

New Ways of Analyzing  
Variation 52

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# Regional & Ethnic Differences in Morphosyntactic Variation among Black Adolescents

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spencer foundation



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- Sociolinguistics has begun to meaningfully engage with diversity between and among Black speech communities when it comes to...
  - **Region** (Farrington, King & Kohn 2020, Fisher *to appear*, Kendall & Farrington 2023, Wolfram & Thomas 2002, Wolfram & Kohn 2015)
  - **Class** (Grieser 2022, Spears 2015, Weldon 2022)
  - **Ethnicity/race** (Blake 2016, Browne & Stanford 2018; Holliday 2016, Nesbitt et al. 2024, Stanford 2019);
  - **Gender** (Lanehart 2009, 2021, Morgan 2020, Rickford & Price 2013, Smitherman 1988)

- Sociolinguistic interviews collected by 6 undergrad RAs (3 Penn; 3 Wellesley), all identifying as Black & female, during Fall 2021– Summer 2023
- 30 high school students who identified as Black/African American in Philadelphia & Greater Boston

**WELLESLEY COLLEGE**  
COGNITIVE AND LINGUISTIC SCIENCES

*We want to know about your high school experiences!*

WE ARE INTERESTED IN THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS, SPECIFICALLY AROUND ISSUES OF LANGUAGE.\* WE'RE RECRUITING STUDENTS AND GRADUATES OF HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE BOSTON AREA TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH.

**WHO?**  
CANDIDATES SHOULD IDENTIFY AS BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN, BE CURRENTLY ENROLLED/A GRADUATE OF A PUBLIC OR CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL IN THE BOSTON AREA BETWEEN THE AGES OF 15 AND 25, AND HAVE ATTENDED U.S. SCHOOLS FROM KINDERGARTEN.

**WHAT?**  
A FUN ONE-HOUR INTERVIEW AND A LANGUAGE-RELATED TASK IN EXCHANGE FOR A \$20 AMAZON GIFT CARD.

**WHEN?**  
WE'LL MEET AT A TIME THAT IS CONVENIENT FOR YOU.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, SCAN THE QR CODE BELOW:



QUESTIONS? CONTACT DR. SABRIYA FISHER AT [SFISHER3@WELLESLEY.EDU](mailto:sfisher3@wellesley.edu)



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## Philadelphia

- 15 high school students from 1 public school
- 15/15 attending predominantly Black schools
- 12 female; 3 male
- 15/15 lower middle to working class based on parent occupation
- 11/15 African American, 3 Caribbean American, 1 Afro-Latinx
- 2/15 also speak Spanish

## Boston

- 15 high school students from a mix of public, charter, exam, private, and Catholic schools
- School demographics varied with 6/15 attending predominantly Black schools
- 11 female; 4 male
- 15/15 lower middle to working class based on parent occupation
- 5/15 African American, 6 Caribbean American, 4 Afro-Latinx
- 4/15 also speak Haitian Creole, 4 Spanish

- Coded interview transcripts for 25 vernacular/AAE morphosyntactic features based on Van Hofwegen & Wolfram 2010
- **Zero modal or auxiliary**
  - *the best class that I \_\_ ever taken*
- **Ain't as a negative auxiliary**
  - *I ain't gonna talk about that though*
- **Negative concord**
  - *you just don't make **no** sense*
- **Copula absence**
  - *cause my mom \_\_ still doin' whatever she gotta do*
- **3rd singular -s absence**
  - *'cause he live \_\_ around the corner*

General Vernacular

AAE

- Coded interview transcripts for 25 vernacular/AAE morphosyntactic features based on Van Hofwegen & Wolfram 2010
- 4 measures to capture use of features associated with AAE/vernacular English
  - Total counts of vernacular features used per speaker (**Feature Counts**)
  - Range of vernacular features used (out of 25) per speaker (**Feature Range**)
  - Features used per utterance per speaker (**Dialect Density Measure/DDM**)(Craig & Washington 2006, Grieser 2019, Oetting & McDonald 2002, Renn 2007, Van Hofwegen & Wolfram 2010)
  - Frequency of copula absence per speaker (**Copula Deletion Rate**)(Van Hofwegen & Wolfram 2010, Labov 1969)

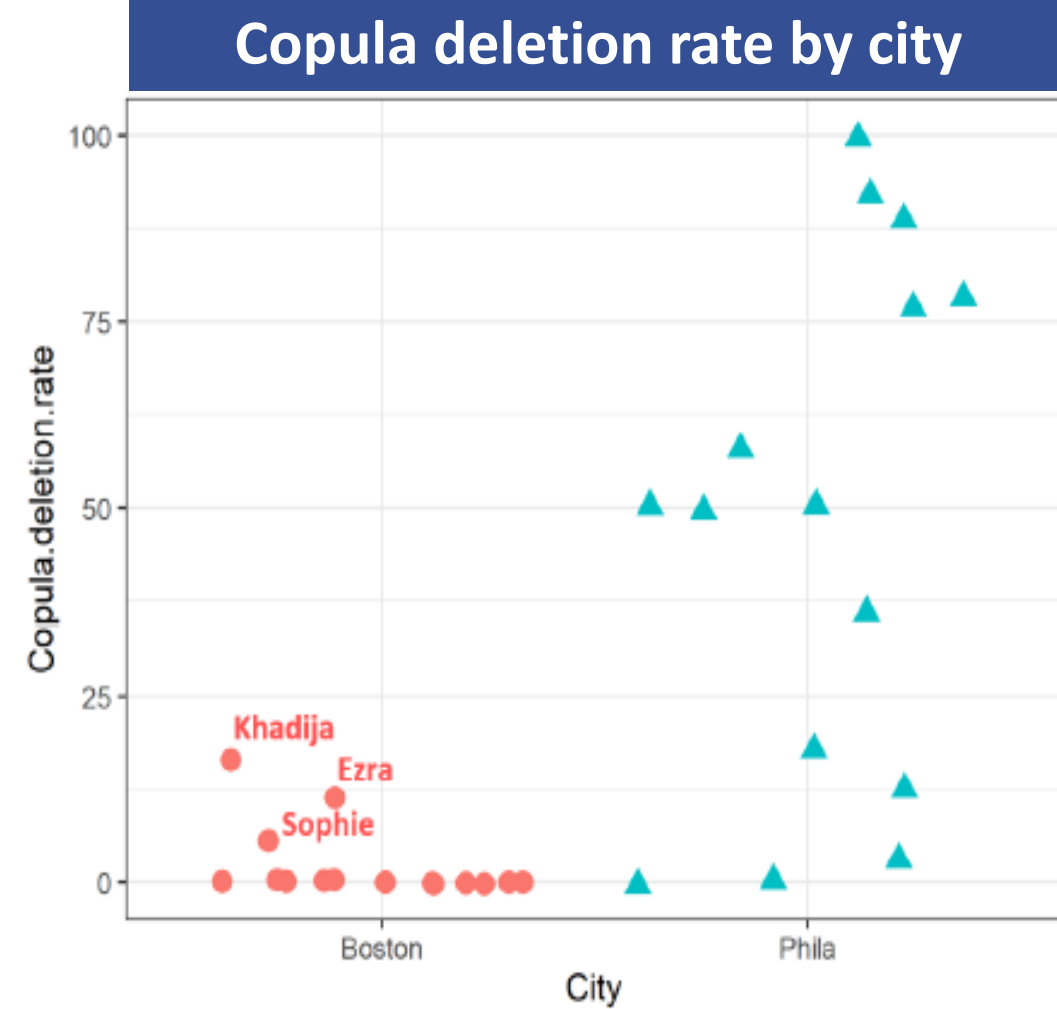
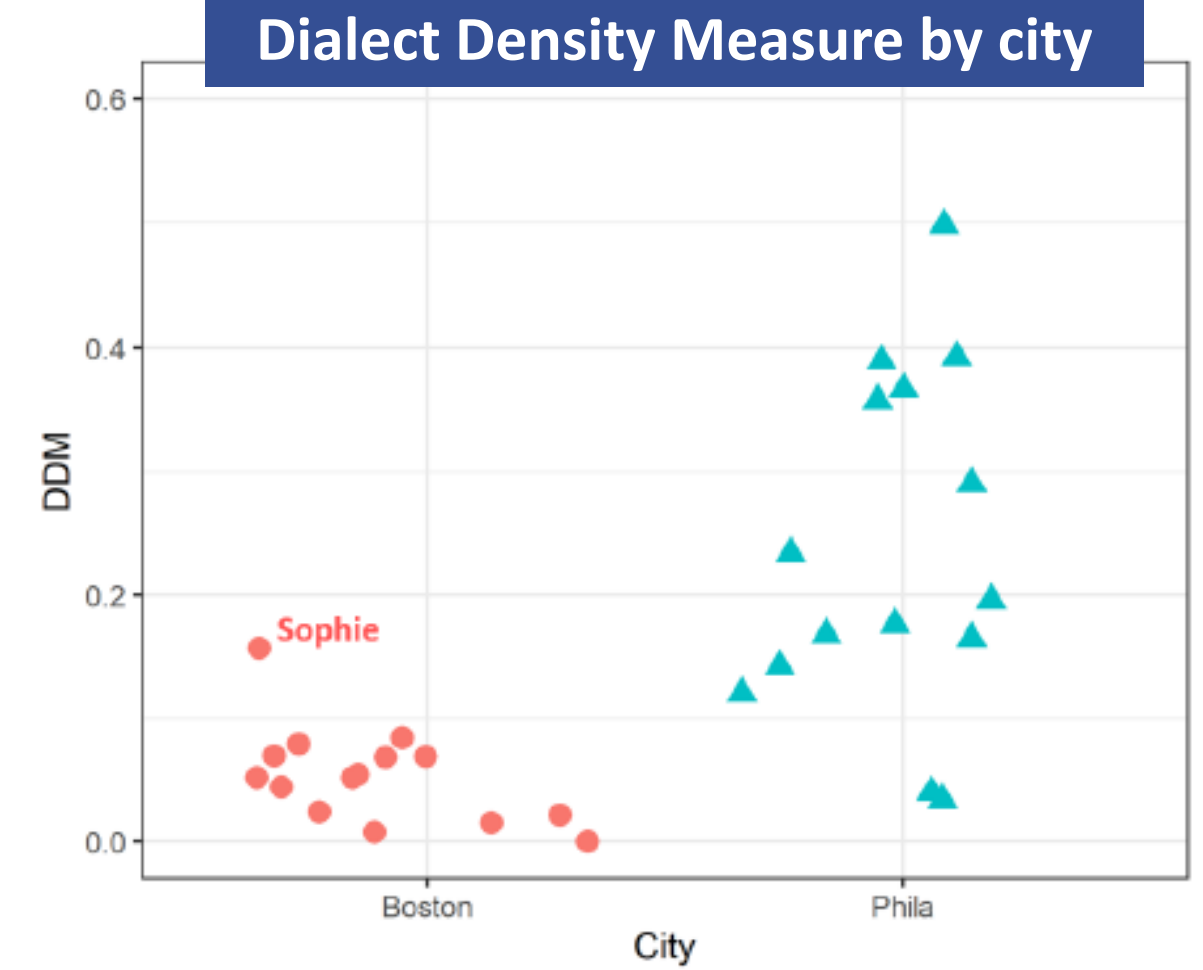
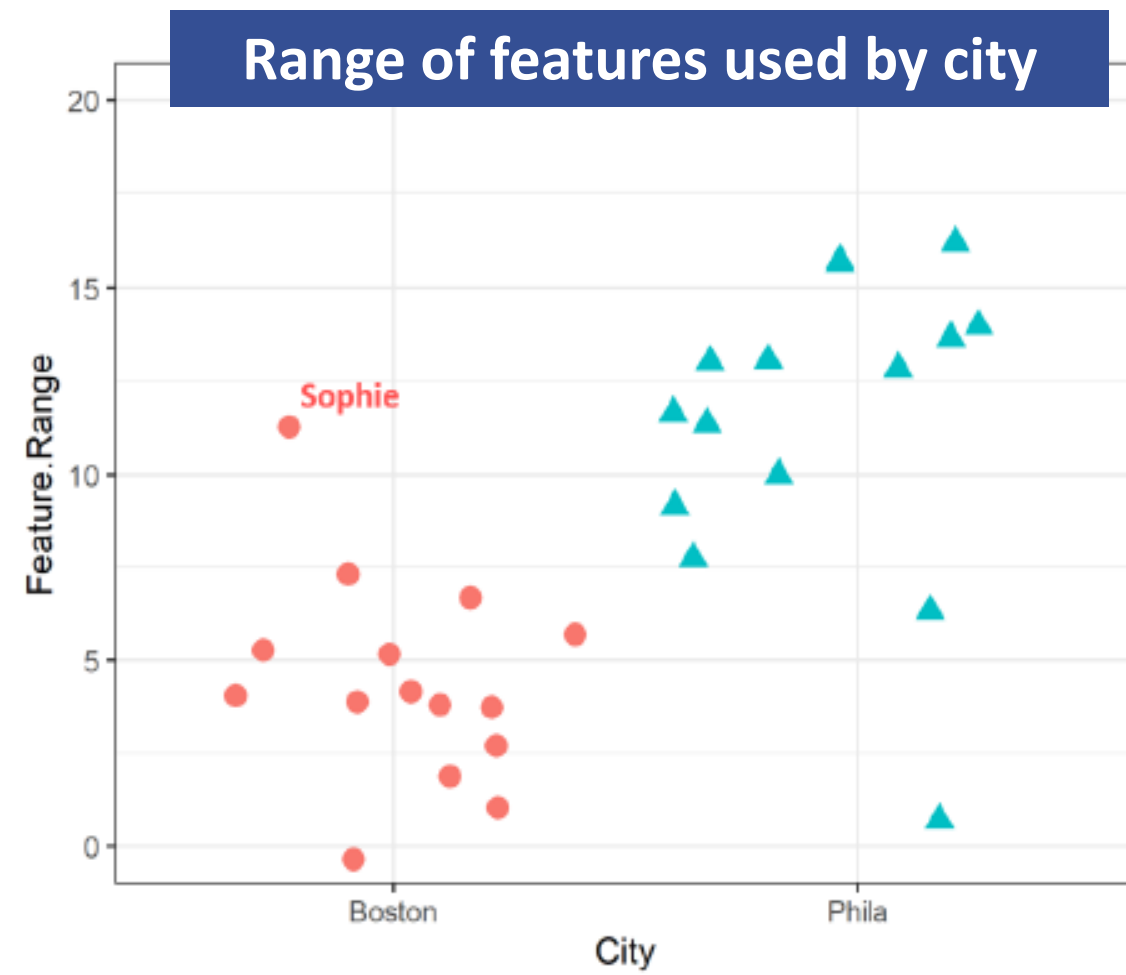
## Results: Top Morphosyntactic Features by City



Counts of top morphosyntactic features used by speakers in Philadelphia and Boston .

\*Habitual be was used 24/26 times by only one speaker in Boston, Sophie (pseudonym).

## Results: Use of Morphosyntactic Features by City





- **3 linear regressions in R** (R Core Team 2024), one each for
  1. Feature Range
  2. Dialect Density Measure (DDM)
  3. Copula Deletion
- **Step up** process to fit best model by Maximum Likelihood Estimation w/ fixed factors:
  - **City** [Boston/Philadelphia]
  - **Gender** [Female/Male]
  - **Ethnicity** [African American/Caribbean American/Afro-Latinx]
  - **School Racial Demographics** [Black/Latinx/MixedBL/White]
  - **School Type** [Public/Charter/Private/Exam]
  - **Reported Code-Switching in School** [yes/no]

- **3 linear regressions in R** (R Core Team 2024), one each for
  1. Feature Range ( $p < 0.0001$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.5859$ )
  2. Dialect Density Measure (DDM) ( $p < 0.0001$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.5455$ )
  3. Copula Deletion ( $p < 0.001$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.5359$ )
- **Step up** process to fit best model by Maximum Likelihood Estimation w/ fixed factors:
  - **City** [Boston/Philadelphia]
  - **Gender** [Female/Male]
  - **Ethnicity** [African American/Caribbean American/Afro-Latinx]
  - **School Racial Demographics** [Black/Latinx/MixedBL/White]
  - **School Type** [Public/Charter/Private/Exam]
  - **Reported Code-Switching in School** [yes/no]

**Factors included in best fit models = City, Ethnicity, Reported Code-Switching in School**

- **Regional differences** in use of vernacular/AAE morphosyntactic features between the two cities
  - Philadelphia speakers have wider ranges of feature use ( $p < 0.001$ ), higher DDMs ( $< 0.001$ ), and higher rates of copula deletion ( $p < 0.0001$ )
- Possible **ethnic differences** in use of vernacular/AAE morphosyntactic features
  - Afro-Latinx and Caribbean American speakers use a more restricted range of features ( $p < 0.02$ )
  - Afro-Latinx speakers may also have lower DDMs ( $p < 0.1$ )
- **Students who are more linguistically aware** (report code-switching in school) have higher DDMs ( $p < 0.01$ ) and rates of copula deletion ( $p < 0.01$ )

- We don't see **ethnic differences** among Black Bostonians in regards to phonology (Brown & Stanford 2018, Nesbitt et al. 2024), but we're seeing them for morphosyntax.
  - Is this due to lack of acquisition of AAE morphosyntactic features among non-African Americans?
  - Or orientation away from an African American identity (e.g., Blake 2016)?
- ❖ Underscores the importance of considering **within and between community variation** in studies of Black speakers as well as **inclusive approaches to data collection**

**Ask me about future directions!**

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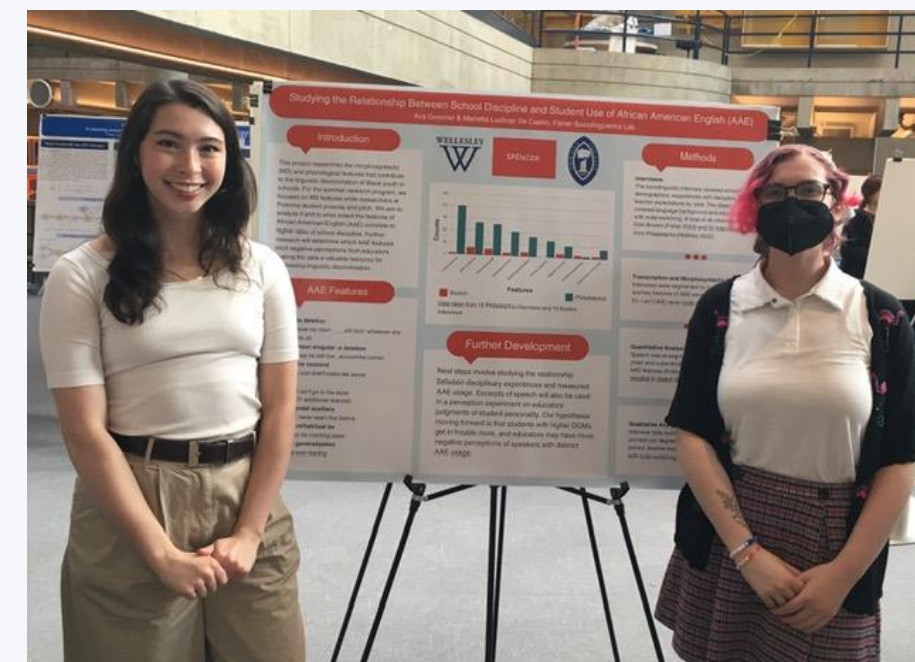
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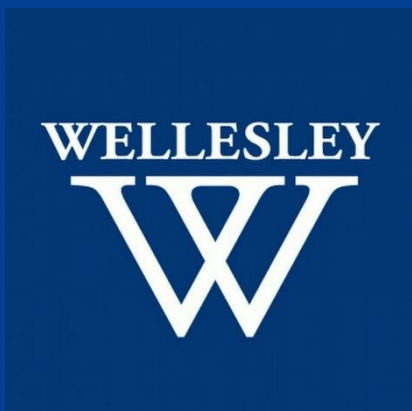
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# Thank you for Listening!

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# Morphosyntactic Features (1/5)

## Copula variation

*cause my mom \_\_ still doin' whatever she gotta do*

## **Ain't** as a negative auxiliary

*I **ain't** gonna talk about that though*

## Negative concord

*you just **don't** make **no** sense*

## 3rd singular -s absence

*'cause he live\_ around the corner*

## Zero modal auxiliary

*my mom \_\_ got eight sisters*

*my mom and my dad \_\_ been together for like a couple...*

*the best class that I \_\_ ever taken*

*What \_\_ you mean?*





## Morphosyntactic Features (2/5)

### Double modals

*I **might could** go there*

### Remote past **BIN**

*he **BIN** worked here*

### Finta/(s)poseta/bouta

*which you **sposeta** to take in tenth grade*

### Invariant/habitual **be**

*he **be** walkin' the hell out these hallway*

### Preterit **had**

*we **had** got kicked out of the house or whatever*



## Morphosyntactic Features (3/5)

### Completive *dən*

*we dən got into a pandemic*

### Existential *it/they*

*it's some wealthy people in my family*

### Uninverted direct question

*Why I can't go?*

### Past form for participles

*we have did for ourselves basically*

### Regularization of irregular past forms

*til she **finded** her a place*



# Morphosyntactic Features (4/5)

## Non-3rd singular -s insertion

*like in the wintertime they separates us*

## Is/was generalization

*her kids and their kids **was** there*

## Do/have generalization

*he still **do** teach spanish*

## Possessive -s absence

*this girl\_ name was like...*

## Nominative or object case of pronoun rather than possessive

*they get **they** hoodies taken*



## Morphosyntactic Features (5/5)

### Zero plural -s

*cause they makin' a lotta house\_ for these white people*

### Regularized *mines*

***mines** was on zoom so i couldn't really find much funny*

### Use of object form for demonstrative

*some of **them** white teachers be fakin', I know they do*

### Use of personal/benefactive dative

*til she **finded her** a place*

### Use of *a* when following noun starts with a vowel

*why they got a\_ overnight and stuff like that*