



Implicational variables and intra- vs. interethnic social meaning

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In this talk, I present the implicational nature of eleven vowel variables that differentiate AAE from EAE younger speakers in Houston, Texas. We ranked speakers according to which variants that they use, and we have shown that for African-American participants, the degree to which speakers use these variants corresponds to greater use of AAE overall, for instance correlating with AAE consonantal and prosodic features. Furthermore, perceptual tests indicate that speakers at one end of the ranking are more likely to be labeled as “white,” while speakers at the other end are more likely to be labeled as “black.” Thus, we suggest that the use of AAE variants for the AA participants indicates *ethnicity*.

While European-American participants reveal a similar implicational scale with regard to these “AAE” variables, and the variables are arranged in a similar manner to the scale for the AAE speakers, there are some noteworthy differences. First, the scale is truncated for the EA participants: rather than an implicational scale with all eleven variables, the EA scale spans only the middle six. Second, rather than indicate ethnicity, the two ends of the ranking scale indicate a clear *gender*-based pattern: with only a single exception, all of the male EA speakers are at one end of the ranking scale, and the female EA speakers are at the other. Further, several female speakers at the lowest end of the ranking produce none of the “AAE” variants.

In sum, examining these eleven variables reveals that the implicational scale can in fact reveal *interethnic* stylistic differences, particularly at either end; however, the middle of our implicational scale reveals *intraethnic* variation: while it may be argued that they still indicate ethnicity for the AAE speakers, they appear to indicate gender for the EAE speakers. Thus, while the very same variables are used for stylistic work in each group, they index different social meanings for each.

Teaser: Is it possible that a set of variables can pattern in exactly the same way, from a linguistic standpoint, for two distinct groups of speakers, but have markedly different social meanings for them? I’ll try to convince you of just that!