

Contextualizing the Corpus of Regional African American Language:DC: AAL in the Nation's Capital

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Abstract: Washington DC has been home to a majority African American population since the late 1950s, with many in the United States considering DC an African American cultural center. At the same time, in the 1960s, it became a key site for foundational studies of African American Language (AAL), spearheaded by researchers from the Center for Applied Linguistics and Georgetown University, as the field of sociolinguistics was in its infancy. This paper is composed of two main parts: first, it provides relevant socio-cultural and demographic information on the history of African Americans in DC; second, this paper provides an overview of the history of linguistic research on AAL in DC and surrounding areas. Research on DC AAL has proceeded steadily if somewhat sporadically since the 1950s, with some studies achieving wider circulation than others. This article thus provides relevant linguistic and socio-historical contextual information for readers interested in learning about DC AAL in connection with the introduction of the Corpus of Regional African American Language, whose core component is centered on DC AAL.

Keywords: history of sociolinguistics; demographics; Washington DC

1. Introduction

CORAAL's core component, CORAAL:DC, comprises sociolinguistic interview recordings from 2015-2017 as well as legacy recordings by Ralph Fasold and colleagues in 1968 and 1969. Beyond these two sub-corpora, the linguistic legacy of Washington DC is an important one, both because of the cultural history of African Americans in DC and the important research on African American Language (AAL) in the DC area, done mainly by linguists at Georgetown University and the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). DC has long been an important center of African American culture, and in the mid-twentieth century, it became the first large city in the U.S. with an African American majority (McQuirter 2003; Asch and Musgrove 2018). In addition, there has been a long history of AAL research in DC, beginning with Fasold's (1972) foundational study. In this article, we first provide an overview of the social history of African Americans in DC and then discuss (socio)linguistic research in DC that focuses on AAL.

2. History of African Americans in DC

Washington DC and the surrounding area have been home to a consistent population of African Americans since well before the Civil War. When DC was first declared the nation's capital in 1791, and at the time of the Federal Census in 1800, people of African heritage accounted for 25% of DC's population, though 80% of them were enslaved. By 1830, more than 50% of the area's African Americans were free people. By the end of the Reconstruction era in the late 1870s, 25,000 African Americans had moved to DC. The African American population grew to 31% of DC residents by 1900, though the white population maintained a majority of 69% (McQuirter 2003).

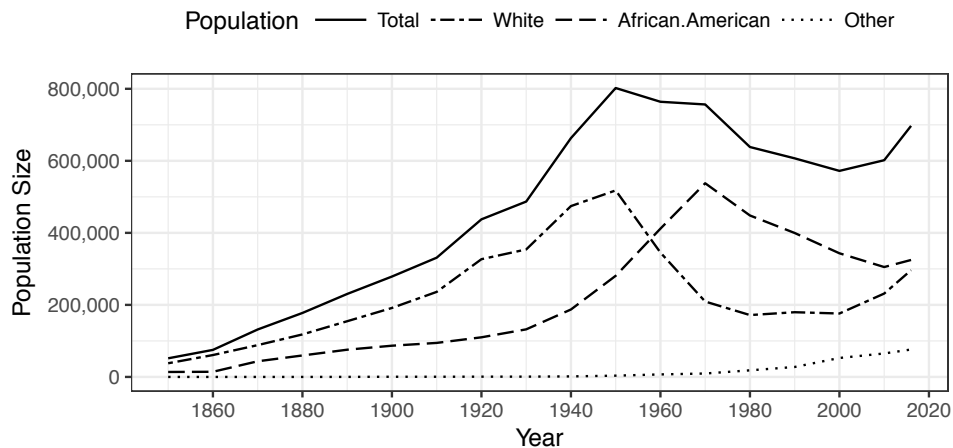
The early twentieth century in DC saw a steady increase in the African American population, especially between 1916 and 1940, considered the first wave of the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. The eastern cities, like DC, New York, and Philadelphia, drew African Americans from the Southeast, like Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia, whereas cities like Chicago and Detroit saw population increases from the Mississippi delta region (Wilkerson 2010). The post-Depression wave of the Great Migration (c. 1940-1970) led to DC's becoming the first large North American city with a majority African American population, in 1957. At the same time, the post-war years saw large scale "white flight" from cities to newly created suburbs throughout the U.S., further increasing DC's African American majority. By 1970, the African American population of DC had grown to nearly 70% of the population within city limits. Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, DC became a center for African American life, arts and culture. The iconicity of DC as *the* quintessential African American city in the late 1960s and early 1970s is illustrated by the funk band Parliament's album, *Chocolate City* (1975), a tribute to DC, and a term used to refer to the city in several CORAAL interviews in the DCB component: "When I was coming up, it was called the Chocolate City," (DCB_se2_ag4_f_01). Middle class African Americans prospered in DC well into the 1960s; at the same time, though, the city saw a growing disparity between affluent residents, both white and Black, and poorer, largely African American residents; and longstanding housing segregation remained firmly entrenched.

The year 1968 was a major turning point for DC, and for the U.S., as race riots broke out in cities across the nation following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. DC was among the most affected, and after four days of rioting, much of the heart of the African American community was gutted – and would remain so until the 1990s and even into the early 2000s. The riots fueled further white flight, and middle class African American residents began leaving the city as well. The city saw declining population levels through the remainder of the 20th century.

In the 1980s and 1990s, DC began to see the redevelopment of some of its poorer neighborhoods. Gentrification has been ongoing ever since, and while it has brought new prosperity to a once-declining city, it has also brought controversy and conflict, as new housing and entertainment venues draw in (and sometimes draw back) wealthier whites and African Americans, while rising prices drive less affluent residents out of longstanding neighborhoods, many of them traditionally African American (Quartey and Schilling, this issue).

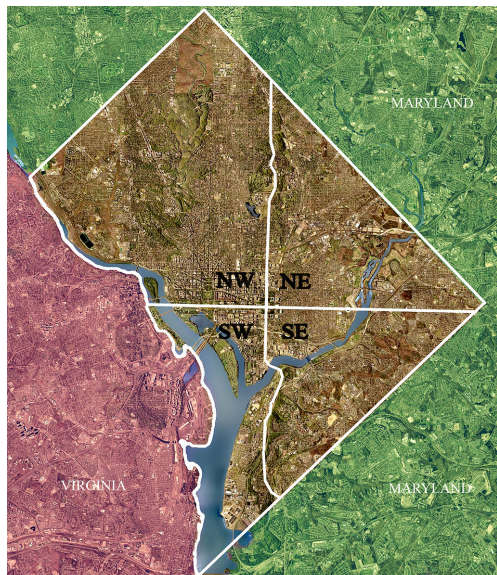
Population trends for DC from 1850 to 2010 are shown in Figure 1, with estimated figures for 2016. Data are from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 1. Population of African Americans, Whites, and Others in Washington DC



U.S. Census estimates from July 2017 indicate that though African Americans are no longer in the majority, at 47.7% of the city's population, they still hold racial plurality, with whites making up an estimated 44.6% of the city's population. The late 20th and early 21st centuries are also seeing increasing numbers of residents of other ethnic identifications, including Latin@s from a diverse array of countries, with an especially high concentration of Salvadorans, as well as the largest population of Ethiopians in the U.S. Despite this diversity, DC remains highly racially segregated; in fact, Census figures indicate increasing bifurcation of DC into the mostly African American Southeast quadrant and largely white Northwest quadrant, with more mixed neighborhoods like Columbia Heights straddling the city's East-West divide. A map of DC city quadrants is shown in Figure 2 (CORAAAL:DC metadata includes the primary quadrant of residence). The city is also sharply divided socioeconomically, with the Southeast showing far lower income levels and much higher levels of poverty than the more affluent Northwest. The prominent Northwest/Southeast and white/African American divisions, as well as a full spectrum of social class differences, are reflected and partly constructed in linguistic differences, as evidenced in studies of DC AAL beginning with the earliest studies in the latter half of the 20th century and continuing with the most recent studies of the first two decades of the 21st, including emergent analyses of CORAAAL:DC (this volume).

Figure 2. Satellite image of Washington DC with quadrants highlighted (via Wikimedia Commons)



3. History of Linguistic Research on AAL in DC

The core of the CORAAL database comprises two sets of sociolinguistic interview data from DC African Americans. CORAAL:DCA comes from fieldwork conducted for Ralph Fasold's foundational work on AAL, *Tense Marking in Black English* (1972), with fieldwork occurring at a time of heightened awareness of ethnic identity and ethnicity-based injustices, between March 1968 (just before the 1968 riots) and August 1969. CORAAL:DCB is composed of data collected on DC AAL between 2015 and 2017 specifically for the CORAAL project. The CORAAL data are contextualized by a rich body of linguistic work on AAL in DC over the past 50 years, which is due in part to the fact that both the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) and the prominent Georgetown sociolinguistics program are located in DC. In this section, we discuss work on AAL in the DC area between 1955 and 2018. Much early (socio)linguistic research in DC fell out of view and one point of this review is to acknowledge the range of contributions about AAL made from studies in DC. For a more extensive bibliography on DC AAL, as well as more information the articles mentioned here, please visit <https://oraal.uoregon.edu/coraal/references>.

3.1 Early Studies

Even before the Center for Applied Linguistics began focused studies of DC AAL in the 1960s, Catholic University researchers Father George Putnam and Sister Edna O'Hern were beginning to study the language and culture of the new African American population in *The Status Significance of an Isolated Urban Dialect* (1955). This early precursor to American sociolinguistics, which could even be considered an early sociophonetic study, provides a brief sociological analysis conducted by O'Hern of a group of residents of "Columbus Court," a pseudonym for an inhabited DC alleyway that is described as quite isolated physically and culturally from more middle-class DC neighborhoods. While this study focused more than others on language, it was only one of several sociological studies of life in DC's alleys, narrow spaces between buildings where poverty-stricken African Americans often lived. These studies are often couched in the sociological jargon of the mid-20th century. These include Sellew's (1938) *A*

deviant social situation: A court; Hannerz's (1969) *Soulside: Inquiries into ghetto culture and community* and Borchert's (1980) *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970*.

Putnam and O'Hern's linguistic analysis was based on several informal conversations, some of which were phonetically transcribed and several of which were audio recorded. Importantly, the authors discuss some classic features of AAL, such as negative concord; existential *it*; variation in verbal *-s*; invariant habitual *be*; possessive *they*; locative *to*, and the camouflaged NP_i call $NP_i V$ -ing construction (e.g. *He calls himself dancing*; see Wolfram 1994).

Additionally, Putnam and O'Hern show evidence for phonological features such as the devoicing of word final stops and Southern Vowel Shifted front vowels (i.e. reversal of /e/ and /ɛ/ in phonetic space), examples of which have been found in CORAAL:DC (e.g. Arnson and Farrington 2017). Beyond the sociological and phonetic analyses, Putnam and O'Hern, and later Harms (1961), used this early data set to conduct perception experiments in which listeners categorized the recorded speakers according to Warner, et al.'s (1960) Index of Status Characteristics (ISC; also used in Fasold 1972 to determine social class). While there are interesting insights to be gleaned from Putnam and O'Hern's work, it was never as influential as it might have been, due to analytical issues and the fact that the researchers did not work directly with Uriel Weinreich's highly influential group at Columbia. (See Joseph 2002 for discussion.)

3.2 Center for Applied Linguistics, Urban Language Study (1965-1967)

In the mid-1960s, a team of linguists at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) focused on the study of AAL through the Urban Language Study and Materials Development Project (ULS), spearheaded by William Stewart, Joey Dillard, and Marvin Loflin. This study was partly connected to the 'Yellow House' studies, a series of studies based on data collected in a small house rented by CAL as a center for after-school activities for neighborhood children – and for audio recordings, via microphones located in strategic locations in the living room. A key objective of the ULS was “to analyze the non-standard dialect of English spoken by school-age Negro children of a lower socio-economic stratum in the District of Columbia with the aim of producing scientific information on which a sound approach to the teaching of standard English to these children can ultimately be based” (Loman 1967, ix).

The ULS was also the DC home of Bengt Loman, who published *Conversations in a Negro American Dialect* (1967), using recordings from the Yellow House for an analysis of intonation. Mogens Baumann Larsen, a Danish linguist, studied language in its social context in the thriving sociolinguistic center of DC in 1966-1967. It was this experience that led to the introduction of sociolinguistic methods to Denmark (Gregersen 2009).

Finally, two Georgetown dissertations from the early 1970s came out of the ULS project at CAL. Philip Luelsdorff published his 1970 dissertation as *A Segmental Phonology of Black English* (1975). While somewhat limited due to its focus on one speaker in a rather formal setting, the study provides an early reference to the centralization of certain vowels in pre-/r/ contexts (as in the regionally relevant “Murrhland” for ‘Maryland’, the so-called (urr) variable), which now seems to be widespread in AAL in DC (Arnson and Farrington 2017), as well as other U.S. regions. William Carroll's (1971) dissertation, *A Phonology of Washington Negro Speech* uses data from the broader ULS project, but like Luelsdorff, focuses on a single speaker for close analysis. Both works used methods outside the scope of sociolinguistic study and are not widely cited in subsequent sociolinguistic work.

3.3 Shuy, Fasold, Wolfram (1967-mid-1970s)

While the ULS was winding down, CAL hired Roger Shuy as its director, along with two of his former graduate students, Walt Wolfram and Ralph Fasold. Shuy later became director of the sociolinguistics program at Georgetown, and Fasold was hired at Georgetown shortly thereafter. Building from the foundational Detroit Dialect Study, in which he played a key role, Fasold spearheaded the first study of DC AAL in the modern quantitative sociolinguistic (variationist) tradition. The resulting publication, *Tense Marking in Black English* (Fasold 1972) is now one of the canonical studies of AAL. Fasold and his colleagues collected sociolinguistic interview recordings from 90 DC residents, with 51 included in his analysis. Importantly, Fasold included speakers of a range of ages (b. 1891-1958) and social strata. In line with sociological studies of the time, Fasold used Warner, et al.'s (1960) ISC to rate speakers by social class. These ratings are included in the CORAAL metadata. Fasold's analyses focused on several key features of AAL implicated in the tense and aspectual systems of AAL, including past tense *-ed* absence (e.g. *Yesterday he walk to work*), present tense *-s* absence (e.g. *She walk to school every day*), and invariant *be*, which Fasold termed 'distributive *be*', as in *He always be talking*. (see Kendall and Farrington 2018 for more information on CORAAL:DCA and the Fasold data set.)

In addition to Shuy, Fasold and Wolfram in DC, other linguists also worked on topics connected to AAL in this period. Edmund Anderson, who was an undergraduate at Wheaton College with Wolfram and Fasold, and also a fieldworker for Shuy's Detroit Dialect Study, wrote a report titled *A Grammatical Overview of Baltimore Non-Standard Negro English* (1970), for the Office of Education, which focused mostly on grammatical structures of children acquiring the variety. Additionally, James Bachmann, a graduate student at Georgetown in the late 1960s, wrote *A Comparison of Nonstandard Grammatical Usage in some Negro and White Working-Class Families in Alexandria, Virginia* (1969).

3.4 Children's acquisition of AAL in DC (1980s)

A key interest of researchers at CAL and Georgetown was how children use and acquire AAL. Ceil Kovac (Lucas) completed a dissertation at Georgetown titled *Children's Acquisition of Variable Features* (1980). She later worked with Denise Borders to produce *Language Diversity and Classroom Discourse* (1983), a study of children's development of language functions in the classroom, based on video and audio recordings and observation of African American children in Kindergarten, fourth grade, and sixth grade in a DC public school, across a range of events from whole-group lessons, to small group discussions with and without their teachers, to one-on-one interviews. Their analysis revealed that, contrary to widespread belief, the children's "nonstandard" home dialect did not impede their ability to understand a full range of classroom language functions. In addition, by grades 4 and 6, the children also showed keen awareness of and capacity for stylistic variation, including lower use of vernacular dialect features in teacher-directed activities. More recently, Ceil Lucas has contributed to important work on the study of Black American Sign Language (BASL) with colleagues at Gallaudet University in Washington DC. (For discussion of the intersection of AAL and BASL, see Lucas, Bayley, McCaskill, and Hill 2015).

Other important studies investigating the acquisition of AAL were those of Ida Stockman, Faye Vaughn-Cooke, and Walt Wolfram, who used both cross-sectional and

longitudinal methods to study dialect development in working class DC speakers (Stockman, Vaughn-Cooke, and Wolfram 1982). Their project would remain the only large-scale longitudinal study of the acquisition and development of AAL until work by Wolfram, Janneke Van Hofwegen and others, based on a large longitudinal database of speakers in North Carolina across a range of speech situations (e.g. Van Hofwegen and Wolfram 2010).ⁱ

3.5 Language and Communication in the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area project (2006-Present)

Despite the important work on DC AAL in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and despite the strong presence of sociolinguists in the DC area over the decades, Wolfram (1984, 21) lamented that “Virtually no comprehensive studies of the overall [DC] community exist, despite the fact that the metropolitan area contains everything anyone would want for a career investigation.” His call for an all-encompassing sociolinguistic study (or studies) would go largely unheeded for more than 20 years, when Deborah Schiffrin and Natalie Schilling, professors in the Georgetown Linguistics Department, initiated Language and Communication in the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area (LCDC), a sociolinguistic research effort with the aim of working toward just such a comprehensive study. As of the writing of this article, the LCDC corpus consists of about 300 sociolinguistic interviews, of which 32 were conducted for CORAAL:DCB. The LCDC corpus consists mostly of data from white and African American residents of DC and the surrounding metropolitan area, though Latin@, Asian, and other ethnicities are represented as well, including Africans not of African American descent (e.g. Ethiopians). LCDC participants are all age 18 or older; CORAAL:DCB encompasses children as young as 12. The LCDC database also includes several interviews from Fasold (1972), some of which can be found in CORAAL:DCA. The LCDC corpus also differs from CORAAL in that the former is not publically accessible, though portions of it are available to university researchers, upon request.

The LCDC project has resulted in a number of presentations and publications, including doctoral dissertations, Master’s theses, and an array of journal articles and book chapters. A number of these are focused on DC AAL, as viewed from a variety of lenses – quantitative variationist, sociophonetic, and discourse analytic.

From the LCDC project, we have learned about dialect variation and change in an array of features. Of interest are such questions as: What are the characteristics of the phonological and morphosyntactic systems of DC AAL?; How do DC African Americans compare with area European American (white) speakers?; and How are both situated with respect to patterns that have been found to characterize the well-defined dialect areas that surround the dialectally liminal DC area – namely, the U.S. South, the Mid-Atlantic, and the more northerly varieties of New York City, the Inland North, and the North more generally (e.g. Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006).

For example, Sinae Lee (2016, 2018b) examined the fronting of the high and mid back vowels as well as the low back merger among DC African Americans and whites. She found that, in general, DC African Americans are participating to a degree in both processes, though to a lesser extent than area whites. Callier, Jamsu and J. Lee (2009) and Schilling and Jamsu (2010) have looked at /ay/ glide weakening, and work in preparation by Minnie Quartey shows the (urr) variable to be robust in DC. The LCDC researchers’ findings regarding vowel features in DC AAL align with incipient work using the CORAAL:DC database by Arnson and Farrington (2017), and so we are already seeing the value of CORAAL:DC in terms of assessing reliability.

Anastasia Nylund (2013, to appear) and Jessica Grieser (2013, 2015) have analyzed several consonantal features (e.g., /l/-vocalization, coronal stop deletion (CSD), devoicing of word final /d/), and both show higher usage levels among African Americans than whites, especially for residents of Southeast DC.

A distinctive aspect of the LCDC data is the focus on meaning making in unfolding discourse. For example, Podesva (2008) shows how a DC African American and a DC European American each respectively capitalize on different social associations of a single variant, CSD, to project an anti-gentrification stance and a casual, relaxed style. Similarly, Grieser (2013) shows how the (dh)/(th) variable (e.g. [dis] for ‘this’, [wit] for ‘with’) is used differently by two DC African Americans of different social class and residential status to convey, on the one hand, contrast between longstanding African American residents and newer white residents, and on the other, difference between hardworking residents of Southeast DC and panhandlers who contribute to the neighborhood’s negative reputation. Other LCDC-based studies focus on stance and identity making in discourse include Nielsen’s (2012) study of prosody and rhythm in a DC African American adolescent’s interview speech, Lee’s (2018a) investigation of how discourse features are used to align or dis-align with negative stances towards Southeast, and Schiffrin’s (2009) study of one DC-area resident’s use of time, space and identity in narrative discourse in the construction of cultural ‘chronotopes’ (Bakhtin 1981). Much of the work on the centrality of place identity to DC residents builds on Gabriella Modan’s (2007) ethnographic study of an ethnically diverse DC neighborhood that slightly pre-dates LCDC, while Quartey and Schilling (this volume) continue the focus on stance and identity in unfolding discourse using the CORAAL corpus.

4. Looking forward: Using CORAAL to build on previous work

Given their focus on phonetics, phonology and discourse, the LCDC studies conducted to date complement Fasold’s (1972) study focused on the tense and aspect system of AAL. These traditions, and the initial studies of CORAAL published in this volume, provide a strong foundation for future research. Researchers using CORAAL:DC will be able to continue building on the rich body of work outlined above, as well as revisit questions long left unanswered. For example, decades ago, a special issue of *American Speech* (Fasold, et al. 1987) was devoted to discussion and debate of Labov’s assertion that African American and white U.S. varieties were diverging from one another in the latter decades of the 20th century. Labov pointed to higher usage levels of vernacular features in young speakers (in the 1960s and 1970s) as evidence of dialectal divergence. However, others in the volume, including Vaughn-Cooke and Wolfram, maintained that more evidence from adult speakers in later decades (i.e. those who were children and teens in the 1960s and 1970s) would be needed to establish change over time vs. age-grading. In fact, Wolfram noted that an ideal site for data collection would be Washington, DC. CORAAL:DC should provide an ideal data for just such a study.

Despite the fact that African American Language is among the most-studied language varieties in the world (e.g. Schneider 1996, 3), a host of issues remain to be investigated, from an array of perspectives, including variationist sociolinguistics, dialect geography, and Interactional Sociolinguistics. A public corpus of AAL hopefully provides a strong base for continuing the long tradition of study of AAL, in DC and beyond, that has been a key component of sociolinguistics since its inception.

ⁱ While these two represent large scale, longitudinal studies of the acquisition of AAL, there are several others who have done important cross-sectional studies (Craig and Washington 2006; Green 2011), and longitudinal studies of AAE in adulthood (Cukor-Avila and Bailey 2018).

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