

“THE WAY I COMMUNICATE CHANGES BUT HOW I SPEAK DON’T”

A Longitudinal Perspective
on Adolescent Language Variation and Change

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Adolescent life stages are central to theories of language variation and change given that sociolinguists hypothesize that the social process of growing up likely affects linguistic behavior, perhaps leading to sound change. However, the field lacks the long-term longitudinal studies necessary to observe how individuals modify their speech as they grow up. The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute’s longitudinal study of over 67 African Americans from infancy through early adulthood presents a unique opportunity to document language variation across the life span. The present analysis focuses on vowel variation in this stable speech community, comparing data points from childhood to early adulthood to test theories of life-stage variation. While individual results include a range of trajectories of change, group patterns indicate stability. This suggests that life-stage variation does not affect all linguistic systems equally at the group level; age-grading may be a highly localized pattern associated with more salient variables.

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