



## University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics

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Volume 10

Issue 2 *Selected Papers from NWAWE 32*

Article 2

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1-1-2005

# [Charles A. Ferguson Prize for Best Student Paper or Poster] Communities of Practice in Sociolinguistic Description: African American Women's Language in Appalachia

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[Charles A. Ferguson Prize for Best Student Paper or Poster] Communities  
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# Communities of Practice in Sociolinguistic Description: African American Women's Language in Appalachia\*

Christine Mallinson and Becky Childs

## 1 Introduction

Recent analyses (e.g., Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995, 1998; Bucholtz 1999; Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999) have advocated a practice-based approach for analyzing language and gender, which involves taking the community of practice (CofP) as the unit of analysis instead of individual language users within a pre-defined speech community (Bucholtz 1999). This approach views sociolinguistic variables as being co-constructed in the community of practice, in local context. In this view, as individuals interact with others in shared social practice, their actions—including common ways of speaking—shape and are shaped by their social identities.

Eckert (2000:171) describes the friendship group as a highly influential CofP, lying “at the heart of one’s place in the peer social order. It is in this group that people decide which activities to engage in, construct attitudes and orientations, debate values, and evaluate each other’s behavior and that of the people around them.” Likewise, in this paper, we explore the social and linguistic practices of two friendship groups of African American women from Texana (see Figure 1), the largest Appalachian African American community in North Carolina. Drawing upon ethnographic and sociolinguistic data collected from fieldwork we have conducted in the community, we submit that shared linguistic resources construct these two groups as distinct communities of practice. For one group of women, the “church ladies,” their talk achieves and mirrors their orientation toward traditionalism and local community. In contrast, the language of the “porch sitters” performs and represents an identification with urbanness and extralocal norms. As our analyses of the women’s dialect patterning will reveal, CofP is a significant variable that may outweigh traditional demographic variables such as social class and age in explaining linguistic variation.

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\*We gratefully acknowledge the support of NSF Grant BCS-0236838 and the William C. Friday Endowment at North Carolina State University for funding this research. We also would like to thank Agnes Bolonyai, Mary Bucholtz, Brian José, and Walt Wolfram for their comments on this paper.

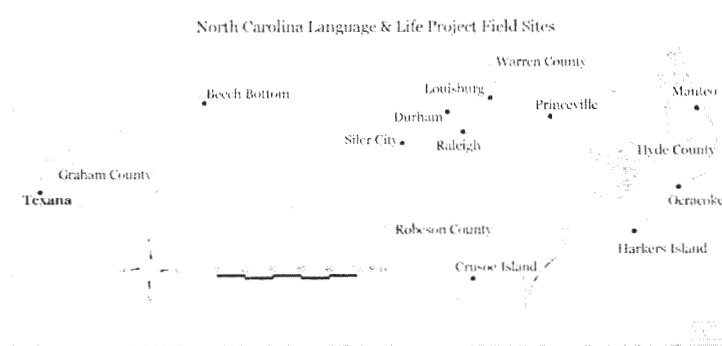


Figure 1: The Location of Texana, North Carolina

## 2 Communities of Practice in Texana

During the first stages of our sociolinguistic fieldwork in the Texana community beginning in May of 2002, we began to realize that one salient social division among women residents of Texana was based on who shared the practice of attending the community church. One of the first residents in the community we met, who became one of our key participants, invited us to attend an evening meeting at the local church where she and several other women gather formally, once a week, to discuss devotional readings and visit with each other. This was our first introduction to the core members of the group that we call the “church ladies.” In this paper, we present data from five core members of the church ladies, who are 48, 49, 65, 70, and 72 years old. Short excerpts from interviews with two church ladies and two porch sitters are given in the Appendix.

The church ladies all highly value church as being a cornerstone of Texana, but their notion of community is also deeply rooted in history and tradition. Most of them, particularly the core individuals, are members of the oldest families in Texana; in fact, our key participant’s family once owned much of the land in the community. The fact that these women are long-standing community members gives them some measure of social capital, since people come to them to find out the history of Texana. For example, the church ladies maintain genealogical records, frequently tell stories about the history of the community, and enjoy showing old photographs and self-published books about Texana written by other community residents. The church ladies revere older residents and see them as being the center of community history and traditional life. In fact, the church ladies were in-

strumental in sponsoring a day in June 2003 to honor the life and community contributions of a woman who, at age 94, is the oldest living resident in Texana.

The church ladies' sense of ownership over Texana leads them to be very protective of the community. For example, they occasionally lament that outsiders have contributed to community degeneration by introducing drugs into Texana. At the same time, the women are also actively dedicated to building respect and appreciation of Texana among the young residents, and they are particularly determined to keep the young residents from losing a sense of their black heritage. A few years ago, several of the church ladies were instrumental in beginning an oral history and quilt project that brought older residents and young people together to preserve stories of kinship and history in the community.

In addition to valuing church and community, these women also value education and work. Education has historically been a priority for Texana residents, due in no small part to the educational achievements of many of the church ladies. Even though most grew up at a time when most white women did not receive much of an education, much less African American women or Appalachian women, two of these ladies were sent away to an all-black girls boarding school in a town two hours away. Both of these women also attended some form of college; one of them became a social worker, and the other went to nursing school and even worked for a time as a nurse in Atlanta, Georgia, before racism and prejudice caused her to move back home. These two ladies continue to work; both of them are now social workers and were instrumental in writing a grant to educate African Americans about the dangers of diabetes. Several of the other church ladies also work and hold jobs of considerable prestige in the community (e.g. nurse, home health care worker). Although a few of the women struggle with money (mainly the ones who are or have been single mothers), the majority of the church ladies live in modest houses and seem to enjoy solidly middle-class status.

In contrast to the church-centered lives of the church ladies are the social lives of a different group of five women in the community, whose ages are 26, 41, 44, 47, and 65 years old. We call these women the "porch sitters," since the part of the day that these women look forward to most is gathering informally each evening on the front porch of one of the women's single-wide trailer not only to talk, laugh, tell stories, and gossip, but also to monitor the goings-on in Texana: they look at the cars that drive past on the single road leading through their community to see who is doing what and going where, and they also casually observe a group of men, who gather across the street every night at the Oak Tree (a local hangout) to drink beer and visit.

Thus, we argue that the porch sitters constitute a CofP that centers around community life, but more specifically, around community gossip (cf. Coates 1997, 1998).

Several social differences distinguish the porch sitters from the church ladies. For one, the porch sitters are more working-class than the church ladies. They all live in single-wide trailers, they hold jobs of considerably lower status (although one woman is a home health care worker, two work in food service and one receives government assistance), and none of them attended college (although they have all encouraged their children to pursue higher education). In terms of hobbies and leisure activities, the porch sitters enjoy drinking, smoking, and playing cards. They pride themselves on being laid-back, fun-loving individuals, and, as previously mentioned, do not attend church. In fact, they occasionally remark that they consider the church ladies to be judgmental, particularly of the porch sitters' habits of drinking and not attending church, which is perhaps one reason why the porch sitters do not socialize actively with any of the church ladies and do not consider them to be close friends of theirs.

<b>Social Attribute</b>	<b>Church Ladies</b>	<b>Porch Sitters</b>
Ages	48, 49, 65, 70, 72	26, 41, 44, 47, 65
Primary In-Group	Church	Gossip network
Community Ties	Longstanding families	First-generation families
Feelings about community change	Nostalgic for past	Unconcerned about change
Naming System	Double names (e.g. Mary Sue")	Nicknames (e.g. "Doodlebug")
Other	Conservative dress and appearance	More urban hairstyle (e.g. braids) and style of dress

Table 1: Ethnographic Description of Communities of Practice

Unlike the church ladies, who worry that outsiders will be a bad influence on Texana, the porch sitters are the first to know what's going on in and around their community and are very open to the presence of outsiders. They allowed us fieldworkers to make friends with them immediately, and any

time that we are in Texana it is expected that we will not only stop in and visit them several times during our stay but that we will hang out and socialize with them. These women are always the first to know who is visiting Texana and who has just moved there from out of town, and several of their children date individuals from outside the community. In general, unlike the church ladies, the porch sitters seem to embrace a conception of Texana as more of an open than a closed social community. These ethnographic differences between the church ladies and the porch sitters can be found in the summary presented in Table 1.

### 3 Data and Methods

During the fieldwork process, we conducted several interviews with the women whose data we present here. Before conducting any interviews with the church ladies or porch sitters as a group, we conducted interviews with most of the women independently in their homes. Establishing this prior contact with them helped us obtain what we believe is relatively natural conversation from the women, since, because we were no longer strangers, the women were able to focus on each other as much as on us. When we began interviewing the church ladies and the porch sitters as groups, we did so in the settings where they typically interact: the church fellowship building and the porch. During these interviews, the women chose conversation topics rather than being prompted, such that the conversations usually took place among the women themselves rather than being directed by fieldworkers (cf. Edwards 1988, Davis 2002). Each group was interviewed on at least two occasions for a total of approximately six hours of recorded conversation; in addition, our corpus also consists of at least one hour of conversation (often many more) with each individual woman, recorded both prior to and following the group interviews.

In this analysis, we consider seven diagnostic linguistic variables: 3<sup>rd</sup> plural *-s* attachment, 3<sup>rd</sup> singular *-s* absence, *is* copula absence, past tense *be* leveling, habitual *be*, post-vocalic *r* loss, and syllable coda consonant cluster reduction. Each of these structures is a well-documented regional and/or ethnic variable of American English (Anderson 2002, Hall 1942, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998, Rickford 1999, Bailey 2001, Cukor-Avila 2001). Some of the features, such as 3<sup>rd</sup> plural *-s* marking, are associated with Appalachian English (Wolfram and Christian 1976, Christian, Wolfram, and Dube 1988, Montgomery 1989). Others, such as 3<sup>rd</sup> singular *-s* absence, are associated with African American English (Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972, Bailey and Thomas 1998, Rickford 1999). Still others, like past tense *be* leveling (Cukor-Avila 2001),

have been found to be associated with both varieties. The comparison of all of these features, whether attributed to region, ethnicity, or both, will illuminate how these Texana women are constructing common ways of speaking within each CoFP. Furthermore, by considering data in light of the women's relevant social practices, we will see how their alignment of shared linguistic resources to regional and/or ethnic norms reflects their social identities.

#### 4 Analysis and Discussion

Our analysis indicates that these two groups of Texana women differ in their levels of vernacular features. In Table 2, we present data for the syntactic and morphosyntactic variables: 3<sup>rd</sup> plural *-s* attachment, 3<sup>rd</sup> singular *-s* absence, *is* copula absence, past tense *be* leveling, and habitual *be*. The church ladies reveal higher levels of 3<sup>rd</sup> plural *-s* attachment, a regional dialect feature characteristic of varieties of Appalachian English (Wolfram and Christian 1976, Christian, Wolfram, and Dube 1988; Montgomery 1989). In contrast, the other features, which indicate alignment with norms of African American English (Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972, Bailey and Thomas 1998, Rickford 1999), are all used more by the porch sitters. In addition, the porch sitters show higher levels of past tense *be* leveling, an indication of general vernacularity (Chambers 2003). We represent these dialect differences graphically in Figure 2.

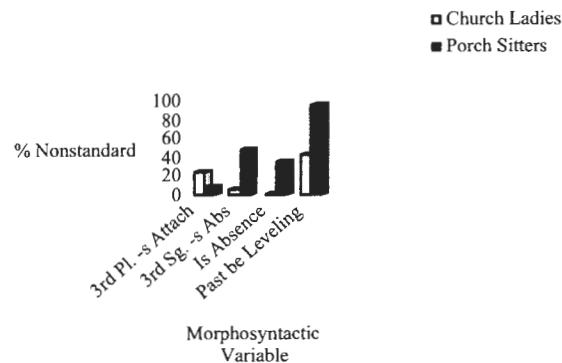


Figure 2: Morphosyntactic Variables by CoFP



Morphosyntactic Variable	Church Ladies		Porch Sitters	
	%	N	%	N
3 <sup>rd</sup> Pl. -s Attachment (‘Several of them walks now’)	24.71	21/85	8.70	4/46
3 <sup>rd</sup> Sg. -s Absence (‘If he move away’)	5.95	5/84	48.42	46/95
<i>is</i> Copula Absence (‘He the man’)	1.55	2/129	35.71	40/112
Past Tense <i>be</i> Leveling (‘They was much healthier’)	43.01	40/93	96.0	24/25
Habitual <i>be</i> (‘He be getting on my nerves’)	no	--	yes	--

Table 2: Syntactic and Morphosyntactic Variables by CofP

In Table 3, we present data for the two phonological variables—*r*-lessness and syllable coda consonant cluster reduction; these data are also represented graphically in Figure 3.

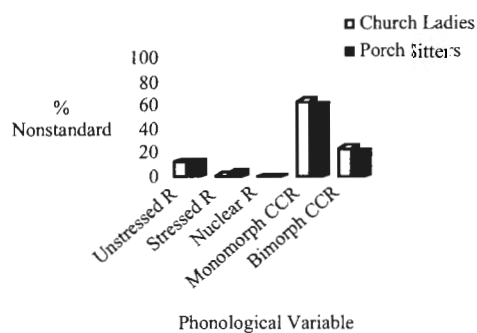


Figure 3: Phonological Variables by CofP

Phonological Variable	Church Ladies		Porch Sitters	
	%	N	%	N
Postvocalic <i>r</i> Loss: unstressed ('mother')	13.82	17/123	13.73	7/51
syllable-coda stressed ('car')	1.77	4/225	3.94	5/127
nuclear stressed ('hurt')	0.0	0/9	0.0	0/6
Cluster Reduction: monomorphemic ('mist')	64.92	87/134	61.54	48/78
bimorphemic ('missed')	24.61	32/130	21.43	12/56

Table 3: Phonological Variables by CofP

As can be seen in Table 3, both the church ladies and the porch sitters show what appear to be strikingly similar percentages for each category of both phonological variables.

Even though the rates for both of these phonological features in the speech of the church ladies and the porch sitters seem impressionistically to be quite similar, we conducted VARBRUL analyses to test our observations. These data are presented in Table 4. For both phonological variables, VARBRUL assigned a weight slightly above .51 for the factor group of community of practice; yet, community of practice is not a statistically significant factor group, as indicated by the non-statistically significant chi square values. In fact, a subsequent step up step down VARBRUL analysis excluded community of practice as a factor group, meaning that it does not contribute significantly to the model of variation for either of these two phonological variables.

Postvocalic <i>r</i> Loss	Consonant Cluster Reduction
Input probability = .05	Input probability = .44
Log likelihood = -111.460	Log likelihood = -240.438
Community of Practice factor group: church ladies = .48 porch sitters = .54	CofP factor group: church ladies = .51 porch sitters = .47
Following Environment factor group: unstressed = .77 stressed = .35 nuclear = knockout	Cluster Status factor group: monomorphemic = .69 bimorphemic = .28
Total $\chi^2$ = .995	Total $\chi^2$ = .005
$\chi^2$ /cell = .249	$\chi^2$ /cell = .001

Table 4: VARBRUL Results by Phonological Variable

To summarize, we have seen that the morphosyntactic variables show a clear split by community of practice, with the church ladies showing higher levels of the Appalachian English feature, 3<sup>rd</sup> plural *-s* attachment, than the porch sitters. In contrast, the porch sitters show higher levels of the African American English features (3<sup>rd</sup> singular *-s* absence, *is* copula absence, and habitual *be*) as well as the general vernacular feature of past tense *be* leveling. For the phonological variables, however, the rates of nonstandardness are much more similar across the two communities of practice, to the point that membership in one CofP or another does not correlate with production of either of the phonetic variables.

Although future research will analyze additional phonological variables as well as examine vowel productions by the church ladies and the porch sitters using acoustic phonetic methods, the data presented here seem to suggest that our speakers are maintaining a baseline level of phonology regardless of CofP. This is an important finding, because it suggests the different status of morphosyntax and phonology for these Texana speakers. As we see

in the case of the porch sitters, it is possible for speakers to orient toward external morphosyntactic norms while at the same time still orienting toward locally-based phonological norms. This is similar to findings by Wolfram and Thomas (2002), who show evidence of persistent levels for certain regional phonetic variables throughout Hyde County, North Carolina—even in the face of some of the same speakers' movement toward more urban norms for morphosyntactic variables of African American English.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper, we have underscored the importance of examining communities of practice to determine how conscious social grouping and shared social practices may affect language variation. Traditional variationist studies might have approached an analysis of the speech of these women residents of Texana by considering the variables of gender, race, social class, and age—typical variables in the sociolinguistic analysis of “language in its social context.” Indeed, that is how we began our analyses, and traditional variationist methods have shaped our research (Childs and Mallinson 2004). But our grounding in the ethnographic perspective, shaped by the community of practice framework, has moved us toward analyzing these women's language variation with attention to the context of social practices. Given our goal of understanding how social meanings and identities are produced as speakers position themselves through language and other social actions, part of our analysis must take into account how the identities of the women who comprise these two communities of practice appear to center around local, or endocentric, versus extralocal, or exocentric, norms (Hazen 2002).

But we reiterate that we are not solely looking at the identities of the individual women who belong to one of these two social groups. Consider the case of GM, a member of the church ladies CofP. Not only is she very mobile, but she is also connected to urban culture via her son and her grandson, both of whom are highly visible in the world of hip-hop and rap. Despite the fact that it would be plausible for this woman to orient extralocally since she would have access to an urban identity, she chooses to position herself as identifying with local norms. We submit, then, that being a member of the church ladies CofP is what indexes her local identity, and she marks this identity in her speech as well as in her other social actions with women who participate in the CofP with her. Essentially, her CofP sets the parameters for social and linguistic practice, within which she operates. Her individual identity both arises out of this group identification and contributes to it as well.

We have conceptualized identity as existing within the framework of CofP for these Texana women, and their linguistic practices seem to confirm our ethnographic observations about their communities of practice. In their interactions with each other, the more standard and more regionally aligned talk that the church ladies use to communicate with each other is simultaneously an outcome of a more endocentric view of their community (Anderson 1991) and an outward marker of this local orientation. In contrast, the speech of the porch sitters, which is more aligned with the norms of African American English, works hand-in-hand with these women's social practices to construct them as a socially distinct and notably different group from the church ladies. For the porch sitters, the way they talk is both a result of their extralocal orientation and a performance of their group values.

As the CofP framework highlights, individuals living in the same speech community bring distinct micro-level identities to their social interactions in addition to their gendered, raced, aged, and classed social selves (Bucholtz 1999). In the case of Texana, we see that analyzing a community in terms of communities of practice can allow the researcher to go beyond the typical variables of gender, race, age, and social class in analyzing sociolinguistic variation within a speech community. Now, more clearly, our analysis reveals the importance of examining the subgroup variation that exists among speakers who share similar demographic characteristics but employ different language practices.

## Appendix

### 1. GM, 70 year old African American female "church lady"

"You didn't get cars, no. There was very few people. Well, even in my early marriage, there was very few people had cars. Now at one time, we did have a bus, you know, that would come through and you'd go downtown, but most people—which I guess they was much healthier than we are now, but they would walk. And to me, now, I've walked it a many a time, but to now, I'd never get back! So but, and then several of them walks now. You know, they just want to walk."

### 2. ZA, 49 year old African American female "church lady"

"And we know we've been noticing, there's a lot of black families living in Murphy now. We don't know who they are or where they come from. Y'know, you go downtown to Wal-Mart. And that's what I say about the city life is so different. When I see somebody in the store, black, I automatically greet 'em. And they don't."

3. MB, 47 year old African American female “porch sitter”

“I told J.C. he get pro, don’t go that crazy with all them cars. What he gonna do with all them cars. Just need one, that’s all you need! If that one tear up, have it fixed or either go get you another one, you know? I told him I wanted a house and a Jeep. That’s all I want. He told me one time, he was talking about, I guess he was bout maybe 15, 16, he told me one time if he move away, you know play ball, professional—professional ball? He told me I was moving with him, I told him no I’m not! I told him just build me a house right up here and you can go on and do your business. I stay here you can live by yourself. I said don’t you get tired of seeing mama. Yeah, so he wanted me to move with him one time, but I believe I done got on his nerves so he ain’t gon- he ain’t gonna want me to move with him now.”

4. EJ, 44 year old African American female “porch sitter”

“If they find Mac guilty, then they gonna prosecute him too for holding the door. So he’ll be more less like aiding and abetting. And didn’t but two move away. One of ‘em come back, one of the black guys come back, yeah. But he’ll graduate from out there where he’s at.”

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