and /s/ in word-final position. Because of the widespread occurrence of /t/ and /s/ in the inflectional morphology of English (in plural nouns, possessive nouns, and third-person singular present-tense verbs such as goes), this salient characteristic is also stereotypical. Chicano English pronunciation is also characterized by the substitution of stops for the standard fricatives represented in spelling by th: [t] for [θ] and [d] for [ð], as in [pitk] for thick and [den] for then. Still another notable characteristic is the pronunciation of verbal -ing as "een" [en] rather than /ɪŋ/ ([ɪŋ]) or /ŋ/. Other -ng words such as sing and long end with a combined velar nasal /ŋ/ and a velar stop /ɢ/; thus sing is pronounced [stɪŋ], not [stŋ], and long is [lɒŋ] rather than [lɒŋ]. A further prominent feature of Chicano English is its use of certain intonation patterns that may strike speakers of other dialects of American English as uncertain or hesitant.

As with speakers of AAE, speakers of Chicano varieties of English who live in cities affected by the Northern Cities Shift don't appear to be participating in these shifts, at least to the same extent as other groups.

Grammatical Features Chicano English also has characteristic syntactic patterns. It often omits the past-tense marker on verbs that end with the alveolars /l/, /d/, or /l/, yielding "wan" for wanted and "wait" for waited. At least in Los Angeles, either... or either is sometimes heard instead of either... or, as in Either I will go buy one, or either Terry will. Another feature is the use of dialect-specific prepositions such as out from for away from, as in They party to get out from their problems. As with many other varieties, Chicano English permits multiple negation, as in You don't owe me nothing and Us little people don't get nothin'.

Ethnic Varieties and Social Identification

It's important to reemphasize that some customary features of Chicano English and African-American English are characteristic of other varieties of American English. In some cases, as with consonant cluster simplification, these features are widespread in mainstream varieties, including standard English. In other cases, as with negative concord, they are not characteristic of standard American English but are shared with other nonstandard varieties. What makes any variety seem distinct is not a single feature but a cluster of features, some of which may also occur in other varieties.

Ethnic dialects are an important ingredient in social identity, and features that are recognized as characteristic of specific social groups can be used to promote or reinforce affiliation with that identity. When speaking, an African-American man or woman who wants to stress his or her social identity as an African American may choose to emphasize or exaggerate features of African-American English. The same is true for speakers of Chicano English who wish to emphasize their ethnic identity. News correspondents on English-language radio and television broadcasts generally speak without marked social group accents. To emphasize their ethnic identity, however, some correspondents use a marked ethnic pronunciation of their own names at the conclusion of a report. A reporter named Maria Hinojosa identifies herself as mah-REE-ah ee-noh-HEH-sah, with a trill /R/ in REE. Geraldo Rivera pronounces his first name heh-RAHL-doh. Such ethnically marked pronunciations highlight a reporter's pride in his or her ethnic identity.

Try It Yourself: Consider these pronunciations of Hispanic names: "deh-lah-
CROOS" for de la Cruz; "FEHN-tehs" for Fuentes; "GAHR-sah" for Garza, and "ehr-NAHN-tehs" for Hernandez. Say these names aloud as you think they would be said without an ethnic pronunciation. Compare those pronunciations with the ones in quotation marks, and identify two features in the Hispanic pronunciations that are characteristic of Chicano English. Identify two other features we did not discuss but that you think may reflect characteristics of Chicano English.