

African American Speech in Southern Appalachia

Walt Wolfram
North Carolina State University

Submitted to:

Appalachian Englishes
Edited by Nancy M. Hayward and Amy Clark

University of Kentucky Press

Draft 1
08/09/2010

Walt Wolfram
Department of English Box 8105
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC 27695-8195
e-mail: walt_wolfram@ncsu.edu

African American Speech in Southern Appalachia

Walt Wolfram

North Carolina State University

The Sociohistorical Context*

Despite their invisibility in traditional portraits of Appalachia, African Americans have been a part of Southern Appalachian culture since the eighteenth century. In fact, nearly 10 percent of the population of the Mountain South is African American (Drake 2001; Billings & Blee 2006). Even though the black population was characterized by much lower density compared to the lowland, plantation South, African Americans in Southern Appalachia were not cushioned from the social and political impact of enslavement and social subordination (Dunaway 2003). At the same time, there were differences. Dunaway (2003) notes that in the Mountain South, slave holdings per household were smaller than in the lowland South, there was more ethnic mixing between African Americans and Native Americans, more frequent assignment of slaves to nonagricultural occupations, and heavier reliance on the labor of women and children. In this context, a number of small, rural and some urban African American communities in Southern Appalachia were established in the 18th and 19th centuries and have stably existed since that time.

Linguistic Myths

Until the past decade (e.g. Mallinson & Wolfram 2002; Childs & Mallinson 2004; Mallinson & Childs 2004; Childs 2005; Mallinson 2006; Hazen 2006), the speech of African Americans in the Appalachian range has largely been ignored or dismissed. Some of the oversight is attributable no doubt to the general cultural and sociohistorical oversight of blacks in the Mountain South, but there were also some sociolinguistic circumstances that contributed to this neglect. Notwithstanding the significant contributions of dialectologists and sociolinguists to the description of regional, social, and ethnic varieties of American English over the past half-century, the field was lulled into the acceptance of several sociolinguistic assumptions that may have contributed to the lack of attention to African American speech in this region (Wolfram 2007, forthcoming). One of the conclusions that emerged from the early wave of African American English (AAE) descriptive studies in sociolinguistics (e.g., Labov, Cohen, Robins & Lewis 1968; Labov 1972; Fasold & Wolfram 1970; Wolfram & Fasold 1974) was the observation that a common set of structural pronunciation and grammatical features characterized the vernacular speech of African Americans regardless of where it was spoken. It was assumed that there was a kind of homogeneity in AAE that united its use in different regional contexts and in urban and rural settings as well. As William Labov (1972:xii), arguably the most influential voice on the study of AAE for more than four decades, put it, “By the “black English vernacular” [AAE] we mean the relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of black young in most parts of the United States today, especially in the inner city areas ... It is also spoken in most rural areas and used in the casual, intimate speech of many adults.” Under this perspective, it could be assumed that descriptions of AAE for the Mountain South simply would match those for AAE varieties elsewhere.

By the same token, analogous assumptions of homogeneity have been applied to Appalachian English, where it has sometimes been assumed that there is a uniform variety that extends throughout the Appalachian range. For example, Wolfram and Christian (1976:29), in one of the earliest descriptions of a variety of Appalachian English, noted that “we use the term AE [Appalachian English] to refer to the variety of English most typically associated with the working class population” and that “many of the features we describe have relatively wide

distribution within the central Appalachian range.” From such a perspective it might be assumed that a general description of Appalachian English might be applied regardless of region and ethnicity in the Mountain South. In the words of Bonfiglio (2002, 62-63), the illusion of homogeneity “is largely a function of secondary revision that glosses over differences and constructs a linear metanarrative...there is something in the popular consciousness that desires to see a unity of geography, ethnicity, and language.” More recent descriptions of Appalachia (Hazen 2006; Hazen, Butcher & King forthcoming; Hazen, Wagner & Simmons this collection) emphasize the diversity of language within the Mountain South.

In traditional studies of AAE there has also been a preoccupation with dialect forms that are most different from Standard English. By comparison, there has been relatively limited empirical study of the social diversification of AAE within African American communities. The operational definition of AAE seems fixated on its most vernacular form, and methodologies for collecting data have centered on procedures for accessing the most vernacular version of AAE from the most vernacular speakers. Furthermore, the traditional comparative base for most descriptive AAE accounts has always been, and continues to be, an idealized version of Standard English rather than localized norms in the context of local speech communities.

A similar preoccupation has been characterized the study of Southern Appalachian speech, where descriptions tend to focus on working-class speakers who are most distant from Standard English (Wolfram & Christian 1976; Montgomery & Hall 2004) rather than speakers who represent the range of social strata within the community. This traditional focus sets the stage for the preoccupation with vernacular structures, leading at times to a kind sociolinguistic nostalgia for the authentic vernacular speaker (Bucholtz 2003). Descriptive attention still remains focused primarily on the most vernacular varieties of both AAE and Appalachian English, despite the fact that identity, style, and politics intersect with the full range of language fluctuation in varieties of Appalachian English and in AAE varieties wherever they are found (Hazen et al. forthcoming).

Linguistic Issues

There are several possibilities in terms of African American speech in Appalachia. As Hazen (2006) points out, there may be shared features between African Americans and European Americans that make the speech of these groups indistinguishable in actual dialect use and undifferentiated in dialect perception. At the other extreme, we might find distinct varieties of English that demark a clear-cut ethnolinguistic boundary so that African American speech maintains the kind of sociocultural distinctiveness that has been noted in traditional sociolinguistic studies of AAE. Or there may be different constellations of shared and distinctive structures that are sensitive to the local context and to community dynamics. Of course, it is further possible that there is a range of language and social relations that characterize the speech of African Americans in the Mountain South, and that demographic, social and sociopsychological factors intersect in defining the use of these varieties in particular communities. Certainly, there is great diversity in the African American communities of Appalachian range so that it is sometimes difficult to generalize from community to community. Notwithstanding these community differences, there may also be factors that unify African American communities in the Mountain South due to the common imposition of segregation laws that led to separate schools, separate churches, and other forms of institutional and social segregation. Questions about African American speech in Southern Appalachia can only be answered by examining empirically some actual cases of African American communities in this region.

Some Empirical Evidence

We can consider the relationship of African American speech to local speech in the Mountain South by examining several types of diagnostic linguistics structures, that is, structures that set apart different regional, social, or ethnic groups. Before examining a couple of these representative variables, however, it is necessary to understand that, although dialects are sometimes set apart by qualitative differences (i.e. one variety always uses a structure that another variety never does), they are just as often differentiated by quantitative differences in which language varieties are distinct in terms of the relative frequency of usage rather than categorical absence or presence of a structural form. For example, all speakers of English sometimes use the form *in'* for the unstressed suffix *-ing*, as in *swimmin'* for *swimming* or *runnin'* for *running*. At the same time, some groups and individuals use the *-in'* form significantly more frequently than others (Hazen 2008) so that low status speakers may use it more than high status speakers, men more than women, Southerners more than Northerners, and some mountain communities more than some lowland Southern communities. It is important to understand that some dimensions of African American and Appalachian speech will be defined by patterns of relative use rather than categorical patterns of use or non-use.

As an illustrative example, consider the relative absence of the third person singular *-s* suffix in structures like *She run* for *She runs* in some representative regional African American communities, including a couple of communities in Southern Appalachia. This feature is a common trait of AAE (Rickford 1999; Green 2002) but it is not commonly found in varieties of Appalachian English (e.g. Wolfram & Christian 1976; Montgomery and Hall 2004). In figure 1, summary statistics for *-s* absence are given for five different communities: two of them, Beech Bottom and Texana, are located in the Appalachian mountain range of Western North Carolina, two are on the Outer Banks (Roanoke, Hyde County) by the coast, and one is in the Coastal Plain (Princeville) region of North Carolina. The Appalachian community of Beech Bottom is located in the northwest corner of North Carolina in Avery County, about 35 miles southwest of Boone along the Tennessee border. Settled in the 1870s, the African American community's population has ranged from 80 to 120. Since the early 1940s, however, due to the closing of feldspar mines and the mobilizing effects of World War II, the community's population has been drastically receding so that there are only a handful of African American residents remaining. Texana is a small African American community located high on a mountain about a mile from the town of Murphy in the Great Smoky Mountain region of North Carolina near the Tennessee border. It was settled in the 1850s, and currently has a relatively stable population of about 150 African Americans.

The percentages for 3rd sg. *-s* absence in figure 1 represent the number of cases of *-s* absence out of the total where it might potentially have occurred. The figures further include 3rd sg. *-s* absence for three different age groups of speakers in each community, older speakers, middle-aged speakers, and younger speakers. Figures for Princeville are from D'Andrea (2005), for Hyde County from Wolfram and Thomas (2002), for Roanoke Island from Carpenter (2004, 2005), for Beech Bottom from Mallinson and Wolfram (2002), and figures for Texana from Childs and Mallinson (2004) and Mallinson (2006).

*** Insert Figure 1 about here ***

Figure 1 shows that third person 3rd sg. *-s* absence is highly variable in different communities and that it is quite sensitive to generational differences as well. For example, *-s* absence is

relatively rare—and receding—in the Appalachian African American communities but quite common in the Coastal Plain community of Princeville, with the Outer Banks communities in between. Similar variability across these communities has been found for other “core” AAE structures (Wolfram & Carpenter 2006) such as copula absence (e.g. *She nice* for *She’s nice*) and prevocalic cluster reduction (e.g. *wes’ en’* for *west end*; , *col’ egg* for *cold egg*), suggesting that features commonly included in the inventory of AAE structures may appear in Appalachian African American speech, but that they are not nearly as stable and uniform as attested in non-Mountain South African American communities.

We now consider a phonological variable that represents a different pattern, the absence of *r* following a vowel, as in *fea’* for *fear* or *ca’* for *car*. Traditional AAE varieties in both urban and rural contexts (Fasold & Wolfram 1970; Labov et al. 1968; Rickford 1999; Green 2002) are described as predominantly *r*-less, whereas varieties of Appalachian English are typically described as *r*-ful, that is, they tend to pronounce the *r* in *fear* or *car* (Wolfram & Christian 1976; Montgomery & Hall 2004; Hazen et al forthcoming). In figure 2, the relative incidence of postvocalic *r*-lessness in several regionally situated contexts in rural North Carolina is considered, again including two communities in Southern Appalachia. For the sake of comparison, figures for *r*-lessness are given for two cohort European American communities, one in Appalachia and one on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. As with figure 1, percentages are given for three different age groups so that change in apparent time can be considered in the assessment of regional accommodation.

*** Insert Figure 2 about here ***

The two Appalachian communities have little *r*-lessness, much like their cohort European American communities. Furthermore, *r*-lessness rates show a relatively stable pattern in the Appalachian communities, with little change across the different generational groups. The patterning of *r*-lessness in communities in Eastern North Carolina shows much more variability in time and place.

The above examples indicate that core vernacular AAE structures that differ from vernacular Appalachian English structures may be represented, but at significantly reduced levels in African American speech in the Southern Appalachian range. This finding has been replicated in other studies; for example, Wolfram and Carpenter (2006) and Hazen et al (forthcoming) find similar patterns for prevocalic consonant cluster reduction (e.g. *wes’ en’* for *west end*) and for copula absence (e.g. *She nice* for *She’s nice*) for African Americans in different settings in the Mountain South. At the same time, there is apparent accommodation of local dialect traits in African American Appalachian communities, as illustrated by the predominant *r*-ful pattern for postvocalic *r* so that it aligns with the Southern Appalachian usage pattern rather than the core AAE pattern.

Accommodation of local Appalachian norms is quite transparent with vowels. For example, Childs (2005), who conducted an extensive acoustical examination of vowels in Texana, shows that traits of Southern Appalachian vowels are frequently adopted by African Americans contra AAE vowel norms (Thomas 2007). For example, the Southern vowel fronting in words such as *boot* and *boat*, so that they sound more like *biwt* and *bewt*, respectively, is common among African Americans in Mountain South communities though it is not typically found in the core AAE system (Thomas 2007). Similarly, the ungliding of vowels of words like *right* and *ride* by African Americans in Southern Appalachia is more likely to follow the local pattern than the core AAE pattern found elsewhere. As noted by Thomas (2007), there are two

patterns of ungliding the diphthong of *ride* and *right*, one in which the ungliding affects only vowels occurring before voiced consonants or syllable-final vowels (e.g. *tahm* for *time*; *bah* for *bye*) and a more general pattern in which the ungliding takes place before voiceless consonants as well (e.g. *rice* to *rahs*; *right* to *raht*). The more general version of this pattern is typical of Southern Appalachian varieties whereas the more restricted version is found in some regions of the lowland South and in urban areas (Wolfram 2004). African Americans in Southern Appalachia, however, are more likely to adopt the general version of the pattern, as found in most Southern Appalachian communities, rather than the more general AAE pattern.

The accommodation of local Southern Appalachian vowel traits may be one of the reasons that African Americans in Southern Appalachian are often misidentified as European Americans in ethnic identification tasks by outsiders. For example, Mallinson and Wolfram (2002) and Childs and Mallinson (2006) found that African American speakers in small African American communities in the Mountain South were consistently identified as European Americans by listeners in Raleigh, North Carolina. This misidentification may take place even when the speakers use some core features of AAE that are not found in European American speakers in Appalachia.

The picture that emerges from recent studies suggests that African American speech in Southern Appalachia is somewhat different from that found in the canonical studies of AAE in both large urban areas of the North and in lowland Southern regions (Wolfram 2004; Bailey 2001; Cukor-Avila 2001). While some of the distinctive, core structures of AAE are evident, they are manifested to a lesser degree than they are in other regions. At the same time, African American speakers tend to be more accommodating to local regional dialect traits found among European Americans, particularly in vowel production but also with respect to some of the distinctive grammatical traits as well. Although the lexicon has not been studied in detail, it appears that African Americans in the Mountain South also tend to accommodate distinctive, local vocabulary items. Southern highland dialect words such as *airish* for ‘breezy’ or ‘chilly’, *holler* for ‘a valley between montains’, or *gaum*.for ‘gummed up’ or ‘messy’ are typically known by both European Americans and African Americans in Southern Appalachia. By the same token, some lexical items may be distinctive to the African American community, such as *high yellow* for ‘light-skinned person’, *ashy* for dried, scaley skin, or *CPT* for ‘colored people’s time’. These items are often known only by members of African American communities in these regions. We thus see a pattern in which regional lexical items are shared while African American communities may preserve some ethnically distinctive terms.

Sociolinguistic Diversity in African American Speech

African American speech in the Mountain South is not a uniform variety; in fact, it may be characterized by great diversity based on demographic, social, and individual factors. For example, urban areas of Southern Appalachia, with larger and more densely populated concentrations of African Americans, are likely to show more extensive traits associated with core AAE and fewer local dialect traits than smaller rural areas. But it is not simply a matter of demographic determinism. There are also aspects of cultural differentiation and ethnic identity that are symbolically reflected through language. Thus, Mallinson and Wolfram (2002) contrast the case of Hyde County, a historically isolated coastal community with Beech Bottom, a historically isolated community in Southern Appalachia. Whereas younger Hyde County residents show a movement away from the local norm in favor of external urban AAE norms, the few younger speakers remaining in Beech Bottom accommodate the local dialect norms of their European American cohorts. Beech Bottom African Americans’ express a strong desire to put

behind them some of the racism they have experienced in the past and gloss over the existing ethnic divide between Whites and Blacks; in fact they self-identify as mixed race rather than African American (Mallinson & Wolfram 2002). There is also a lack of a distinctive Black youth culture in Beech Bottom where African American youth are largely involved in local White culture. The converging cultural milieu facilitates a more pronounced movement toward the regional dialect norm, even as traces of a distinctive ethnolinguistic past continue to erode.

Finally, there may be differences in communities of practice within local African American communities. For example, in conducting their study of Texana, the small African American community in the Smoky Mountains, Childs and Mallinson (2004) found that the linguistic practices of women in the community were best explained in terms of the different communities of practice in which the women participated. One group, the “church ladies” engaged in practices related to church activity and activities associated with cultural conservatism and “propriety.” The other primary group, the “porch sitters” engaged in regular socializing on one group member’s porch, where they would listen to music and engage in activities indicative of affiliation with more widespread African American culture, especially youth culture. Differential social practices help explain why the “porch sitters” showed high usage levels for features of core AAE, while the “church ladies” showed low usage levels for these features and instead used features associated with the local Southern Appalachian variety, as well as more features of Standard American English.

African American speech in Appalachia cannot be reduced to a singular description any more than Appalachian English can. There are regional differences, demographically based differences related to community size, gender and social status, and symbolic cultural differences related to how ethnolinguistic differences are symbolically perceived and practiced in various communities. And of course we cannot overlook individual differences, as particular speakers choose to present themselves ethnolinguistically within and outside communities. Notwithstanding these significant variables, we may conclude that many African Americans in the Mountain South reveal an identity that is both shared with and distinct from their European American cohorts. This identity is reflective of the complex ways that region, ethnicity and culture intersect in the Mountain South and the past and current social interactions within and across communities.

References

- Bailey, G. (2001) The relationship between African American Vernacular English and white vernaculars in the American South: A sociocultural history and some phonological evidence. In Lanehart, S.L. (ed.), *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English*, 53-92. Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bucholtz, M. (2003) Sociolinguistic Nostalgia and the Authentication of Identity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7:398-416.
- Bonfiglio, T. P. (2002) *Race and the Rise of Standard American*. Mouton: DeGruyter.
- Childs, B. (2005) *Investigating the Local Construction of Identity: Sociophonetic Variation in Smoky Mountain African American Women's Speech*. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Georgia.
- Childs, B. & Mallinson, C. (2004) African American English in Appalachia. *English World-Wide*, 25:1- 27.
- Childs, B. & Mallinson, C. (2006) The Significance of lexical items in the construction of ethnolinguistic identity: A case study of adolescent spoken and online language. *American Speech*, 81(1):3-30.

- Cukor-Avila, P. (2001) Co-existing grammars: The relationship between the evolution of African American and Southern White Vernacular English in the South. In Lanehart, S. L. (ed.), *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English*, 93-128. Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Billings, D. & Blee, K. (2006) African-American families and communities. African-American Appalachian English. In Haskell, J & Abramson, R. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, 55-56. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.
- D'Andrea, K. D. (2005). The Shifting Significance of 3rd singular –s absence as Compared to r-lessness in Princeville, NC. Unpublished manuscript. North Carolina State University.
- Drake, R.B. *A History of Appalachia*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Dunaway, W. A. (2003) *Slavery in the American Mountain South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fasold, R. W. & Wolfram, W. (1970). Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect. In *Teaching Standard English in the Inner City*, In Fasold, R.W. & Shuy, R.W. (eds.), 41-86. Washington, D.C: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Green, L. J. (2002) *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hazen, K. (2006) African American Appalachian English. In Rudy Abramson and Jean Haskell (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Appalachia*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1006.
- Hazen, K. (2008) (ING): A vernacular baseline for English in Appalachia. *American Speech* 83: 116-40.
- Hazen, K, Butcher, P, and King, A. (forthcoming) Unvernacular Appalachia: An empirical perspective on West Virginia dialect variation. *English Today*.
- Hazen, K., Wagner, J.& Simmons, E. (forthcoming) The Appalachian range: The limits of language variation in West Virginia. In the current volume.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Labov, W., Cohen, P, Robins, C. & Lewis, J. (1968) *A Study of the Non-Standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City*. Washington, D.C.: United States Office of Education Final Report, Research Project 3288.
- Mallinson, C. (2006) *The Dynamic Construction of Race, Class, and Gender through Linguistic Practice among Women in a Black Appalachian Community*. Ph.D. dissertation. Raleigh: North Carolina State University.
- Mallinson, C. & Childs, B. (2004) The intersection of regional and ethnic identity: African American English in Appalachia. *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 10(1/2):129-142.
- Montgomery, M. B. & Hall, J. S. (2004) *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Rickford, John R. (1999) *African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, and Educational Implications*. Malden/Oxford: Blackwell.
- Thomas, E.R. (2007) Phonological and phonetic characteristics of AAVE. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 1:450-75.
- Wolfram, W (2004) The grammar of urban African American Vernacular English. In Kortmann, B & Schneider, E (eds.), *Handbook of Varieties of English: The Americas and Caribbean*, 111-32. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wolfram, W. (2007). Sociolinguistic myths in the study of African American English. *Linguistic and Language Compass* 1:288-313.

- Wolfram, W. (forthcoming) The African American English canon in sociolinguistics. In Adams, M. & Curzan, A. (eds.) *Contours of English and English Language Studies*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Wolfram, W. & Carpenter, J. (2006) Trajectories of change in African American English. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, in Albuquerque, New Mexico.
- Wolfram, W. & Fasold, R. W. (1974) *The Study of Social Dialects in the United States*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Wolfram, W. & Thomas, E.R. (2002) *The Development of African American English*. Malden/Oxford: Blackwell.

Figure 1. The relative frequency of 3rd sg. -s absence in different African American communities

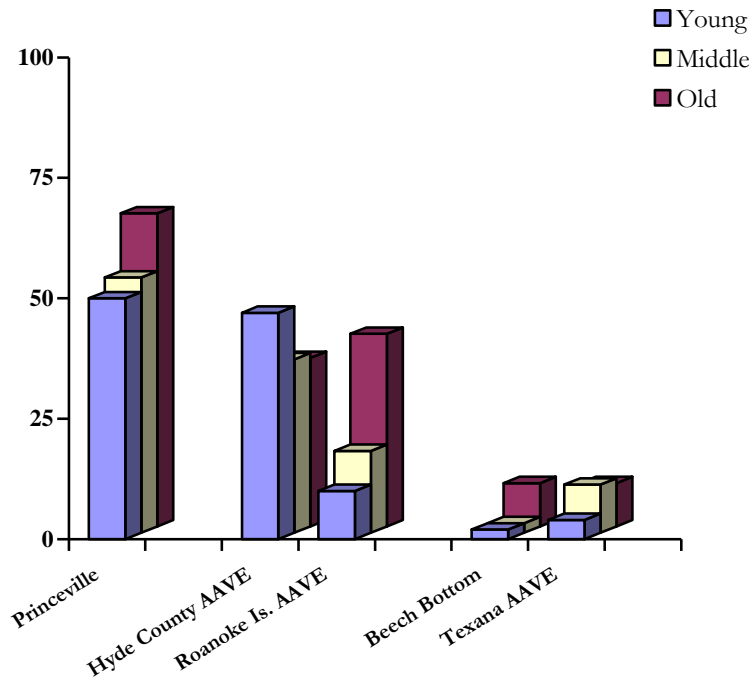
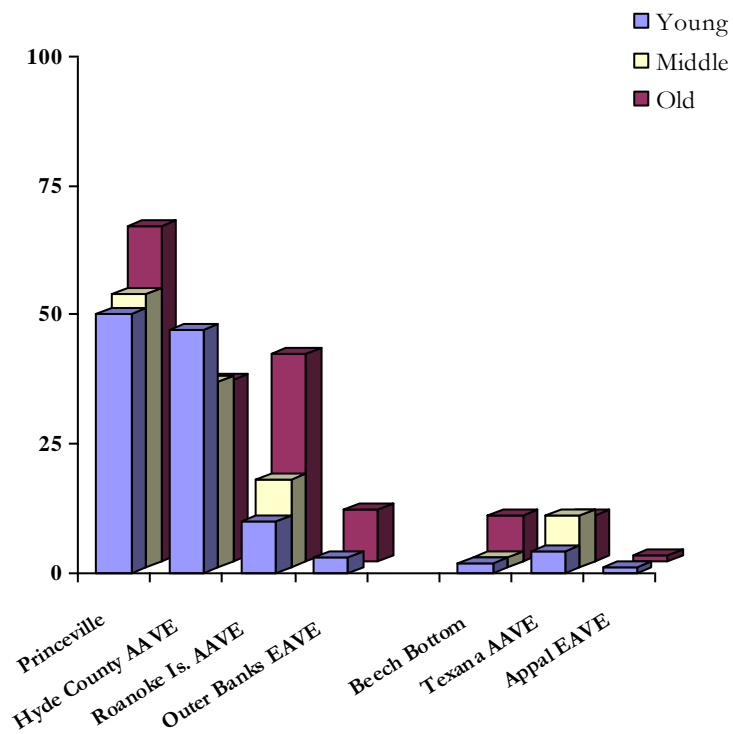


Figure 2. The relative frequency of postvocalic *r*-lessness, by community and age

*Research reported in this paper was generously supported by NSF grants BCS-0236838 and BSC-0843865. Thanks to Kirk Hazen and Mary E. Kohn for comments on a draft of this paper.-