

**Stability and change in native American Indian English:
the case of Lumbee English in North Carolina**

***Estabilidade e mudança no inglês indígena nativo americano:
o caso do inglês Lumbee na Carolina do Norte***

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Abstract: This description considers the English variety of the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina, the largest group of Native American Indians east of the Mississippi River. They lost their ancestral language generations ago, and have lived in a relatively stable, tri-ethnic, isolated rural context for several generations with African Americans and European Americans. We examine two prominent morphosyntactic structures, the use of perfective *I'm* in *I'm been there* and the remorphologization of *was* and *were* based on polarity (e. g. *It weren't me*, and *they was here*) and one less-salient phonetic process, the fronting of the BOOT vowel. The morphosyntactic structures indicate traits of a regionalized remnant variety that set the Lumbee apart from their cohort varieties. The phonetic trait, however, shows changes over recent generations as the Lumbee move from an alignment with African Americans to one with European Americans. We explain the realignment of the phonetic trait away from African American Language in terms of an oppositional identity, in which the Lumbee maintain their distinctiveness as an ethnolinguistic group that is neither African American nor European American, but especially not African American.

Keywords: Native American English; Tri-ethnic language contact; Oppositional identity; Remnant variety; Language accommodation

Resumo: Esta descrição considera a variedade do inglês dos índios Lumbee da Carolina do Norte, o maior grupo de Índios Americanos Nativos a leste do Rio Mississippi. Eles perderam sua língua ancestral gerações atrás e viveram em um contexto rural relativamente estável, triétnico e isolado por várias gerações com afro-americanos e europeus americanos. Examinamos duas estruturas morfosintáticas proeminentes, o uso de perfective *I'm* em *I'm a there* e a remorfologização de *was* e *were* baseadas na polaridade (por exemplo, *It weren't me*, e *they was here*) e um processo fonético menos saliente, a anteriorização da vogal BOOT. As estruturas morfosintáticas indicam traços de uma variedade remanescente regionalizada que diferenciam



o Lumbee de suas variedades de grupo. O traço fonético, no entanto, mostra mudanças ao longo das gerações recentes à medida que o Lumbee passa de um alinhamento com Afro-Americanos para um com os Europeus Americanos. Explicamos o realinhamento do traço fonético para longe da Língua Afro-Americana em termos de uma identidade de oposição, na qual o Lumbee mantém sua distinção como um grupo etnolinguístico que não é Afro-Americano nem Europeu-Americano, mas especialmente não é Afro-Americano.

Palavras-chave: Inglês Nativo Americano; Língua de contato tri-étnico; Identidade de oposição; Variedade remanescente; Acomodação linguística

1 Introduction

It is somewhat ironic that the indigenous populations of North America, the so-called American Indians, have been largely underrepresented or dismissed in descriptions of the varieties of North American English. In part, this is due to the small percentage of indigenous people in a nation now made up overwhelmingly of immigrants from other countries. It is estimated that only about 1.5 percent of the population identifies as Native American or indigenous people, and that 78 percent of the approximately the 4 to 5 million indigenous people live outside of reservations (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_Americans_in_the_United_States). The relatively few studies of English in Native American varieties in North America come from reservation communities in the Southwest where the indigenous language is still spoken to some extent and has a direct or indirect effect on the English variety (WOLFRAM, 1980; 1984; LEAP, 1993).

The Lumbee Indians of North Carolina represent a quite different situation, since they interacted with the earliest Europeans in the late 1600s and early 1700s: they have completely lost their ancestral language. In fact, the specific language or languages that they spoke are a matter of conjecture, since there are no vestiges or written records (WOLFRAM; DANNENBERG; KNICK; OXENDINE, 2002). At the same time, the Lumbee are different from other American Indian groups in terms of their demographics and status. Demographically, they are the largest Native American Indian group east of the Mississippi River, the largest non-reservation tribe in the United States, and arguably the most debated group of Native American Indians in the United States in terms of their

tribal status. More than 45,000 of the estimated 55,000 Lumbee Indians live in Robeson County, North Carolina, in a relatively stable, rural tri-ethnic situation where approximately 42 percent of the population is Lumbee Indian, 31 percent is European American, and 24 percent is African American in the estimated population demographics of 2019 (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/robesoncountynorthcarolina/RHI125218#RHI125218>).

Though census data are sometimes difficult to interpret given the fact that American Indians were classified as “free persons of color” through the nineteenth century, evidence indicates that Robeson County has maintained a substantive population of European Americans, African Americans, and American Indians, since at least the American Revolutionary War. As noted in Maynor Lowery (2018, p. 44):

Lumbee founding families lived in a place of 12 or 15 square miles that had no known name besides what they themselves called it, “the Settlement.” ...The settlement held somewhat less than 10 percent of the population of the county. Exact numbers are hard to come by, because public officials labeled Indians “free persons of color,” a designation that included free blacks as well. Enslaved people, on the other hand, made up about 30 percent of the county population, and European settlers the remaining 50 percent—a significant number but not enough to take complete control.

Though the proportion of American Indians, African Americans, and European Americans has varied over the years, there is evidence that substantive numbers of these three populations have cohabited Robeson County for several centuries now, making it one of the most robust cases of sustained tri-ethnic situations in the Southeastern United States involving American Indians. The location of Robeson County is shown in Figure 1. While the largest proportion of the Lumbee live about 10 miles west of I-95, the major interstate highway running north-south in the eastern U.S., the community remains densely situated and relatively socially isolated in a largely rural context. For example, the biggest town, Pembroke, approximately 3,000 residents, consists of more than 90 percent Lumbee.

Figure 1 - Location of Robeson County



Source: the authors.

2 The status of the Lumbee

The Lumbee have a peculiar, marginalized status as an Indian tribe. In 1956, a Congressional Act recognized them as an Indian tribe—without entitlements. This means that they could call themselves Indian, but they were granted no land or funds by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, unlike other federally recognized tribes. The quest for federal recognition by the Lumbee has been a long, arduous journey, starting in the 1880s and continuing to the present. In 1885, the North Carolina General Assembly recognized the Indians of Robeson County as Croatan, an American Indian tribe associated with the Lost Colony. Just a few years later, in 1888, the Lumbee petitioned the U.S. government for recognition and assistance. They were denied federal recognition by the Bureau of Indian Affairs due to a lack of funding, the start of a series of failed petitions for federal recognition that have incrementally taken place since then. Finally, in 1956, they were officially recognized by a Congressional Act that managed yet again to underscore their marginal status. The Lumbee Recognition Act, H.R. 4656, recognized the Lumbee as having American Indian origins and designated them as the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina, but stipulated that they were not eligible for services such as reservation land or funding. Since that time, new petitions for full federal recognition have been submitted routinely, and there is currently yet another petition to gain full recognition under consideration as this article goes to press, introduced in November 2019 (The House Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States hearing on H.R.1964, the Lumbee Recognition Act). Though the Lumbee lost their ancestral language generations

ago, they have developed a variety of English that is ethnolinguistically recognized as “Lumbee English,” described in a number of descriptive studies by researchers (WOLFRAM; DANNENBERG, 1999; WOLFRAM et al., 2002; DANNENBERG, 2002). In fact, the original Congressional Act recognizing them notes this fact in the following statement about their status:

Whereas by reason of tribal legend, coupled with a distinctive appearance and *manner of speech* [emphasis authors] shall, from and after the ratification of this Act, be known and designated as Lumbee Indians of North Carolina.
(*Act Relating to the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina*, Congress of the United States, June 7, 1956)

There are several factors implicated in the Lumbee struggle for federal recognition, but a primary one is directly related to their historical language situation, as they relinquished their ancestral language(s) generations ago. If the Lumbee had a heritage language that was still used or identified specifically, their argument for full federal recognition would have been settled in their favor long ago (WOLFRAM et al., 2002).

The historical circumstances surrounding the Lumbee make it difficult even to trace the roots of their indigenous, ancestral language. Little documentation of the languages of the Lumber River region exists, and linguists are not certain about what language or languages the Lumbee spoke in the past. By the mid-1700s, the Lumbee apparently were no longer reliant exclusively on their ancestral language for communication, at least in their interactions with outsiders, and that would have masked their ancestral language roots. An additional problem comes from the cultural dynamics of the area. According to archeological and linguistic evidence, the Lumber River region was a zone of cultural interaction for different American Indian language families, so it is quite possible that the Lumbee community developed not from a single, unitary cultural group but from a conglomerate of American Indians who spoke different, mutually unintelligible languages. Though the Lumbee lost their ancestral language generations ago, they have developed a variety of English that is ethnolinguistically distinctive, as described in a number of descriptive studies by researchers from the Language and Life Project at North Carolina State University (WOLFRAM, 1996; WOLFRAM; DANNENBERG, 1999; WOLFRAM; SELLERS, 1999; WOLFRAM et al., 2002; DANNENBERG, 2003; BISSEL; WOLFRAM, forthcoming) over the decades.

In particular, these studies have described a number of the distinctive morphosyntactic and phonological traits of the vernacular variety of English associated with the Lumbee Indians, including the use of perfective *be* (e. g. *I'm been there*) (WOLFRAM, 1996; DANNENBERG, 2003), finite *be* (e.g. *that's how it bes*) (DANNENBERG; WOLFRAM, 1998), null copula (e.g. *you nice*) (DANNENBERG, 1998), and the remorphologization of past tense *be* (e.g. *I weren't there* vs. *I was there*) (WOLFRAM; SELLERS, 1999), as well as some of the structural traits of its vowel system (THOMAS, 2001). Other analyses have contextualized the symbolic cultural significance of the variety of English correlated with the indigenous status of Lumbees in Robeson County (e.g., WOLFRAM et al., 2002; COGGSHALL, 2008; WOLFRAM; DAUGHERTY; CULLINAN, 2014; WOLFRAM, 2018; BISSEL; WOLFRAM, forthcoming).

3 Linguistic identity

To examine the extent to which the English of Lumbee speakers is identifiable to listeners, Hammonds (1999) designed a simple identification task. Twelve anonymized passages of 20-30 seconds each were taken from the conversational interviews conducted by the staff of the North Carolina Language and Life Project, four passages from each of the major Robeson County ethnic groups: Lumbee, European American, and African American. The vernacular dialect samples, which were neutral with respect to cultural content, included two men and two women from each group, one older and one younger speaker. Listeners were asked simply to identify if each speaker was Lumbee, European American, or African American. The task was administered to two different groups of speakers, one group of Robeson County listeners and one group of Raleigh listeners, located about 100 miles north of Robeson County. Participants from Raleigh know who the Lumbee are, but do not generally have regular contact with them. The results of the identification task are given in Table 1.

Table 1 - Results from Speaker Identification Task for Lumbee, European American, and African American Speakers in Robeson County, NC

Regional Group	Listener	Correct Speaker Identification: Lumbee	Correct Speaker Identification: European American	Correct Speaker Identification: African American
Robeson County (N=41)		81%	74%	95%
Raleigh, NC (N = 37)		38%	80%	91%
Statistical Significance		$\chi^2 = 56.957$; $p < .001$	$\chi^2 = 1.585$; $p = n.s$	$\chi^2 = 1.216$; $p = n.s.$

Source: Hammonds (1999).

The results from Table 1 indicate a significant difference in the ability of the two groups of listeners to identify speaker groups, but only with respect to the Lumbee Indians. Residents of Robeson County where the Lumbee live accurately identify the Lumbee speakers, showing a tripartite ethnic differentiation locally, whereas residents of the outside community only demonstrate a bipartite ethnic perceptual differentiation: they can accurately identify African American from non-African American speakers, as can the listeners from Robeson County, but outsider cannot perceive the differences between Lumbee and non-Lumbee. In most cases, listeners misidentify Lumbee as European American (HAMMONDS, 2000). The more accurate perceptions of speakers from within the community thus supports many Lumbees' claim:

That's [i.e. the dialect] how we recognize who we are, not only by looking at someone. We know just who we are by our language. You recognize someone is from Spain because they speak Spanish, or from France because they speak French, and that's how we recognize Lumbees. If we're anywhere in the country and hear ourselves speak, we know exactly who we are (35-year old Lumbee artist).

Part of the strong sense of dialect identity among the Lumbee may be related to the role that self-definition has played in their cultural identity. Outsiders have often expressed skepticism about the status of the Lumbee as “real Indians” due to their early departure from traditional American Indian customs and the early loss of an ancestral language. The response to this skepticism by Lumbees has been to emphasize the role of self-definition in their identity. One of the participants in our studies noted that “We know who we are, we have always known. Y'all are the ones who are always trying to identify something.” Such self-asserted identity embraces community-based dialect distinctiveness, and considerable cultural capital may be vested internally in the unique variety of English.

4 Illustrative features of stability and change

In this section, we focus on a couple of different grammatical and phonetic features that illustrate the stability and change in Lumbee English as it has developed within the context of the tri-ethnic contact situation in Robeson County. Together, these features represent the ways in which the variety has maintained distinctive traits while negotiating its status with the European American and African American varieties that have coexisted with it over several centuries. The structures are selected to represent the differing constellations of accommodation and distinctiveness within Lumbee English.

4.1 Perfective *be* in Lumbee English

One of the structures described for Lumbee English in our descriptive accounts (Wolfram, 1996; Dannenberg, 2003) is the use of so-called perfective *be*, particularly in the first person *I'm* forms, as in the following examples (1) documented in our corpus.

- (1)
- a. *If I'm got a dollar, I'm got it.*
 - b. *I- says, I'm Indian, I says, I'm been nothing, I says, but a Indian, I says here.*
 - c. *You look more like a Indian, he said, than anybody says I'm seen in a year.*
 - d. *I'm had two heart attacks so I'ma take care of myself (WOLFRAM. 1996, p. 9).*

Although the majority of examples correspond to contracted forms of present perfect, there are also some instances in which *I'm* occurs with simple past tense forms as in (2).

- (2)
- a. *I'm set down there, and she says [56-year-old Lumbee woman].*
 - b. *I'm forgot what was a-ringin' there and the, but I was here by myself [80-year-old Lumbee woman].*

Sentences such as (2a) and (2b) refer to a single past time event, a situation routinely indicated in simple past tense forms: the use of *I'm* in these syntactic constructions indicates an extension from its simple perfective meaning. As noted in Wolfram (1996), the use of *I'm* for present perfective and past is quite robust among Lumbee speakers; in fact, one 80-year-old produced more than 30 instances in a 90-

minute interview. However, it is also used by younger speakers so that it is sustained as uniquely Lumbee in this context (WOLFRAM, 1996).

The use of the perfective *I'm* has been documented in the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE) (CASSIDY, 1985, p. 177), especially in earlier written records of American English. These attestations in early accounts in the mid-1800s led the DARE editors to note that this form is an “archaic formal usage.” Interestingly, a recorded example of *I'm* from the DARE survey (p.177) “*I'm felt* like *I'm had* it today” is from an American Indian speaker born in Robeson County in 1902. Though perfective *be* is certainly most extensively used among older vernacular speakers, it is quite common throughout the vernacular-speaking community. It has syntactically and semantically changed over time so that it can hardly be considered as simply a moribund relic form (WOLFRAM, 1996). In surveys of English dialects such as the World Atlas of Varieties of English (WAVE), these constructions are typical of historically remnant varieties of English (<https://ewave-atlas.org/introduction>), a condition that certainly applies to the Lumbee who still primarily live in relative isolation in Robeson County.

4.2 Remorphologized *weren't* in Lumbee English

Lumbee English appears to be like a limited set of historically isolated island dialects of coastal North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia (SCHILLING-ESTES; WOLFRAM, 1994; WOLFRAM; SCHILLING-ESTES, 2003), in which both *was* and *were* may alternatively function as pivot forms in the regularization of past tense forms of *be*. Examples in (3) illustrate typical cases of leveling to *was*, whereas those in (4) illustrate leveling to *were*.

(3)

Was leveling in Lumbee English

- a. They told me they *was* coming here Sunday morning [97-year-old Lumbee man].
- b. The barges *was* on the other side [68-year-old Lumbee woman].
- c. That was Miss Julia coming to see how you *was* a-doing [68-year-old Lumbee woman].

(4)

Were leveling in Lumbee English

- a. There *weren't* a bit of dirt on that hair [73-year-old Lumbee man].
- b. I *weren't* talking to him; I *weren't* talking to him or nothing [23-year-old Lumbee woman].
- c. I *weren't* gonna be the one that break up that home [73-year-old Lumbee woman].

These constructions are common among Lumbee speakers in this region, including speakers from all generations. It is rarely if ever used by the cohort African American and European communities in Robeson County (WOLFRAM; SELLERS, 1999). One of the intriguing aspects of the past *be* regularization is its potential structural-functional reconfiguration in which *was* leveling and *were* leveling are realigned in terms of their polarity marking. Thus, Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1994) suggest that the leveling process for *was* and *were* is being functionally utilized to bring about *remorphologization* of the allomorphs of past *be*. In this remorphologization, the two allomorphs of past *be* are being used to distinguish positives from negatives—or polarity—rather than to mark person-number distinctions, as they do in standardized English. Leveling toward the remorphologization of past *be* in terms of polarity makes explanatory sense in terms of the need to maintain the transparency of the critical distinction between positives and negatives, and there is a historical precedent for distinguishing positive from negative forms in verbs (BRUNNER, 1970). Leveling to *were* is a minority leveling option that has been attested in selected regions of England (CHESHIRE, 1982; TRUDGILL, 1990; BRITAIN, 1997) and some eastern coastal regions of the United States, as mentioned above (SCHILLING-ESTES; WOLFRAM, 1994). In our study of leveling to *were* with negatives in Robeson County (WOLFRAM; SELLERS, 1999), we demonstrated that this feature was used distinctively by vernacular Lumbee English speakers. In our multivariate comparison to its use on the Outer Banks of North Carolina (WOLFRAM; SELLERS, 1999), located less than a hundred miles away, we found that the constraints on variability for leveling to *weren't*, however, are characterized by some important differences. Lumbee English, unlike Outer Banks English, shows a strong favoring effect for first-person subject in leveling to *weren't* (e.g. I *weren't* there). There is also a difference in the third-person subject effect for the Lumbee and Outer Banks Englishes. Lumbees disfavor *weren't* leveling with third-person singular pronoun subjects as in *She weren't there*, whereas the Outer Banks version of *weren't* leveling is relatively neutral in this effect. Finally, there is a dramatic difference for leveling to *weren't* with existential subjects. Outer Banks English strongly favors leveling in structures such as *There weren't a duck*, whereas Lumbee English strongly disfavors leveling with existential subjects.

Although we have not discussed in detail the historical source of past *be* leveling in Lumbee English, it seems most reasonable to conclude that the alternative leveling to *weren't* was probably introduced by British English contact varieties, as appears to be the case for other Eastern Seaboard varieties of American English where this feature is found—historically isolated island and coastal communities of the Eastern Mid-South Seaboard. It should be noted that an earlier version of Outer Banks English was spread through the mainland area that may have encompassed Robeson County. Retentions of older forms, however, are hardly exempt from change over time, and there is ample evidence to suggest that Lumbee English (or its contact varieties) has not simply preserved a static version of past *be* leveling. Analysis of the variable patterning of past tense *be* leveling has revealed an interesting intersection of subject type in the morphologization process for Lumbee English that is not matched by some other groups. Different varieties not only change at varying rates, as appears to be the case for the contact vernacular varieties of Robeson County, but they also demonstrate considerable versatility in configuring the structural and functional details of language organization as they change. In the process, some of these may come to mark ethnic identity, as some aspects of past *be* have done for Lumbee English.

4.3 Back-vowel fronting

The fronting of the BOOT and the BOAT vowels in American English are a relatively well-established feature of the Southern Vowel Shift (e.g., LABOV, 1991; LABOV; ASH; BOBERG, 2006; THOMAS, 2001); at the same time, the fronting of back vowels is *not* a trait associated with the African American Southern vowel system (THOMAS, 2007; KOHN, 2013; KING, 2016; JONES, 2020). In fact, the absence of fronting is one of the distinguishing traits of African American Language (AAL) vowel system in the South (THOMAS, 2007). Nonetheless, it is *not* a trait frequently discussed in popular culture, and is rarely if ever a topic of public commentary when discussing Southern or African American vowel systems. Its status as a social indicator (LABOV, 1966, WOLFRAM & SCHILLING, 2016, P. 64) therefore contrasts with the kinds of morphosyntactic social markers and overt structures described above—or even other vowel features such as the ungliding of the diphthongal [ai] of BIDE, a salient feature of Southern English (BAILEY;

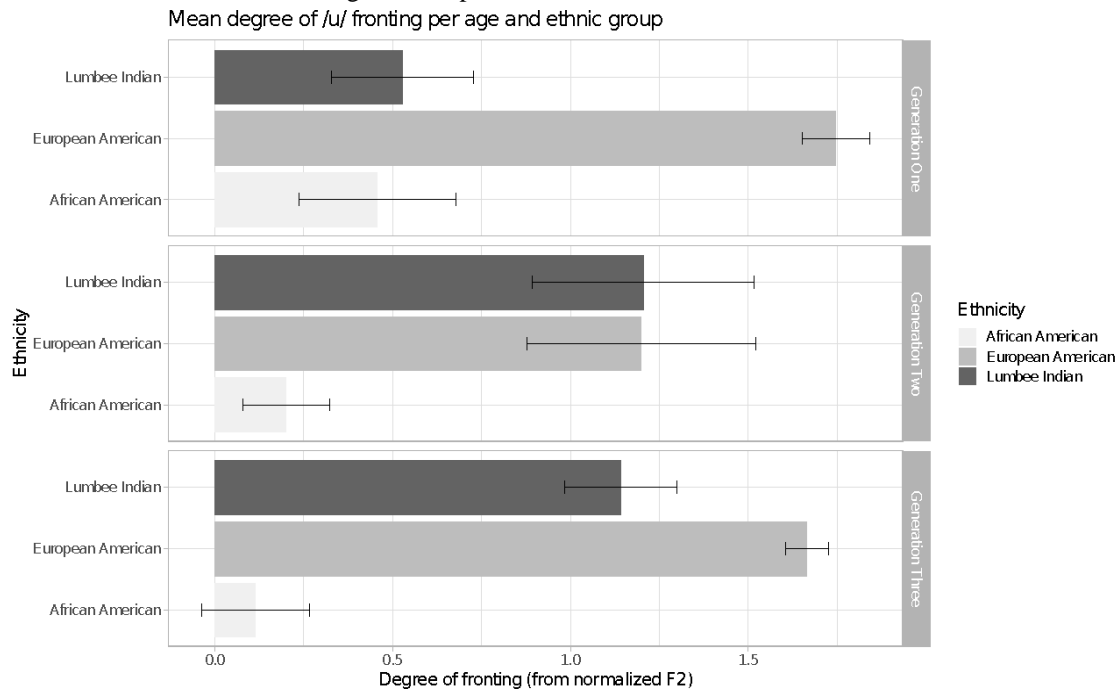
WIKLE; TILLERY; SAND 1991; PLICHTA; PRESTON, 2005). In this respect, we consider back-vowel fronting to be a low-saliency feature. Compared to the more overtly recognized morphosyntactic features, this type of trait can add complementary insight into some of the more subtle aspects of accommodation and divergence that distinguish and unite Lumbee English with respect to its African American and European American cohort ethnic language varieties in Robeson County.

To examine the role of back-vowel fronting across time in three different ethnic groups, a recent study by Bissell & Wolfram (forthcoming) examined its use in three different time periods of speakers: (1) speakers born between 1915-1935, representing the oldest groups before World War II; (2) speakers born during the period from 1936-1955 during the expansion of Robeson County surrounding World War II, and (3) speakers born from 1956-1980, a period covering the official integration in Robeson County schools. All of the data were obtained from the North Carolina Sociolinguistic Archive (KENDALL, 2007) for sociolinguistic interviews collected from 1993-2000 (WOLFRAM et al., 2002), where the data from the original study are stored.

We analyzed BOOT vowels from 27 speakers in this corpus: 3 speakers per age group per ethnic group. Pre-lateral tokens are excluded from these measurements, as many scholars have previously reported that following laterals inhibit fronting (LABOV; ASH; BOBERG, 2006; FRIDLAND; BARTLETT, 2006). The data (pre-lateral back vowels were not tabulated) were hand-transcribed and then force-aligned with the P2FA forced aligner (YUAN; LIBERMAN, 2008). Then, we extracted F1 and F2 acoustic measurements at vowel nuclei (25% segmental duration) using a Praat script. These measurements were Lobanov-normalized (LOBANOV, 1971) using the online NORM suite resource (THOMAS; KENDALL, 2007). This normalization protocol helps to minimize the effects of differences in vocal tract size among speakers in our data.

Figures 2 show the pattern for fronting in the BOOT vowel for the three generations and three ethnic groups.

Figure 2 - Means and standard errors for /u/ nuclei productions by ethnicity and generation. Longer bars represent more fronted vowel tokens



Source: elaborated by the authors.

A series of statistical analyses were then conducted (see BISSELL; WOLFRAM, forthcoming) to determine how ethnicity conditioned back vowel fronting by generation using mixed-effects linear regression models. The best fit models for BOOT vowel productions across the three generations are shown in Tables 2 through 4, and these models mirror the best fit models for BOOT vowel productions in that they contain significant effects of ethnicity. Significant effects at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level are again shown in bolded text in each table.

Table 2 - Best fit model for /u/ productions by generation one speakers

Coefficient	Estimate	t value	p-value
Ethnicity – European American	1.290	4.375	< 0.001
Ethnicity – Lumbee Indian	0.070	0.186	0.853

Source: Bissell and Wolfram (forthcoming).

Table 3 - Best fit model for /u/ productions by generation two speakers

Coefficient	Estimate	t value	p-value
Ethnicity – European American	1.550	7.392	< 0.001
Ethnicity – Lumbee Indian	1.026	3.123	0.002

Source: Bissell and Wolfram (forthcoming).

Table 4 - Best fit model for /u/ productions by generation three speakers

Coefficient	Estimate	t value	p-value
Ethnicity – European American	0.999	3.466	0.001
Ethnicity – Lumbee Indian	1.005	2.722	0.009

Source: Bissell and Wolfram (forthcoming).

These findings show that BOOT fronting is a change that has occurred across ethnic groups at different rates: European American speakers produced significantly fronter BOOT tokens than African American speakers across all three generations, while Lumbee Indian speakers only started producing significantly fronter BOOT tokens than African American speakers starting in the middle generation. Additionally, the cross-group timing differences in the adoption of fronted /u/ tokens suggests that the diffusion of this change in the community is happening at variable rates across speakers of different ethnicities. Our results demonstrate that this change in progress was first taken up by European American speakers in the oldest generation and then later adopted by Lumbee Indian speakers a generation later. While African Americans in Robeson County steadfastly maintained non-fronted BOOT vowel productions over apparent time, Lumbee English speakers patterned with African American speakers in the oldest generation but departed from this pattern by producing fronted BOOT vowels in the middle and youngest generations. The Lumbee Indian speakers' convergence with European American speakers in the two most recent generations thus suggests dialect accommodation to the norms of European American English and away from the vowel pattern of African American Language.

5 Discussion

In the previous section, we considered two prominent morphosyntactic features and one less salient phonological feature. The different ethnic communities of Robeson County have maintained linguistic distinctiveness for generations while simultaneously sharing many features of Southern English. At the same time, ethnic relations have shifted over time through contact and other sociocultural and sociopolitical circumstances, and these may have an impact on the language change across groups. Both of the morphosyntactic features cited above are unique to the Lumbee English speakers in the context of Robeson County, whereas the less salient phonological feature showed shifting alignment from

African American to the European American phonological models. Further, the morphosyntactic structures were reflective of remnant varieties of English that retained structures found in earlier versions of English. One of these seemed to be a general feature of English, while the other was quite dialectally restricted. This might be expected to be the pattern for a culturally isolated, rural variety of English spoken by a concentrated Indian community who learned English several centuries ago. However, the case of back-vowel fronting seems different, in that the Lumbee have shifted from alignment with an African American vowel pattern to a European American Southern vowel pattern.

How do we explain this configuration of distinctive maintenance for distinctive morphosyntactic traits with realignment of a non-salient vowel feature? The relationships of Lumbee Indians to their cohort European American and African American groups are both simple and complex. On the one hand, a traditionally recognized separation of three ethnic groups was represented by both formal and de facto segregation that included school systems, restrooms, different seating sections in movies, and other stringent lines of separation during the Jim Crow era. As Maynor Lowery notes (2018, p. 108):

The country courthouse in Lumberton included restrooms and drinking fountains for “White”, “Colored”, and “Indian.” The tobacco warehouse in Fairmont also had three separate restrooms. One of Lumberton’s movie theaters began offering segregated seating in 1931, which white residents probably saw as evidence of progress since this venue had been closed to blacks and Indians before. In theaters throughout the county, Indians and blacks sat in the balcony, which was sometimes partitioned into sections with wood or other materials to separate the groups from each other.

When we began our fieldwork in Robeson County, the primary high school where many Lumbees attended still recognized three homecoming queens and kings—European American, African American, and Indian—and other events that fostered the tripartite recognition of ethnic groups. This tripartite division was at odds with the earlier census designations, which recognized whites, free persons of color, and slaves, lumping Indians with “free persons of color”.

In the earlier context, there was Lumbee resentment towards the classification of Indians with free persons of color. As Maynor Lowery (2018, p. 130) summarizes, Lumbees were “‘typical Southerners’ in their attitudes towards blacks, a statement that speaks volumes about Lumbee racism and the way white supremacy has made racism a key feature of fitness for Southern society”. Given their motivation to be unlike

stigmatized African Americans and to free themselves from the earlier categorization as “free persons of color”, it would make sense for them to distinguish themselves based on a speech feature they shared with AAL. There would not be nearly as much stigma and, in fact, some prestige, associated with adopting a feature that was formally or informally associated with the white normative model of the region. The movement away from a low salience AAL vowel pattern that they once shared with African Americans would appear to fit with a kind of oppositional identity that set them apart from their historical grouping in a biracial society. At the same time, retaining morphosyntactic structures that were unique to their ethnic cohort would ensure that they would continue to embrace a distinctive linguistic identity.

One of the historical incidents that highlights the tenuous relationship between African Americans and Lumbees was the murder of James Jordan, the father of the famous basketball player, Michael Jordan, which took place in Robeson County during our earlier fieldwork in the community in 1993. The two teenagers convicted of the murder were an African American and Lumbee. As the sheriff of the town commented when taking a reporter on a visit to them in prison:

Anytime you look down the street and you see a black and an Indian guy, you've got crime. You know you're not supposed to look at things like that, but that's the way it is," says Stone. "If they're running together, something's up. We always know when we spot a car and see 'em –an Indian and a black—there's gonna be some crime. We have to keep a firm hand on 'em (RAAB, 1994, p. 79).

While such encounters speak to the racism in the county, they also provide a context in which the association of Blacks and Indians symbolically indexes antisocial behavior. In such a context, accommodating the linguistic features of a stigmatized variety of language would be counterproductive for symbolic language usage in Lumbee identification.

In our fieldwork in Robeson County, we were routinely confronted with skepticism by some of our European American interviewees, who would express their doubts about the Lumbee's status as authentic Indians. On several occasions, before or after our recorded interviews with European Americans, interviewees pulled aside the first author of this chapter to give him some friendly, cautionary advice: that the Lumbee were not “real Indians,” but a mixed group of blacks and whites who did not accept their

status as “mixed.” This is not an uncommon theme expressed about the Lumbee, even by European Americans in Robeson County. In part, this theme is perpetuated through a number of phenotypic and cultural traits that do not match stereotypes of American Indians. There has certainly been mixing over the centuries as Europeans and African Americans settled in North Carolina, hardly peculiar given their history of co-existence. At the same time, there has been a steadfast insistence that they are genuinely American Indian for as long as they have encountered the incursion of white and black people into their indigenous territory now considered their homeland. The Lumbees’ persistence as a distinct ethnic group has been molded in the shifting context of racial identity in the American South. As Maynor Lowery (2018, p. 131) notes about the central site of Pembroke, where more than 90 percent of the residents are Lumbee:

At its zenith as an Indian place in the 1950s, the town of Pembroke was remarkable in the otherwise biracial South. The system of Jim Crow worked so well that in most places that black and white were the only racial options, yet Pembroke’s Indian residents found more and new ways to make the place more and more their own.

Part of their unique status as a distinct group was their use of English language, which has remained uniquely Indian in the local context of Robeson County. In effect, it was neither white nor black, but especially not black. It would make sense that moving away from features that were associated with the African American vowel system would be a part of their lower salience, oppositional identity to a stigmatized group with whom they were often mistakenly identified. The movement towards accommodating the back-vowel fronting of European Americans may be a small, non-salient variant in this regard, but every little bit of linguistic structure helps them establish that they are *not* African American. At the same time, their maintenance of unique, salient morphosyntactic features is a continuing testament that they are linguistically distinctive. In effect, they underscore their distinctiveness at the same time they subtly ensure that they escape a racial system that historically assigned them to the same category as African Americans. Our current body of research demonstrates how complex and emblematic language can be as it practices ethnolinguistic differentiation along with shifting accommodation.

Contribution

Walt Wolfram: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & edition; **Marie Bissell:** Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & edition.

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