

Grammar-external and structural factors predict the rate of forestressing in African American English: A corpus study

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Prosody is arguably one of the most understudied areas in sociophonetic research on African American English (AAE). While prosodic cues have been claimed to be vivid markers of ethnic identity (Thomas 2015), there is little research on how AAE prosodic variants may have been socially indexed in different regions of the USA since earlier studies, in thrall of the “supraregional myth”, assumed homogeneity in AAE speech (Farrington, King and Kohn 2021).

Here, we focus on one such prosodic feature, forestressing (henceforth FORESTR), which is a well-known albeit under-theorized variant of AAE prosody. FORESTR refers to the placement of primary stress on the initial syllable of words that carry non-initial stress in many mainstream varieties of English, e.g., *pólice* (AAE) vs. *police* (General American). Accounts of FORESTR suggest that it is stratified by language-external factors such as age, region and socioeconomic status (Thomas 2015). As for language-internal constraints, Baugh (1983) notes that especially CV.CVC structures promote FORESTR. However, most such observations stem from anecdotal evidence and systematic data are lacking. Similarly, little is known about which other structural factors, predicted to circumscribe FORESTR on typological and diachronic grounds (e.g., part of speech, word segmental structure, and word prosodic makeup), modulate FORESTR in AAE.

The dearth of empirical studies arguably arises from methodological challenges since this variant results from a mismatch to an otherwise uncommon prominence pattern in English: Non-initial stress is rare in content words (e.g., Cutler & Carter 1987). As such, an empirical analysis of FORESTR requires systematic backtracking of AAE deviations to an arbitrary set of words that bear non-initial prominence in other varieties. Furthermore, as a receding feature (at least of urban Southern American English, which shares other features with AAE, Tillery & Bailey 2004), large sets of spoken data are needed to detect patterns at the intersection of phonology and sociolinguistic notions.

Here we present results from a comprehensive analysis of FORESTR using the *Corpus of Regional African American Language* (CORAAL; Kendall & Farrington 2021). Based on a list of 84 carefully selected words, we impressionistically coded 3200 tokens for stress placement, only ca. 5% of which exhibit FORESTR. The results of our logistic regression analyses show that the degree of FORESTR is modulated by speaker’s region and year of birth, with the variant being more prevalent in southern regions and in the speech of older speakers. FORESTR is also more common in nouns and heavy initial syllables that are specified to carry secondary stress.

We argue that the structural factors that reliably predict FORESTR in the CORAAL data are also attested in word prominence patterns crosslinguistically as well as in other synchronic varieties of English. We suggest that the high density of pitch accents in AAE (Wolfram & Thomas 2002, McLarty 2018) could be one of the factors that foster stress shifts to the initial syllable, especially in the form of stress reversals of primary and secondary prominence (Shattuck-Hufnagel, Ostendorf & Ross 1994). Furthermore, we take the significant correlation of FORESTR with such factors as generation as well as region in the data to suggest that the variant is in rapid decline among AAE speakers while projecting a residual association to the American South. At first sight, the overall decline in FORESTR may be seen as a sign of convergence to General American lexical stress norms. Concurrent with AAE’s distinct pitch accent patterns,

however, it may also indicate a possible alignment with an emergent supraregional accentual norm bereft of strong regional associations (see also Wolfram & Thomas 2002, who show that AAE speakers from Hyde County not only abandon regional features but also adopt new features associated with AAE supraregionally).

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