Shared spaces, shared structures: Latino social formation and African American English in the U.S. south

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This study examines the appropriation of grammatical structures of African American English (AAE) by adolescent Latinos attending a multi-ethnic middle school in North Carolina. The study couples quantitative variationist analysis of four ‘core’ grammatical features of AAE (invariant be, copula deletion, past-tense copula leveling, and third-person singular –s absence) with the findings of an ethnographic study of Latino adolescent identity in order to better understand the social processes leading to the incorporation of AAE grammar into English varieties spoken by Latinos. Results show that Latino students from across social formations make use of AAE grammatical features, but differ significantly from African American students in terms of sociolinguistic patterning. Ethnographic data shed light on linguistic data in three domains: (1) differences in use of AAE structures between male and female Latino/a students; (2) the prolific use of AAE by one gang-affiliated student; and (3) the racial complexities within the ethnic category ‘Latino.’

Este estudio examina las complejidades lingüísticas y sociales del uso de estructuras gramaticales del inglés afroamericano entre adolescentes latinos que asisten a una escuela multi-étnica en Carolina del Norte, un estado del sur de los Estados Unidos. Un análisis cuantitativo de cuatro rasgos gramaticales del inglés vernáculo afroamericano se combina con observaciones etnográficas para esclarecer la relación entre la identidad personal y los procesos sociales que llevan a la incorporación de estos cuatro rasgos en las variedades del inglés que hablan los latinos. El análisis estadístico (realizado en SPSS) reveló que estudiantes latinos de diversos grupos sociales manifiestan estos rasgos en su habla, pero la distribución de su uso difiere del patrón que se evidencia en el habla afroamericana. Se exploran tres dimensiones de la identidad en relación con estos usos diferenciales: (1) el género de los hablantes; (2) la afiliación con las pandillas; y (3) el concepto de raza dentro de la categoría étnica ‘latino.’ [Spanish]

KEYWORDS: Latino English, African American English, adolescent language, social formation, ethnography, identity
1. INTRODUCTION

A number of studies of varieties of English spoken by Latinos in the United States have investigated an important sociological dimension of many U.S. Latino communities – contact with contiguous African American communities (e.g. Dunstan 2010; Fought 2003; Kohn and Franz 2009; Labov et al. 1968; Poplack 1978; Wolford and Evanini 2006; Wolfram 1974; Zentella 1997). Wolfram’s (1974) study of contact between African Americans and Puerto Ricans in New York City reports three findings of longstanding value for this type of sociolinguistic analysis. First, many features associated with African American English (AAE) have been taken up by Puerto Ricans in New York, regardless of the nature of their contact with African American speakers of AAE. Second, those Puerto Rican speakers who do have closer social contact with African American speakers of AAE use a wider range of features and have a higher frequency of use for all features, than those Puerto Ricans without similar contacts. And finally, certain phonological processes in the speech of Puerto Rican New Yorkers could not be directly and unambiguously attributed to contact with African American English, given the presence of similar processes in Puerto Rican Spanish.

In the years since Wolfram’s (1974) work on AAE and Puerto Rican English, several studies have commented on the use of AAE by Latinos in various regional and social settings, including some in the U.S. South where Latino varieties remain understudied (Wolfram, Kohn and Callahan-Price 2011). Fought (2003), for example, provides a detailed analysis of the use of AAE features among Chicanos in Southern California, and very recently, Kohn and Franz (2009) and Dunstan (2010) reported on the extensive use of certain AAE features among Latinos in North Carolina. Though it is not always the case, usually the use of AAE by Latinos can at least be partially attributed to contact with African Americans, if not contemporaneously (as in Wolfram’s study) than historically (as in Fought’s study).

With respect to the historical influence of AAE on Chicano English, Fought (2003: 95) notes, ‘So little has been written on the history and evolution of Chicano English that it is difficult to know what role AAE may have played in the development of this dialect.’ While this holds for those varieties spoken in the West and Southwest with longstanding Latino populations, the influence of AAE on varieties of English spoken by Latinos in ‘new’ contexts, such as the U.S. South, is still very much an open topic for empirical investigation and raises a number of theoretical and empirical questions. First, to the extent that grammatical elements associated with AAE are becoming an enduring, entrenched part of emerging Latino varieties, does the sociolinguistic patterning of these forms look the same for African Americans and Latinos, or does ethnolinguistic differentiation in use set them apart? Second, what is the intended use of these features for Latinos, and what social meanings do they project? Finally, how is sociolinguistic
variation involving grammatical elements of AAE used to construct Latinidad in new settings, such as the U.S. South, and how is this Latinidad – and the language that animates it – variegated by divisions in social structure and differences in social formations?

The current study seeks to answer these questions by coupling the findings of quantitative analysis of the use of four ‘core’ AAE grammatical structures by Latino students attending an African American-majority middle school in an ethnically diverse region of central North Carolina, with the qualitative insights from ethnographic observation of the same research setting. Beginning with a detailed, quantitative look at the overall use of four ‘core’ AAE grammatical structures among Latino students across social formations, the paper then turns to ethnographic data in order to emphasize how three components of identity – gender, ethnicity, and social affiliation – complicate and complement the quantitative findings. This study reaffirms the value of mixed methods in the study of language use in U.S. Latino communities (e.g. Fought 2003; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Zentella 1997).

2. ‘BEDLINGTON MIDDLE SCHOOL’

The data for the project come from an intensive ethnographic investigation that took place during the spring semester of the 2008–2009 academic year at a multi-ethnic middle school in an ethnically diverse region of central North Carolina that I call ‘Bedlington Middle.’ Bedlington comprises three grades, 6th, 7th, and 8th, with students ranging in age from 10–15 years. According to demographic records provided by school officials, the ethnic make-up of the school at the time when this work was conducted was about 58 percent African American, 19 percent White, 16 percent Latino, three percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and three percent Other.

The Latino population – both at Bedlington Middle and the local community at large – is predominately Mexican American, though the community and school also include a substantial number of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans. In the discursive context of the school, differences in nationality tend to be erased and, correspondingly, the popular term among students for all people of Latino origin is ‘Mexican’ (Zentella 1996). The students in this study vary in terms of nativeness and immigration history; some were born in North Carolina to immigrant parents, while others had recently arrived from their countries-of-origin, though the majority immigrated with their parents at some earlier point and had been living in North Carolina for some years at the time this work was carried out. This stands in contrast to the research settings described in the work of Fought (2003) and Mendoza-Denton (2008), where recent immigration took place against the backdrop of fairly well-established Latino communities.
2.1 Field methods

In order to understand the organization of sociality at Bedlington, I divided my research time into three phases:

1. one month of strict observation, a step commonly reported in school ethnographies (e.g. Bettie 2003; Carter 2005; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Newman 2010; Thorne 1993);
2. talking with students informally during breakfast, lunch, between classes, and after school; and
3. recorded sociolinguistic interviews with Latino, African American and White students representing a variety of social groupings that I observed in prior phases.

In all, recordings were made with 47 students. Of those, 16 were African American, 18 were Latino/a and 13 were White. Because participants were selected for interviews based on ethnographic interest, no attempt was made to recruit subjects based on ethnicity and sex as such.

The selection of students for group interviews was based on ethnographic observation (i.e. only students who shared social groups were interviewed together). A typical interview-conversation lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and began with the question: ‘What do you think I should know about Bedlington Middle School?’ This provided scope for students to raise the issues that were salient to them, and usually led to natural conversation about these issues, requiring little intervention from the researcher. I was able to gain the trust of students by avoiding public interactions with teachers and administrators and, correspondingly, students knew that I was not an employee of the school, school system, or police force (who had a daily presence on campus). The openness I shared with student participants allowed me to follow up on more polemical issues that they occasionally raised, such as race/ethnicity, immigration, and class. Conversations about these subjects, coupled with my own ethnographic observation, helped shed light on the social structure of the school, as well as institutional constraints on adolescent social formation.

2.2 Latino language at Bedlington

AAE is a valuable resource for Latino students at Bedlington, as I hope to make clear in the analysis that follows. I should stress, however, that although the English spoken by Latinos at school involves AAE, it is of course not reducible to it. That is, AAE features combine with a range of phonological, grammatical, and lexical features of Latino English, resulting in a variety of English unique to Latinos in the school. Even the Latino students who demonstrate frequencies of use similar to African American students for AAE grammatical features are phonologically more aligned with Latino varieties. Needless to say, ‘Latino English’ at Bedlington is not monolithic, and varies across social groups, both with respect to the use of AAE as well as the use of...
Spanish, which also forms an important part of the language scene for Latinos at Bedlington.

The use of Spanish at school ranges from ‘subtle’ (e.g. pronouncing Latino names with Spanish phonology) to ‘conversational.’ I observed monolingual Spanish conversations, for the most part, only among the most recent immigrants, who are not included in the present study. Many of the students who were born in North Carolina or arrived at a very young age have a good deal of meta-linguistic awareness about their use of elements of Spanish, and many describe their language as ‘Spanglish.’

3. QUANTITATIVE VARIABLES AND METHODS

This section describes prior research on the grammatical variables of African American English that are examined here, which include verbal –s absence, copula absence, invariant be, and past-tense copula leveling. Each variable was coded for independent linguistic and social factors for consideration in regression analysis. Coding for independent linguistic factors is described in turn for each variable.

3.1 Social variables

All variables were coded for the following social factors: ethnicity (Latino, African American, White); sex (male, female); popularity; and gang status. All students were originally assigned a popularity rating of 1, 2, or 3 (from most to least popular). In the regression analysis, levels 2 and 3 were combined, leading to a distinction between the most popular students and everyone else. For gang status, students were originally coded as gang-affiliated, ‘wannabe,’ or non-gang affiliated. In the regression analysis, ‘gang-affiliated’ and ‘wannabe’ were grouped together. Determinations about popularity were based on ethnographic observation and determinations about gang status were based on interviews with students and information provided by school administrators. Latino students were not coded for nativeness since all students considered here were either born in North Carolina to immigrant parents or came with parents at a very young age. The only exception is Mateo, who arrived with his family from Argentina two years prior to this research. Mateo’s case is considered at length in section 5.

3.2 Verbal –s absence

Third-person singular –s absence is a well-documented feature of African American English in a variety of regional contexts, as has been reported thoroughly over the past four decades (e.g. Fasold 1972; Wolfram 1969; Wolfram and Thomas 2002). Most notably, Dunstan (2010) examined the absence of third-person singular –s among African American and Latino speakers in two North Carolina communities, including one similar to the
community where Bedlington is located. She found rates of verbal –s absence for Latino speakers that were comparable to those for African American speakers.

For the analysis of verbal –s absence conducted here, 3rd person, singular present tense forms were coded for either presence or absence (i.e. The dog barks vs. The dog bark). Independent linguistic factors included preceding phonological environment (vowel or consonant), following phonological environment (vowel, consonant, or pause), and grammatical subject type (noun phrase, pronoun).

### 3.3 Copula absence

Variation in the copula between full, contracted, and zero forms is one of the most well attested features of varieties of AAE (Rickford 1999: 63). In the U.S., numerous studies have examined copula absence in African American communities throughout the country (Baugh 1980; Fasold 1972; Labov 1969; Rickford 1999; Wolfram 1969; Wolfram 1974) as well as in some Latino varieties (Dunstan 2010; Fought 2003; Kohn and Franz 2009).

For the analysis conducted here, all tokens of *is* and *are* in contractible environments were included for analysis, as described by Blake (1997). Non-absent forms include contracted forms (*He’s mean*) and full forms (*He is mean*). Each token considered was coded according to copula form (*is* or *are*), actual realization (full, contracted, zero) and preceding and following grammatical environments.

### 3.4 Past tense copula leveling

Though the copula is not prone to deletion in the preterit, the inflectional paradigm in which *was* is used for 1st and 3rd persons singular and *were* for everything else in non-vernacular varieties, can undergo leveling to *was*. The result is a single form – *was* – throughout the inflectional paradigm, or variation between *was* and *were* where *was* would be expected in non-vernacular varieties (e.g. *We was there* for *We were there*). Invariant *was* has been documented to be a feature of AAE in many studies (Labov et al. 1968; Weldon 1994; Wolfram and Thomas 2002), and generally of English vernaculars around the world (Chambers 2003).

For the analysis of preterit *was*-leveling, each possible instance of leveling to *was* was coded as leveled or unleveled. Because previous studies (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994; Tagliamonte and Smith 1999; Wolfram and Sellers 1999) of preterit copula have shown that a subject constraint may condition leveling, whereby *was* is favored by subject noun phrases more than subject pronouns, each token was also coded for subject type (pronominal or full).
3.5 Invariant BE

The invariant form of *be* in AAE is commonly used to mark habitual aspect, which is accomplished in other English varieties through the use of adverbs or adverbial phrases. In addition, Alim (2001) shows that invariant *be* can also be used for existential emphasis. Green (2002: 47–54) provides an overview of the aspectual uses of *be* in AAE, noting that it is never inflected and never deleted.

For the analysis of invariant *be* among Bedlington speakers, every instance of uninflected *be* was recorded, excluding infinitives (*to be*) and invariant forms with co-occurring verbal markers and adverbials (*will be*, *would be*, *should be*, *must be*). Because it was not possible to quantify *be* as a proportion of actual versus expected uses, a rate-of-use measurement was calculated using the Sociolinguistic Archive and Analysis Project (Kendall 2007). The measurement extrapolates the number of times an invariant form would be used in an hour, based on observed use in observed time and should be taken with great caution since there are no controls on independent situational or conversational variables across interviews.

4. THE ETHNOLINGUISTIC SHAPE OF VARIATION: SAME FORMS, DIFFERENT PATTERNS

Figure 1 provides an overview of three of the four vernacular features studied: verbal –s absence, copula absence, and past-tense copula leveling. N values for these features are provided in the tables that follow. Invariant-*be* was analyzed...
using a rate-of-use measure rather than proportional analysis and is therefore not included in this figure. Two findings are evident:

1. core features of AAE are used in the speech of both Latino and African American students at Bedlington; and
2. African American students have higher frequencies of use than Latino students for all variables.

Although the source of these structures in the speech of Latino students is likely to be contact with African Americans, we cannot assume that African American and Latino students use the forms in the same ways or with the same intended meanings. That is, to what extent are the sociolinguistic patterning and social meaning of these structures related in the two varieties? I address the question of sociolinguistic patterning in this section by presenting the results of the logistic regression analysis. Results are provided for both social and internal factors in order to investigate the possibility that the use of these features by African American and Latino speakers is subtly different. I take up the related issue of social meaning in the following section by presenting data from the ethnography.

4.1 Verbal –s absence

In order to understand the patterning of verbal –s absence for Latinos and African Americans, two logistic regression analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 17. Both regression models included all social and linguistic main effects, as reported in Table 1.

The first model included all possible two-way interactions among social variables. This analysis yielded no significant interaction effects. However, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor type</th>
<th>Factor group</th>
<th>Subject type</th>
<th>% absence (N)</th>
<th>Total N of tokens</th>
<th>Factor score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Pronoun</td>
<td>24.4 (84)</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Noun phrase</td>
<td>29.1 (16)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Following environment</td>
<td>Pause</td>
<td>25.0 (10)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consonant</td>
<td>28.2 (69)</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vowel</td>
<td>19.2 (25)</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>22.3 (43)</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>.58*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>27.5 (61)</td>
<td>228</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21.4 (40)</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28.1 (64)</td>
<td>228</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gang member</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>29.2 (80)</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>36.9 (24)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at p=.05 level; **significant at p=.01 level.
interaction between ethnicity and sex approached significance such that Latino/a students exhibited similar rates of $-s$ absence to each other (23.6% and 18.4%, respectively), while male and female African American students exhibited quite different rates of absence (14% and 30.7%, respectively). The second model included all possible two-way interactions between social and linguistic variables. This analysis yielded two significant interactions between: (1) ethnicity and subject type; and (2) following environment and gang membership. First, Latino students demonstrated higher rates of $-s$ absence

![Figure 2: Verbal $-s$ by ethnicity and subject type](image)

![Figure 3: Verbal $-s$ absence by gang status and following phonetic environment](image)
when the subject was a noun phrase (32.3%) rather than a pronoun (20.4%). African American students demonstrated the opposite pattern, such that absence was slightly higher for pronominal subjects (27.8%) than for noun phrases (25%). This interaction is depicted in Figure 2.

Second, gang members demonstrated higher rates of –s absence in pre-pausal contexts (50%) than in pre-consonantal ones (31.1%), whereas non-gang members (a category that includes all African Americans and all non-gang-affiliated Latinos) demonstrated the opposite pattern; namely, higher rates of absence in pre-consonantal environments (27.5%) than in pre-pausal ones (22.2%). I present the gang effect, despite the low number of tokens for gang members, because it provides subtle evidence that Latino gang members may be patterning differently from non-gang-affiliated Latinos, and may therefore be getting speech patterns from social networks outside the school. I discuss this possibility further in section 5. This interaction is shown in Figure 3.

4.2 Copula absence

For the quantitative analysis of copula deletion, two logistic regression analyses were conducted using SPSS. Both models included all social and linguistic main effects, as reported in Table 2. Ethnicity, popularity, and following grammatical environment all contributed to deletion, with African Americans, unpopularity, and several environments (predicate adjective, noun phrase, and verb + ing) favoring the deleted forms. Examples (a)–(c) come from African American students in the Bedlington corpus, and were found to favor deletion:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor type</th>
<th>Factor group</th>
<th>Factor level</th>
<th>% absence (N)</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>Factor score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Is/are</td>
<td>Is</td>
<td>18.7 (55)</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are</td>
<td>25.1 (86)</td>
<td>343</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following environment</td>
<td>Pred ADJ</td>
<td>18.0 (51)</td>
<td>283</td>
<td></td>
<td>.39*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>16.0 (23)</td>
<td>144</td>
<td></td>
<td>.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>V+ing</td>
<td>38.5 (40)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
<td>.66**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>17.2 (10)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td></td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gonna</td>
<td>38.7 (12)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td>.66†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quot Like</td>
<td>29.4 (5)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>14.7 (35)</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>26.6 (106)</td>
<td>399</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19.2 (56)</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24.6 (85)</td>
<td>345</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gang member</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>23.1 (129)</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>.50**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>15.3 (12)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at p=.05 level; **significant at p=.01 level; †marginal at p=.06.
The second model included all possible two-way interactions between social 
variables and linguistic variables. Two interactions were significant: (1) 
ethnicity and sex; and (2) ethnicity and copular form, indicating further 
differentiation in the sociolinguistic patterning of these structures in the speech 
of African American and Latino students at Bedlington. As reported in 
Figure 1, African Americans delete the copula at a higher rate than Latinos; 
this holds for both male and female students. Within ethnic groups, however, 
an interesting gender pattern emerges. While African American female
students delete the copula more than African American male students, the opposite is true for Latino students: male Latino students delete the copula over three times more than Latina students, as depicted in Figure 4.

This analysis shows a second mirror-image pattern with respect to ethnicity and copula deletion in which the preferred copular form for deletion (is or are) differs by ethnicity. The expected and well attested pattern for copula deletion is for the are form to be deleted with greater frequency than the is form. While this pattern holds for African American students, Latino students exhibit a rarer pattern of deletion, in which is gets deleted with greater frequency than are. This significant interaction between ethnicity and copular form is depicted in Figure 5.

4.3 Past tense copula leveling

The number of tokens and percentages of leveling according to linguistic and social factors are presented in Table 3. I found leveling to was for all possible person/number permutations, though most leveling was with 1st person plural (‘we’) and 3rd person plural pronoun (‘they’). This was commensurate with the overall distribution of tokens (leveled and non-leveled), which is probably a reflection of the topics of conversation. There are not enough tokens to make any assessment about whether or not a subject constraint between NPs and PNs is operational.

With respect to social factors, the main finding is that Latinos level to was in the preterit far less than African Americans. This is interesting in light of the fact that their levels of verbal –s absence were similar, and while Latinos deleted the copula less than African Americans the difference is not as precipitous as for past tense copula. These results should be taken with caution, however, given the low number of observed tokens.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor type</th>
<th>Factor group</th>
<th>Factor level</th>
<th>% leveling (N)</th>
<th>Total N of tokens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>1st plural</td>
<td>19.1 (9)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2nd singular</td>
<td>50.0 (1)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3rd plural pronoun</td>
<td>30.8 (8)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3rd plural NP</td>
<td>20.0 (2)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ex there/it</td>
<td>100.0 (1)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>3.0 (1)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>37.7 (20)</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20.5 (9)</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28.6 (12)</td>
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<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12.5 (1)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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4.4 Invariant BE

One hundred and sixty-two tokens of invariant be were observed across all recorded interviews in the Bedlington corpus. Parodic uses of be by white students imitating ‘ghetto talk’ were not included in the analysis. Table 4 presents a list of speakers who use invariant be, the number of tokens observed, and a rate of usage. The table orders speakers according to rate of usage, from highest to lowest. Speakers with no observed tokens are not included in the table.

Exactly one half of observed tokens (81) come from ‘Joel,’ a 7th grade Latino student and self-purported ‘gangbanger.’ I consider Joel’s social situation more thoroughly in section 5.1, but will provide a synopsis of his use of BE here. The verbal construction that Joel uses with greatest frequency to express present tense action is BE + V-ing (e.g. be saying, be wearing, etc.). Joel only rarely made use of other grammatical options (e.g. simple present inflection) to describe action that takes place in present or habitual frames of reference. The high frequency of use for invariant be may, in part, be a reflection of the grammatical temporality instantiated by the interview, in which Joel described his general observations about Bedlington school culture. The forms used in this frame of reference would seem to mark the habitual aspect. However, not all of Joel’s uses of invariant be can be described as marking habitual aspect, and some of them are used with actions taking place outside of a present tense frame of reference, such as examples (d) and (e):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (grade)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Rate (N/hour)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joel (7)</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>87.37</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dashawna (7)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>29.06</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenna (7)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>20.76</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan (7)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>17.09</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink (7)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>15.26</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawny (7)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>14.86</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubi (7)</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>13.68</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krystal (7)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>12.46</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trix (6)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>12.33</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy (8)</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>9.86</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mateo (6)</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>8.88</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana (7)</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>7.63</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny (7)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6.95</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfonso (7)</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>6.84</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia (7)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keandra (7)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakina (7)</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis (6)</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorge (7)</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Joel uses invariant *be* forms with stative verbs, which was rare among other students, whose usage of invariant forms was mostly confined to non-stative verbal contexts. Examples (f) and (g) illustrate this usage:

(f) You're supposed to be knowing Spanish.
(g) And the cortez, they be costing $80 too.

Finally, Joel’s use of *be* forms were frequently paired with co-occurring adverbials, including *supposedly*, *too much*, and *just*. *Too much* is interesting, as it seems to have a semantic range that includes ‘quantity marker and ‘positive evaluation.’ The latter could be a calque based on the Spanish *demasiado* (*‘too much’*) that can be used as a quantity marker, as in English (e.g. ‘too much homework’) but may also be used in vernacular Mexican Spanish to indicate a positive assessment (e.g. *Me gustó demasiado*: ‘I liked it too much [a lot]’). Examples (h) and (i) illustrate the most frequent co-occurring adverbials.

(h) Supposedly the Blacks be having more cooler stuff.
(i) I be drawing too much and I be under a car too much, too.

Unlike Joel, I observed that some Latino students only use *be* in specific grammatical constructions. For example, Rubi (7th grade, Latina) only shows *be* with quotative *like*, as in:

(j) Sometimes they be like ‘go back to Mexico.’
(k) And I be like ‘I’m not from Mexico.’

Kohn and Franz (2009) report on the use of quotative *be like* in the speech of adolescent Latino and African American speakers in two North Carolina communities. Finding extensive use in both groups, they argue that quotative *be like* is a grammaticalized marker of reported speech in these varieties.

Among African American students, I observed a much wider range of semantico-grammatical contexts for the use of *be* than for Latino students. For example, Deshawna, a 7th grade African American girl, uses *be* prolifically with a variety of verbal complements and subjects. Example (l) shows Dashawna using *be* with two different subject types (3rd person singular, animate and inanimate, and first person singular), two different verbal complements (predicate adjective and verb + *ing*) and with the verb + *ing*, stative and non-stative verbs.

(l) Anthony be saying stuff but I don’t be thinking it be true.

The results of the quantitative analysis show that, although both Latino and African American students make use of four grammatical structures thought of as ‘core’ features of AAE, the sociolinguistic patterning of these variables shows significant ethnolinguistic differentiation in several ways. First, African
American and Latino students differ in terms of frequency. Overall, African American students use three of the variables (verbal –s absence, copula absence, and past-tense copula leveling) more than Latino students. Second, differences in internal conditioning were observed between Latino and African American students. Specifically, two mirror-image patterns emerged: (1) a subject condition for verbal –s absence, in which Latinos favor deletion with NP subjects and African Americans with PN subjects; and (2) person/number condition for copula absence, in which Latinos favor deletion of is and African Americans favor are. Third, the interaction between ethnicity and other independent social variables differentiates the use of these structures for Latino and African American students. A significant two-way interaction between ethnicity and gender was found for copula absence, in which African American girls and Latino boys delete more than African American boys and Latina girls. Though not statistically significant, another gender-ethnicity interaction was found for verbal –s, in which male and female Latino students delete at roughly the same rate, while African American female students delete at almost twice the rate of African American male students. Finally, there is some quantitative evidence that gang-affiliated Latino students are patterning differently from non-gang-affiliated students, with the former group favoring deletion of verbal –s in pre-pausal, rather than pre-consonantal positions.

These quantitative differences are valuable in at least three ways. First, they help us track the development of Latino Englishes in new communities. This is important empirical work in light of projections for the continued growth of the U.S. Latino population as well as sociodemographic change already underway in the U.S. South. Second, the quantitative findings reported here shed light on the relationship between grammaticalization and dialect contact. Even though the source of these structures in the speech of Latino students is likely to be contact with African Americans, the grammatical patterning in the speech of Latino students is clearly unique. That is, although the grammatical structures in these varieties are ‘the same,’ their grammatical use is not. Therefore, we cannot assume a priori that the presence of syntactic constructions in an emergent variety implies congruence in grammatical meaning with the source variety. Finally, the quantitative analysis, when coupled with qualitative findings, provides insight into the social meaning of these structures.

In the following section, I focus on three ethnographic findings having to do with:

1. ethnic stylization and gang affiliation;
2. the gendering of Latino social formations; and
3. the processes of racial formation operating within the category ‘Latino.’

These dimensions of sociality help explain three related patterns of linguistic variation:

1. Joel’s higher than expected use of AAE grammar;
2. gender differences in the patterning and frequency of AAE grammar among Latino/a students; and
3. patterns of variation within Latino friendship groups that the quantitative data obscure.

5. EXPLORING IDENTITY

The quantitative analysis provided here shows that the sociolinguistic patterning of AAE grammatical forms among Latino/a students at Bedlington Middle School is complex. Although Latinos recruit from a similar pool of grammatical resources as African Americans, the ways in which those linguistic resources are deployed are unique. The quantitative data alone, however, shed little light on the *social meaning* of these structures for young Latinos.

5.1 Ethnic stylization and gang affiliation

It may well be the case that many Latino students at Bedlington make use of AAE grammar simply because they are in contact with it; that is, it is a part of their dialects, as described by Wolfram (1974). Yet, we should not discount the possibility of other explanations, especially in light of the many studies that have documented the purposeful recruitment of elements of AAE by non-African Americans in a variety of social and ethnic contexts (Bucholtz 1999b; Chun 2001; Cutler 1999; Slomanson and Newman 2004). Indeed, the notion of *ethnic styling* (Coupland 2001, 2007) has become an invaluable construct in sociolinguistic studies of ethnicity during the past decade.

It must be emphasized that the indexical link between language and ethnicity in interaction (Ochs 1992) is not always obvious and straightforward. For example, Chun (2001: 61) examined the use of AAE lexical items by one Korean American teenager and found that AAE ‘allows for the local construction of a particular male Korean American identity’ and ‘challenges mainstream characterizations of Asian American men as passive, feminine, and desirous of whiteness.’ Chun argues that these resources are not direct and univalent indices of African American culture and identity, given the semiotically complex field in which they operate. I observed a similar phenomenon at Bedlington Middle School involving Joel, whose prolific use of invariant-*be* I described in the prior section.

Gangs and gang violence are a reality in the city where Bedlington is located and, as a result, Bedlington requires all 6th grade students to take a gang-prevention class, which is taught by a city-appointed police officer known on campus as a ‘resource officer.’ While many Latino/a students are reputed to be gang members, I learned from the assistant principal and the on-campus police officer that most of them were ‘wannabes.’ Only one Bedlington student had actually been involved in local gang activity, and this student was Joel. I had
seen Joel over the course of my time working as an ethnographer at Bedlington, mostly in the principal’s office or in the cafeteria, where he usually ate lunch at a table by himself, a common form of punishment called ‘silent lunch.’ Joel’s dress was typically comprised of dark, saggy blue jeans, black high-top sneakers, and a plain, white T-shirt, sometimes with a black sweatshirt hoodie. He frequently wore around his neck a large crucifix made of beads in red, green, and white, the colors of the Mexican flag. Joel walked with a determined limp, and socialized only with one other boy, a Latino ‘wannabe’ gangbanger. He differed in this respect from most other Latino boys I observed, who tended to hang out in groups with each other and at times with Latina girls from the same grade.

With respect to language use, Joel makes use of African American English in ways that are quantitatively different from his Latino/a peers. First, as previously shown in Table 4, Joel uses invariant forms of be with greater frequency than any other student in the corpus, including African American students. A similar pattern holds for the other three analyzed variables. Table 5 compares Joel’s percentage of past tense copula absence, past tense copula leveling, and 3rd person –s absence with the average percentage for all Latino boys except Joel. Specifically, Joel deletes 3rd –s twice as much as the average of the other Latino boys (33.9% and 16.8%, respectively), he deletes the copula more than five percent more than the average (22.7% and 17.4%, respectively), and he was the only Latino boy to demonstrate any instances of past tense copula leveling. Joel is, therefore, the single-most prolific Latino user of African American grammatical forms of all the students analyzed.

On the one hand, Joel’s use of AAE could be explained as a straightforward means of identification with African American culture, but the qualitative data suggest otherwise. On the other hand, Joel’s use of these features could be understood in terms of dialect contact, or ‘access’ to AAE grammar, but the fact that his use of all analyzed features is quantitatively greater than other Latino students who have similar contacts militates against this interpretation. This is especially true since Joel’s primary social network is comprised of other, mostly older, Mexican gang members. Although discourse about gangs has great currency within school culture, local gang affiliation implies an orientation outside of school. It therefore seems likely that the patterning of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Joel n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>All Latino boys n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd –s absence</td>
<td>19/56</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>15/89</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copula absence</td>
<td>15/66</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>22/126</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was/were leveling</td>
<td>1/7</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>0/24</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Joel’s language – including his use of AAE grammatical structures – is at least partially rooted in patterns from outside Bedlington.

Rather than being a question of identification with African American culture or a question of access to AAE dialect norms, I argue, instead, that these linguistic resources help Joel articulate a particular type of Latinidad, or ‘Latino-ness’ – one that significantly overlaps in the social and geographic space in which AAE is normative, but at the same time is self-consciously ‘Mexican’ and rooted in local gang culture. Not only is this interpretation supported by Joel’s lack of African American friends and style of dress, but also in his talk about race. The following transcript comes from a conversation I had with Joel about two of his classmates, Manny and Montana, who he believes ‘act black.’

**Extract 1** (Int. = interviewer)

Joel: Him? He, he’s like mostly he’s black, he’s not Mexican. He’s trying to act mostly black, and like he’s like black, he’s not trying to act Mexican.

Int.: What does it mean for him to act black?

Joel: It means like, like because they, like, supposedly like the blacks be like having like more cooler stuff, like the clothes, the shoes, Air Forces and all that stuff. We only wear Converse, Cortez. And yeah some other shoes we don’t even know. But like mostly, Manny be like somewhere else. And Montana? She like tries to act like she don’t talk to Hispanics. And yeah, she does talk too much English, and she’s too much involved like with black people.

Int.: So, uhm, do you understand why she and Manny want to hang out with black kids and not Mexican kids?

Joel: Because they feel like they more better than us. They feel like they not Latino, they don’t belong with us. And I don’t get it, he talks Spanish … You can talk to us, we understand English, but we don’t really care. But at least you know what you are.

For Joel, the distinction between ‘Black’ and ‘Mexican’ is fundamental, and transgressions of that distinction are problematic. Nevertheless, his own articulation of ‘Mexican-ness’ relies on elements of African American English, a usage that does not seem to pose a contradiction with the categorical way in which he talks about ethnicity. Joel’s use of AAE points to the common racialized space shared by ethnic minorities at Bedlington and in the broader community and underscores the racial/ethnic meanings of gang affiliation.

For Joel, these grammatical structures common to AAE are both a part of his linguistic inheritance, and one of myriad elements for the stylization of his own, Mexican-oriented ‘gangbanger’ identity. While Joel is quantitatively greater in his use of AAE grammatical structures than other Latino students, his use is nevertheless qualitatively different from African American students.
That is, we cannot think of the high frequency of AAE grammatical features in Joel’s speech as simply a question of access, especially considering the fact that Joel’s primary social network is actually outside the school. Put differently, we cannot equate frequency in form with social meaning of use, especially in the context of multiethnic communities where the boundaries between ways of speaking may be especially permeable. Joel’s case exemplifies what a good deal of work in sociolinguistics now shows: that one group may mobilize some dimension of another group’s stylistic repertoire in order to highlight a salient social dimension of that group.

5.2 Gender and social structure

The quantitative analysis of AAE grammatical features reported here points to a gender difference between Latino and Latina students, with the boys using AAE grammatical variables more than the girls. Although it is easy to invoke an argument about masculinity and vernacularity, I do not think AAE grammar is indexical for Latino masculinity, at least not directly. The explanation is more complicated, and has to do with the relationship between the gendered structure of sociality at Bedlington and code-choice.

I observed that, in general, Latina students at Bedlington spoke far more Spanish at school than Latino students. While I rarely observed boys engaging in monolingual Spanish conversations, it was not unusual to hear groups of girls speaking Spanish. The language structure of my recorded conversations gives some insight into the gendering of code-choice. All students were told at the outset of the recordings that they could speak English, Spanish, or any combination of both. The students were aware that I was bilingual, and had seen me speaking both languages on campus. Without exception, the primary way in which Latino boys from across social formations communicated with each other and with me during recorded conversations was in English. Some boys made frequent switches to Spanish, but Spanish was never used as the ‘matrix’ language. In contrast, three of the Latina students I recorded spoke mostly in Spanish.

In a recorded conversation with Payasa (English: ‘clown’) and Lazy, two self-described 8th grade ‘wannabe gang girls,’ Payasa spoke mostly Spanish, while Lazy switched between Spanish and English. In explaining that she prefers to speak Spanish, Payasa adds, ‘me gusta hablar tambien Spanglish porque it sounds funny’ (‘I also like to speak Spanglish, because it sounds funny’). In a separate conversation I had with a group of 7th grade Latino/a students – Alfonso, Milk, Rubí, and Andrea – the boys, Alfonso and Milk, spoke only in English, while Rubí switched between English and Spanish, and Andrea spoke only in Spanish.

I observed that Latina students at Bedlington, especially those in the English-as-a-Second-Language track, tended to stick together more than male Latino students, who were somewhat more likely to be involved in sports teams and
have more contact with non-Latinos. Thus, while Latino students in general occupied a marginal space in Bedlington culture, Latina girls were the least integrated into the broader sociocultural milieu. In light of the fact that Spanish is the home language for most Bedlington Latino/a students, it may be the case that the preference for Spanish within Latina friendship groups is in some way reflective of the gendered organization of domestic life. These observations are reminiscent of Zentella’s (1997: 51–52) discussion of gender-based patterns of language socialization and bilingualism among Puerto Rican children in New York City. Although there is no single, easy explanation for these differences, it is clear that there is a gendered dimension to code-choice, which at least partially accounts for differences between Latino and Latina students in the use of AAE grammatical structures.

5.3 Unpacking ‘Latino’

The use of African American English at Bedlington is clearly constrained by social factors such as ethnicity, but the term ‘Latino’ obscures a range of racialized meanings that themselves may affect the possibilities of identity formation, the constitution of friendship groups, and language use. The term, ‘Latino’ brings under its aegis diverse groups of people who differ in terms of national origin, socio-economic class, language, and the range of somatic, phenotypic, and cultural meanings that together constitute ‘race’ in a given sociohistorical moment. Sociologists of race and ethnicity in Latin America (e.g. Howard 2001; Twine 1997; Wade 1997) and U.S. Latino communities (e.g. Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2008; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008) have written extensively on the non-dichotomous (i.e. ‘black’ and ‘white’) formation of race in these regions and communities. In this section, I would like to show how race matters within the ethnic category of ‘Latino’ by focusing on a group of 6th grade Latino boys who playfully refer to themselves as ‘the cuatro amigos’ (which is a misnomer given that they are five, not four; one boy was added to the group after it was originally named).

The cuatro amigos friendship group includes: Gordo, Hector, Martin, Luis, and Mateo. The boys eat lunch together daily, hang out together during recess, and have many of their classes with one another. Although all of the boys are fluent in both Spanish and English and used both languages at school, I observed them to speak with one another mostly in English, but with frequent code-mixing. Their English is characterized by many more features of Latino English than AAE, especially at the phonological level.

The common term used by non-Latinos to describe Latinos at Bedlington Middle is ‘Mexican.’ Though it is the case that the majority of Latino immigrants to North Carolina are from Mexico, the term ‘Mexican’ erases the national-origin diversity that comprises Bedlington’s Latino population. In the cuatro amigos friendship group, for example, Gordo and Martin are of Mexican
origin, Luis and Hector are of Salvadoran origin, and Mateo is of Argentine origin. Gordo, Hector, Luis, and Martin grew up in North Carolina, and have few memories of their countries of origin. Mateo is a more recent immigrant.

The other way in which Mateo differs from the other boys in the group is that he is phenotypically ‘white.’ Though Mateo is classified as ‘Latino’ by the school because Spanish is his first language and because his country of origin is Argentina, and though Mateo refers to himself as ‘Hispanic,’ he differs from Bedlington’s other Latinos in his phenotypic/somatic appearance. His skin is ‘white’ with freckles that run across his face, his hair is light brown, almost a sandy-blonde, and his eyes are blue. With their black hair, brown or black eyes, and skin in varying shades of brown, the other boys in the cuatro amigos more closely resemble the other Latino students at Bedlington, and indeed, in the community at large. The importance of phenotype in the study of Latino communities in the U.S. has been emphasized by Fought (2006: 71–73) and discussed in various ethnographies and community studies (e.g. Bailey 2000; Bucholtz 1999b; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Newman 2010; Rosa 2010; Toribio 2003; Urciuoli 1996; Zentella 1997). Mateo’s case differs somewhat from these, however, in that his phenotypic/somatic appearance is not discussed overtly, neither by Mateo nor the other boys in the friendship group. That is, his ethnic classification as ‘Latino’ appears, for now, to override his ‘racial’ characteristics.

Although Mateo’s ‘race’ is not discussed, there are signs that the privilege of whiteness (McIntosh 1988) is nevertheless operational. First, Mateo is the only member of the cuatro amigos who is not registered in Bedlington’s ESL program. It is, of course, possible that his preparation in English in Argentina was strong enough for him to place out of ESL in North Carolina, and I do not wish to imply that Mateo was able to directly avoid ESL because of his whiteness. Nevertheless, Mateo’s absence from the ESL program is surprising in light of the fact that he has lived in the U.S. the least, was the oldest of the boys at his age-of-arrival, and is, as a result, the least proficient in English. The other boys, having grown up in the U.S., are completely proficient English speakers. At Bedlington, ESL students are ‘tracked’ together, which creates a de facto class of Latinos from mostly working-class, immigrant families who move together throughout the day. Being outside of the ESL track affords Mateo the opportunity to choose his own electives and socialize with a wider range of students.

One of the ways in which social networks are constituted and reinforced at Bedlington is through lunchtime seating (Tatum 1997). This is highly constrained, in that students are required to sit at the same table as the class with which they came to the cafeteria. A couple of times per semester, however, students are rewarded with ‘free seating,’ which allows them to sit anywhere they choose. On two such occasions, I observed that Gordo, Luis, Martin, and Hector chose to sit together at their usual location. In both cases, Latino boys from other classes joined them, while Mateo chose to sit with
a group of white students (boys and girls) whom he knew from his other classes.

Table 6 depicts a tabulation summary for the use of AAE grammatical variables studied here for the *cuatro amigos*. On the whole, the boys are not prolific users of these features, though usage varies by individual. Excepting Mateo, all of the boys were found to use at least one of the variables. For example, Luis deletes the copula and 3rd person –s, Martin demonstrates only 3rd person –s absence, and Hector and Gordo demonstrate only copula absence. As was depicted in Table 4, Mateo does demonstrate usage of invariant-BE, though all three observed tokens were in *quotative* contexts, which is common among African American and Latino/a students.

Though Mateo’s whiteness – and the comportments that seem to attend it – are not remarked upon by the other ‘amigos,’ I observed another member of the group, Martin, to be gently chided for maintaining friendships with African American students outside of school. Despite these friendships, Martin’s use of AAE grammar is in line with the other boys, who do not spend time with African Americans outside of school. Thus, the link between ethnicity, multi-ethnic contact, and sociolinguistic variation is not straightforward. This reaffirms the importance of understanding racial/ethnic meanings *within* ethnic categories, especially one as historically and discursively mutable as ‘Latino.’ Doing so requires detailed and sustained observation of the settings where race, ethnicity, and language are lived.

### 6. CONCLUSIONS

This examination of the use of African American English by Latino adolescents has yielded several important findings for future studies of language use in U.S. Latino communities. First, African American English continues to be an important source of language material for Latinos acquiring English in multi-ethnic communities, and appears to be an enduring part of the variety of English developing in new Latino communities.
in the U.S. South. The presence of AAE grammatical structures in Latino English can be seen as a reflection of the sustained social and linguistic contact between Latinos and contiguous AAE-speaking communities. However, caution must be taken, since there is not always a clear and direct link between contact with African American students and the use of AAE grammar at the individual level. Second, the study shows that the actual use of grammatical elements of AAE by Latinos differs from that of African Americans, both in terms of frequency and sociolinguistic patterning. The unique ethnolinguistic configuration of these features suggests that their intended use meaning is also unique.

In addition to the implications for new dialect formation, this study also shows that AAE is a valuable resource for doing a range of identity-based work, including the construction of localized forms of Latinidad. In the case of Joel, the use of African American English was a means of challenging the hegemony of the black-white ethnic dichotomy that predominates in the U.S. South. One the one hand, his extensive use of AAE points to the overlapping sociocultural space that Latinos and African Americans co-inhabit, especially within gang culture, but at the same time AAE grammar allows him to articulate an identity that is uniquely Latino and reflective of his own subjective circumstances. Without critical attention to identity formations, Joel's sociolinguistic behavior could easily be misinterpreted as anomalous when it is socially – and sociolinguistically – rich in meaning. Joel's case reminds us that social meaning frequently exceeds the possibility of statistical correlation to account for it.

This study also reminds us that we cannot take any ethnic category for granted, especially one as diverse and historically mutable as 'Latino.' Even as we mobilize ethnic categories to help answer sociolinguistic questions, such as those posed here, we must not forget to look inside those categories for the experiences, discourses, and identities that animate them. In this respect, this work reaffirms the value of mixed methods for contemporary sociolinguistics, as has been demonstrated now many times over (Barrett 1999; Bucholtz 1999a, b; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Rampton 1995). In this study, quantitative methods provided a productive means of mapping the use of grammatical features of African American English in an emergent variety of Latino English, while qualitative data provided explanations for some of the sociolinguistic patterns uncovered with the quantitative analysis, shed light on the social meaning of these structures, and helped sketch a more socially rich picture of the sociolinguistic landscape for Latino students at Bedlington Middle. Exploiting quantitative and qualitative research paradigms, with attention to multiple levels of analysis (e.g. community, group, and individual), will be crucial for understanding the complexities of language use in Latino speech communities as they continue to develop in the U.S.
NOTES

1. I am thankful to Andrew Lynch, Christine Mallinson, and Walt Wolfram for their assistance and reaction to earlier drafts of this paper. I am especially grateful to the editors and both anonymous reviewers for their feedback, which has greatly improved the quality of this work.

2. With only a few exceptions, the White participants did not use any of the grammatical structures analyzed for this study and were therefore not included in the statistical analysis that follows.

3. Recorded conversations with students varied in terms of discourse topic, but often cohered around a genre that has been described as ‘gossip’ (Cameron 1998; Jaworski and Coupland 2005). The objects of gossip included friendship (e.g. the termination and recuperation of friendships), popularity (e.g. the status of particular students with respect to the popularity hierarchy), and romantic involvements (e.g. ‘getting together,’ breaking-up, etc.).

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