The Sociolinguistic Significance of Martin Luther King Jr.

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Abstract

Although Martin Luther King Jr.’s eloquence as a speaker is widely recognized and his rhetorical strategies extensively studied, no sociolinguistic analyses have been conducted on his language variation. This presentation examines a set of sociolinguistic variables in Dr. King’s speech to determine how it indexes his regional, social, and ethnic identity as he accommodated different audiences and interactions. The use of unstressed (ING), final /t/ release, postvocalic r-lessness, coda-final cluster reduction, copula/auxiliary absence, the vowel system, and syllable timing are considered for four different speech events: (1) the I Have a Dream speech, (2) the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, (3) the Mountaintop speech, and (4) a talk-show conversation with host Merv Griffin. The analysis indicates stability across speech events for some variables and significant manipulation of other variables based on the speech event. His indexical profile indicates that he consistently embodied his southern-based, African American preacherly stance while fluidly shifting features that indexed performance and formality based on audience, interaction, and intentional purpose. His language embraced ethnomelinguistic tradition and transcended linguistic diversity, modeling linguistic equality in practice. We argue that King’s dictum “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” applies to linguistic inequality and that institutions of higher learning might implement sociolinguistic justice programs that align with Martin Luther King Jr’s sociolinguistic legacy.

[Key Words: African American English, style, register, sociolinguistic application, performance speech]

INTRODUCTION

The speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. are without peer in their public recognition and rhetorical significance. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech given in 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, in fact, is rated as the number one speech of the twentieth century (Lucas and Medhurst 2015, 2008) with several of his other speeches rated among the top 100. In collections of famous speeches (e.g. Quality Information Publishers 2007; Perri 2011) his oratory is routinely cited as a model for effective public speaking. In the process, countless analyses of his rhetorical techniques have been published (e.g., Miller 1992; Selby 2008; etc.). More importantly, King’s speeches played a significant role in the promotion of social justice; they were the rhetorical force underlying the Civil Rights Movement and consistently inspired audiences to engage in social change (e.g. Abbott 2012; Sebag-Montefiore 2015).

Given King’s prominence as a speaker and his leadership role in the Civil Rights Movement, it is ironic that his sociolinguistic legacy has been relatively unexamined by linguists. For example, there are no analyses of how he systematically manipulated different regional, ethnic, and stylistic variables in his speech in different situations or for different audiences. Although Queen (1992) analyzed King’s prosody, noting how he used “structured pauses, phrase-final pitch contours and phrase initial rises” (p.30) in the organization of his speeches and Liberman (2007) analyzed selected phrases in King’s pitch contours for a couple of speeches to demonstrate drastic differences in pitch contours and fundamental frequency, no
systematic analyses of his use of segmental variables within and across speaking events have been conducted.

This gap in the sociolinguistic literature leads us to ask the following questions about King’s public speaking. What does his use of socially marked linguistic variables indicate about his stance as a Southern-bred, African American preacher, and how did he manipulate linguistic variables for different audiences, for different kinds of interactions, and for different intentional purposes? Which linguistic variables vary and which are stable across speech events, and what is the significance of his linguistic variation in terms of identity and stance? And finally, what does his speech say about linguistic inequality given his well-known dictum that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”? To our knowledge, King never spoke publicly about linguistic injustice or even about his personal linguistic background, but this does not necessarily mean that no inferences can be drawn from his linguistic choices. In fact, one of the goals of this paper is to demonstrate that King’s speech indexed a number of important sociolinguistic and sociopolitical dimensions that may be applied to our current understanding of linguistic inequality. In this paper, we empirically consider a number of linguistic variables of King’s speech in different situations to demonstrate how these variables situate him regionally, ethnically, socially, and stylistically. We then offer an explanation of how his speech is relevant to social justice programs related to language diversity.

**KING’S SOCIOLINGUISTIC BACKGROUND**

Martin Luther King Jr. (originally named Michael Luther King) was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15, 1929. He attended segregated public schools in Georgia, graduating from high school at the age of fifteen. He received his bachelor’s degree in 1948 from Morehouse College, a historically black college in Atlanta from which both his father and grandfather had graduated. King’s early social networks, peers, and community were predominantly, if not exclusively, African American (Garrow 1987). His grandfather began the family’s extended tenure as pastors of the Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta. Ebenezer was the first African American church built in the Auburn area of Atlanta after the end of the Civil War in 1865, and became a religious and social center, serving African Americans across different social strata for over a century and a half (Garrow 1987). King’s grandfather served as pastor from 1914 to 1931, when his father took over as pastor. From 1960 until his death in 1968 King Jr. was co-pastor.

Martin Luther King Jr. was ordained into the preaching ministry at the age of 19, after preaching a trial sermon at Ebenezer. Following college at Morehouse, King spent three years studying theology at Crozer Theological Seminary, located in Delaware County near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he was awarded his Bachelor of Divinity and elected president of a predominantly white senior class. With a fellowship awarded by Crozer, he enrolled in graduate studies at Boston University, completing his residency for the doctorate in systematic theology in 1953 and receiving the degree in 1955. He accepted a pastoral call to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1954, serving that congregation until 1959. In 1960, he joined his father as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist church in Atlanta where he served until his death.

King’s wife, Coretta Scott, was originally from Marion, Alabama, where she also attended segregated schools. They met in Boston where she was attending the New England Music Conservatory at the time. Both King and his wife’s primary language socialization took place in the segregated South, though both spent a few of their higher education years studying at
primarily white institutions in the North. They returned to the South after their education and lived there until their deaths, firmly situating them as Southerners embedded in African American culture.

King’s adult social networks were much more expanded socially than his early socialization, indicating a number of intersecting ties and relationships that present a complex portrait of his identity. His identity has been situated in terms of an IDENTIFICATORY CONGLOMERATE (Kristeva 1990), explained as follows (Worthington 2013:225-6):

As interaction among various spheres of our highly integrated society intensifies, social actors become involved in multiple social circles that belong to a wide range of complex realms within a differentiated society. Each actor is, therefore, engaged in an ever-growing bundle of widely divergent ties and relationships that connect her to distinct regions of contemporary society.

Worthington (2013:228) notes that the identificatory conglomerate is consistent with the dynamic notion of black identity and dual consciousness in American society as African Americans seek to maintain a “livable psychic space” within a context of patriarchal white supremacy. King’s networks showed a wide constellation of ties that revealed both emerging cultural identifications as well as cultural clashes. The fluid status of some of these relationships may be revealed in language as well as in other behaviors. King’s link in the intersection of heterogeneous networks is set forth by Worthington in figure 1.

Figure 1. Martin Luther King Jr’s Identificatory Conglomerate (from Worthington 2013:236)

Not all network connections are weighted equally in terms of their social and linguistic influence. Furthermore, a SOCIOLINGUISTIC IDENTIFICATORY CONGLOMERATE is not a static identity, indicating fluidity in agency and accommodation.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, our goal is to determine how different linguistic variables might index different dimensions of King’s complex adult networks and identificatory roles. The black church, given its historical (and current) social and cultural significance, is a central component of King’s background and it is essential to acknowledge its role in his socialization and adult life. It is also important to recognize that the black religious community was—and continues to be—largely autonomous and segregated from other church bodies and white society. Additionally, a longstanding tradition of black prophetic and revolutionary
preaching would be expected to influence King’s sociolinguistic profile (Britt 2011). In this tradition, leadership and verbal performance intersect within the religious and social community. As Smitherman (1977:76) puts it, “[o]nly those blacks who can perform stunning feats of oral gymnastics become cultural heroes and leaders of the community.”

At the same time, King was connected to a wide swath of networks that extended from government contacts to liberal white churches and integrated secular social activists. Worthington (2013:230) observes that King’s “literary and oratorical performance is necessarily intertextual, a dynamic mosaic of overlapping linguistic conditions and strategies.” The empirical challenge that emerges from Worthington’s holistic, impressionistic summary is to determine how different linguistic variables actually situate King’s speech regionally, ethnically, and stylistically, and how his sociolinguistic variation might be simultaneously fixed and flexible. Which sociolinguistic markers mark a constant sociolinguistic identity and which markers carry out King’s performative and interactional work?

**CONTEXTS AND VARIABLES**

To examine King’s use of sociolinguistic variables in different contextual settings, we have chosen several different kinds of situations and audiences for comparison. Sociolinguistic research has demonstrated the vitality of shifting based on different situations, events, interactions, interlocutors, and purposes (Wolfram and Schilling 2016), including explanations that range from Labov’s (1966) “attention to speech” model to Bell’s (1984) “audience design” and Coupland’s (2007) “speaker design” models. Britt (2011:212), in a qualitative analysis of four prominent African Americans who spoke at the 2008 State of the Black Union, notes that “shift in style, and therefore interactional framework, becomes a useful tool for managing the reception of the political and social messages presented by black leaders,” contrasting speech frames in the symposium as “doing symposium,” “doing conversation,” and “doing church.”

In this analysis, we consider King’s speech in four different settings that include different interactional settings, audiences, and intentions: 1) the “I Have a Dream” (henceforth “Dream”) speech given in Washington, DC; 2) the “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” (henceforth “Mountaintop”) sermon given at a church in Memphis the night before he was murdered; 3) the Nobel Prize acceptance speech (henceforth “Nobel Prize”) given in Oslo Norway; and 4) a one-on-one conversational interview with talk-show host Merv Griffin (henceforth “Merv Griffin”) on a live television broadcast from New York City. The dates, audience compositions, and purposes of his discourse in different situations are summarized in figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I have a dream” speech</td>
<td>August, 1963</td>
<td>Lincoln Monument, Washington D.C</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Inspire civil rights movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’ve been to the mountaintop” speech</td>
<td>April, 1968</td>
<td>Mason Temple, Memphis, TN</td>
<td>Predominantly African American</td>
<td>Sermon, social gospel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The selected situations and speeches analyzed here are not intended to be comprehensive; instead, they were selected to represent different kinds of audiences, interactions, and intentional purposes. All of them are readily available to the public on YouTube and on other media outlets.

We have selected seven different linguistic variables that are subject to a range of social, regional, and stylistic/performative differences, applying quantitative analytical techniques found in current variation studies.

UNSTRESSED (ING). The variation of the coronal [n] and velar [ŋ] in unstressed final syllables (e.g. *swmmin’* vs. *swimming* or *nothing* vs. *nothin’*) is one of the most frequently studied variables in the history of American English, showing both systematic linguistic-structural effects (Hazen 2008; Forrest 2015) and social effects on its variability that include class, ethnicity, regionality, and style. Furthermore, social perceptions of (ING) variation may range from educated/uneducated to inarticulate/pretentious (Campbell-Kibler 2007).

RELEASED /t/. The production of word-final /t/ in words such as *bet* or *closet* is a variable that has been found to index speaker traits ranging from learnedness and articulateness (Benor 2001) to gayness and political stance-taking (Podesva, Reynolds, Callier, and Baptiste 2015). Research shows both linguistic constraints and social and performance constraints on its variation. The study of this variable among politicians (Podesva et al. 2015) makes it relevant for examining King’s oratory performance in his speech in different situations.

POSTVOCALIC r. The vocalization of postvocalic r in words such as *fea’* for *fear* or *fathuh* for *father* is a well-established regional, social, and ethnic variable. Its linguistic and social constraints have been studied in a number of different regions (Labov 1966; Feagin 1979), though there are limited studies of its role in performative genres such as sermons. Given King’s regional and ethnic background and his role in religious and social performance, its examination helps illustrate King’s indexing of regional and ethnic stance as well as the use of a performance register (Schilling-Estes 1998).

WORD-FINAL CLUSTER REDUCTION. The deletion of the final stop in clusters that share their voicing (e.g. *build* but not *built*, *cold* but not *colt*) has been one of the paradigmatic cases of systematic language variation illustrating both linguistic and social constraints (Wolfram 1969; Labov 1972; Guy 1980). Deletion of the final stop may occur with both monomorphemic (e.g. *mis’* for *mist, des’* for *desk*) and bimorphemic (*miss’* for *missed, beg’* for *begged*) clusters. Significantly more cluster reduction has been found in vernacular African American English varieties than cohort European American varieties (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Thomas 2007), thus making it a potential ethnic marker in Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech.
COPULA/AUXILIARY ABSENCE. The deletion of contractible cases of are (You’re nice → You nice) and is (She’s asking → She asking) represents one of the most studied examples of systematic variation in the description of vernacular African American English (Labov 1969), and its similarities and differences with white vernacular Southern English (Wolfram 1974) are important for the study of ethnic indexing in American English. Its use in King’s speech may be an indicator of ethnic indexing along with regionality, as well as his stylistic variation across speaking contexts.

VOWELS. There are two socio-historical dimensions of vowel systems that are relevant to King’s regional and ethnic marking. The Southern Vowel Shift (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006) and the African American Vowel Shift (Thomas 2007) index both regionality and ethnicity, thus situating King’s regional and ethnic background. Specific vowel differences, such as the production of the BAT vowel in relation to the BAN vowel, the BIDE diphthong, and the BOOT and BOAT vowels are implicated in this indexing, along with the overall phonetic dispersion of vowels in his system in different speaking contexts.

PROSODIC RHYTHM. The timing of syllables is one of the dimensions of prosody added to the study of language variation in the last decade (Thomas and Carter 2006; Thomas 2011), and studies have revealed differences in ethnic varieties of English as well as in different styles of speaking. Possible differences in timing may relate to different kinds of speech situations, thus making the measurement of syllable timing relevant to King’s speech.

The representative variables in this analysis hold the potential to indicate how King presents and represents his regional, ethnic, and stylistic identity in different contexts, providing insight into his dynamic identity and his different stances in speech events that also involve diverse audiences and interlocutors. Our variables are situated within the larger theoretical context of the indexical field (Silverstein 2003), since linguistic forms may symbolize, or index, social meanings related to group affiliation and interactional positioning due to their frequent use by particular groups or their use in particular contexts of speaking. For example, Eckert’s (2008) formulation of the different indexical meanings of (ING), or –ing vs. –in production, range from signals of education and formality to more affective traits like articulateness or perceived effort.

Figure 3. Indexical field for (ING) (from Eckert 2008: 466)
Depending on whether the listener reads the performance positively or negatively—or what overall style or identity a speaker projects—different constellations of traits may emerge or be emphasized (Eckert 2008). In addition to those attributes indicated in Eckert’s diagram, the -\textit{in} variant may also serve to index both Southernness and blackness, depending on the perceived status of the speaker and the social situation in which a given utterance is heard (Campbell-Kibler 2007). In dissecting King’s stylistic choices, a variant that signals a desired ethnic or regional identity may stand at odds with the social situation (i.e. a formal speech). This fluid, contextualized nature of indexicality is essential to understanding the identity-driven motivations underlying King’s sociolinguistic performance.

**ANALYSIS**

In this section we consider the analysis of each of the variables under study, paying special attention to which variables index King’s regional and ethnic embodiment, as well as the performative stances he assumed in differing speaking contexts.

**THE (ING) VARIABLE.** Tokens of (ING) in King’s speeches were coded impressionistically as either –\textit{in} or –\textit{ing}, with additional coding for internal factors following Forrest (2015). Significant differences were determined between speeches via chi-squared testing\(^1\), and the raw results are displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Percentage of unstressed -\textit{ING} in King’s speeches
The results in Figure 4 follow what would be expected from previous research, given the symbolic associations of the –in variant and the differences in the social context of the speeches. Significant differences exist between Mountaintop and all other contexts and Merv Griffin and all other contexts, with no difference between Dream and Nobel. King maintains categorical use of –ing throughout both the Nobel Prize acceptance speech and the Dream speech. The high degree of formality in both of these speeches—the former on an international stage and the latter in the nation’s capital to a national television audience—likely motivated King to avoid the use of the –in variant in these contexts. The higher degree of variation in the Merv Griffin interview highlights the importance of formality for King’s manipulation of (ING). King’s interview on the televised Merv Griffin show also was televised, but it is a more informal context; thus, the use of a few –in variants. To explain the much heightened incidence of -in in the Mountaintop speech, however, requires us to look beyond formality, towards the makeup of the audience and the communication of King’s racial and regional identity. The Mountaintop speech, unlike King’s other speeches under analysis, was given to a predominantly black, Southern audience. It stands to reason that King’s desire to show solidarity with his audience might trump formality in this case, leading to the increased variability in (ING).

/t/ RELEASE. Released /t/, like (ING), exhibits a wide array of social meanings, making it an excellent variable for comparison with previous studies and across King’s speaking contexts. For our study, the coding of /t/ release followed that of Podesva et al. (2015), with auditory coding supported by examination of a spectrogram. Tokens were coded as released, flapped, glottalized, deleted, voiced, and “other,” with release being our primary category of interest. Each token was also coded for internal factors: preceding and following segment, morphology, preceding syllable stress, and medial/final position. A logistic mixed-effects regression was run to determine significant differences in use of /t/ release between speeches, with internal constraint controls and word as a random intercept included in the model. The models show significant differences between Nobel, Dream, and Merv-Mountaintop, as borne out in the graph of overall percent /t/ release presented in figure 5.
As was the case with (ING), the Nobel Prize speech shows the highest rate of the more prestigious form, the released /t/ in this instance. The released form also seems to index a more performative style. King uses a released /t/ in nearly 50 percent of possible cases during the Nobel Prize speech, an exceptionally high rate when compared to the results for individual politicians presented in the Podesva et al. study (2015). The level of formality of the speech combined with the internationally prestigious venue seems to induce King to heighten the incidence of released /t/, carrying connotations of education and articulateness (a la Eckert 2008; Podesva et al. 2015). We see a substantial drop in the rate of /t/ release for the Dream speech, and an even lesser rate for both Merv Griffin and Mountaintop. In the case of the Dream speech, despite the national stage, the expectation for formality is lower than that of the Nobel Prize speech, thus the less prestige forms. A noteworthy difference between these results and those for (ING) is the lack of distinction between the Merv Griffin interview and the Mountaintop speech. King shows no difference in rates of /t/ release in these contexts, which may indicate the lack of a role for /t/ release in indexing Southern or black identity.

**POSTVOCALIC /r/** Following Thomas (2008), the vocalization or absence of postvocalic /r/ in King’s speech was coded impressionistically, relying on Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2013) to assess F3 and F2 format levels and trajectories. Each potential instance of postvocalic /r/ was coded for syllable type (unstressed, nuclear /r/, post front vowel, or post back vowel), following phonetic environment (vowel, consonant, or pause), and realization (using a binary coding system in which it was coded as /r/-ful or /r/-less). The overall percentages for King’s /r/-lessness in the four speaking contexts are summarized in figure 6.
The summary in figure 6, shows that King is predominantly r-less across all contexts. Results of a linear mixed effects model show that there is no significant difference ($p > 0.05$) between speeches with regard to r-lessness. Syllable type had an effect across all contexts; King is r-ful the most in the context of nuclear r which coincides with the typical hierarchical constraints for postvocalic r in urban areas in the South and elsewhere (Wolfram and Thomas 2002; Thomas 2008). The pattern of r-lessness signals both ethnicity and regionality.

While King’s more frequent use of r in prevocalic contexts might be expected in terms of previous research, the phonetic production of r in this phonetic environment is sometimes realized as a flap [f] or a trill [r] rather than the retroflex production ([ɻ], [ɹ]) typical for American English. Both the flap and the trill production are coded in this analysis under the category “tap.” Tapping occurs only before a vowel, such as the r’s in the phrase “never appear in the who’s who.” Figure 7 shows the percentage rates at which King’s prevocalic r–ful productions were realized as taps as opposed to retroflexes. Although the production of postvocalic r before a vowel is quite limited, the results are still indicative of sociolinguistic manipulation. In the two most formal contexts, the Dream speech and the Nobel Prize speech, King uses taps categorically for postvocalic r preceding a vowel; no retroflex productions of r are found in these two speeches. In the less formal speaking contexts, Mountaintop and Merv Griffin, King uses a mixture of tapping and retroflex r.

Figure 7. Percentage of tapped r in intervocalic r–ful productions
The analysis of \( r \) reveals a couple of noteworthy patterns: the stability of \( r \)-lessness across different speech events and contexts is quite unlike variables such as (ING) and /t/-releasing, which showed significant contextual variation. Thus, King’s regional and ethnic statuses are consistently indexed regardless of the speaking event. Further, the use of a tap, which is sensitive to contextual variation, appears to be associated with a kind of homiletical, performative and formal style. The fact that the relative use of the tap increases in more formal speeches reinforces an interpretation that indexes both formality and performativity, notwithstanding the small number of tokens.

WORD-FINAL CLUSTER REDUCTION. The reduction of final-stop consonant clusters that share voicing was coded by cluster type (bimorphemic, monomorphemic) and by the absence or presence of the final stop, following traditional procedures for coding this variable (Wolfram 1969; Fasold 1972; Guy 1980). Although a number of linguistic constraints on variability have been identified based on the preceding and following phonetic environment, we limit the environment here to the phonetic context preceding a vowel or pause, the most diagnostic phonetic context distinguishing ethnically associated varieties (Wolfram, Childs, and Torbert 2000; Thomas 2007), including African American English varieties. Figure 8 shows the raw percentage of reduction across the four speech contexts, with the overall potential cases of clusters found in the samples, with figure 8a showing the overall incidence of cluster reduction and figure 8b comparing the percentages for monomorphemic and bimorphemic clusters. Figure 8. Percentage of reduced prevocalic final-stop clusters in MLK’s speeches, faceted by monomorphemic and bimorphemic tokens
While the tokens are relatively limited given the number of potential clusters in the speeches, they are still indicative of how variables might be used. In fact, Wolfram’s (1973) and Guy’s (1980) analyses of this variable indicate that constraint patterns on this variable emerge with relatively limited numbers of tokens. Overall, the Mountaintop speech given to a largely black audience shows the highest incidence of cluster reduction, but it is not appreciably different from other speeches apart from the Merv Griffin interview, which shows the fewest cases of cluster reduction. Moreover, both the Mountaintop speech and the Merv Griffin interview show more cluster reduction for bimorphemic than monomorphemic clusters, a departure from the usual constraint ordering for African American English, but the limited number of tokens limits a symbolic interpretive interpretation. Overall, King’s incidence of cluster reduction is higher than that found for most varieties of European American English (Wolfram and Schilling 2016), reinforcing an interpretation of ethnic indexing. King’s use of consonant cluster reduction reflects a pattern that would be expected of a speaker of a variety of African American English. Cluster reduction does not, however, appear to be a particularly salient trait and seems relatively immune to stylistic shifting (Labov 1972; Wolfram 2003), underscoring the pattern revealed in this analysis.

COPULA/AUXILIARY ABSENCE. The deletion of contractible cases of are (You’re nice → You nice) and is (She’s asking → She asking) is one of the most studied examples of systematic variation in the description of vernacular African American English (Labov 1969; Wolfram 1969; Rickford 1999), and similarities and differences with white vernacular Southern English (Wolfram 1974) are important for ethnic differentiation. This variable is also a social marker of stratification within the African American community (Wolfram 1969), with working-class speakers revealing significantly higher levels of deletion than other social strata. Accordingly, its use in King’s speech may thus be an indicator of ethnicity, standardness, and regionality, as well as stylistic differentiation across speaking contexts.

Each potential present-tense copula was coded for potential verb (is, are) and its realization as a full, contracted, or deleted form. Figure 9 shows the instances of full, contracted, and deleted forms out of the total cases of is and are. The only cases considered in the coding are
contractible cases—that is, cases where contraction—and therefore also deletion—might potentially take place (e.g. *My father is a minister* → *My father’s a minister* → *My father a minister*, but not That’s what he is → *That’s what he’s* → *That’s what he Ø*) (Blake 1997). The percentages of full, contracted, and deleted *are* and *is* forms are indicated for each of the four speech events.

Figure 9. Full, contracted, and deleted absent *is* and *are* copula in MLK’s speeches

![Graph showing percentages of full, contracted, and deleted *are* and *is* forms in different speeches](image)

To begin with, King’s speech shows an unusually high incidence of full *is* and *are* forms despite the fact that all cases occur in contractible contexts. In fact, no contracted forms of *is* and *are* occur in the Dream and Nobel Prize speeches. This is highly unusual for everyday speech, and in stark contrast to the cases of full forms found in analyses of copula absence for African American or European American English conversational speech (Labov 1969; Wolfram 1969; Wolfram 1974; Rickford et al. 1991; Rickford & Price 2013). But it is not that unusual for formal speech and writing. The Nobel Prize and Dream speech are the most formal contexts, so it is not surprising that these would be the speeches where full forms are preserved.

On the other hand, the only events in which King reveals copula deletion are the Merv Griffin interview and the Mountaintop speech, which shows restricted *are* deletion. King avoids the more socially stigmatized deletion of *is*. In the Merv Griffin interview, King is engaged in a relatively informal conversation whereas in the Mountaintop speech he is addressing a predominantly black audience. Thus, informality and ethnic indexing may be at work in these contexts. While the limited incidence of copula deletion is found in a couple of King’s speeches, it is noteworthy that the indexing of ethnicity does not include a more vernacular version of African American speech associated with *is* deletion.

VOWELS. The analysis of King’s overall vowel system proceeded by force-aligning (Yuan and Liberman 2008) each speech with their publicly available transcriptions – aside from the Merv Griffin recording which was obtained from the YouTube Closed Captioning. Measurements of
F₁ and F₂ were taken at intervals equaling 5 percent of the duration of the vowel starting at 20 percent and ending at 80 percent using a semi-automatic script in Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2013). Tokens were hand-corrected and coded for preceding and following consonantal environment, voicing, and vocalic duration. The vowel variables of primary interest – the front diagonal, defined as F₂ minus F₁, of BAT and BAN and the Vector Length (VL) (Fox and Jacewicz 2009) of BIDE – were entered as the dependent variables into mixed-effects regressions in order to assess the degree of use and variation in /æ/-raising and /aɪ/-ungliding. The positioning of the BAT and BAN vowel is diagnostic of an ethnic distinction, and the ungliding of the BIDE class indexes Southerness along with other symbolic meanings. In the South, where the fronting of the back vowels BOOT and BOAT is the norm (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006), the non-fronting of the back vowels generally indexes blackness (Thomas 2007). The overall vowel distribution for the four speech events is given in figure 10.

Figure 10: Means (represented by the word) and 1.5 standard deviations (ellipses) for all vowels separated by the speech in which they occurred.

The back vowels in King’s speech do not show the type of fronting that would be expected in the Southern Vowel Shift, aligning more with the African American Vowel Shift described by Thomas (2007). The BAN vowel shows a slight raising vis-à-vis the BAT vowel but not nearly as drastic as that typically found in the Southern Vowel Shift. The Dream and Mountaintop speeches also show more overall dispersion than the Merv Griffin and Nobel Prize recordings, which can be attributed to the fact that in the former two the volume of King’s voice is much louder than in the latter two speeches. Generally speaking, the configuration of the vowels does not seem to vary between the different speeches, showing that King did not appear to manipulate vowel quality as part of his rhetorical style.
Submitting the front diagonal of /æ/ to a regression analysis – including controls for context, duration, and random intercept for word – shows that the slight raising of the BAN vowel class over the BAT vowel class is consistent across contexts (figure 11).

Figure 11: Predicted values from the BAN-BAT comparison model. Number of tokens within each category are given below the point estimate with error bars.

A statistically significant interaction was found between speech situations and whether the /æ/ was followed by a nasal consonant (i.e. following /m, n, ŋ/ were coded as nasal and all others as non-nasal). The predicted values for each vowel context are plotted in figure 11 with standard errors surrounding the estimate. The figure illustrates that the interaction is not only significant, but the slight raising of BAN across all contexts is statistically robust in that the error bars show no overlap between BAN and BAT within each speaking context. This indicates that regardless of the context (i.e. audience and rhetorical style) King consistently produced an /æ/ system that was associated with blackness.

The ungliding of the BIDE vowel (/ai/) in pre-voiced environments (e.g. tide) versus pre-voiceless environments (e.g. tight) is a long-standing feature of Southern American English that is not only indexical of Southernness, but also often popularly imitated and stigmatized. The degree of gliding was measured via the Vector Length in F\textsubscript{1}/F\textsubscript{2} space. Vector Length is defined as the sum of the Euclidean distance between successive measurement points starting at 20 percent of vowel duration and ending at 80 percent, thereby providing an overall measure of how much the trajectory of /ai/ has traversed the vowel space with a larger number indicating more gliding of /ai/. The regression analysis with Vector Length as the dependent variable also
included duration, following voicing, and a random intercept for word. Model comparison showed that the inclusion of the interaction between speech context and following voicing significantly improved the model at the $p = 0.00823$ level. The predicted values from this model are plotted in figure 12.

Figure 12: Predicted values of VL from the model of /ai/-ungliding. Number of tokens within each category are given below the point estimate with error bars.

The figure shows that while all speech contexts show the voice-voiceless split with voiced being more unglided, the Dream and Mountaintop speeches show a patterning in word-final position (open syllables, often being words such as I and my, but also high), labeled as “none” in the graph. The Merv Griffin Show and Nobel Prize show a significant difference between the word-final and voiced environment. This type of variation is usually indicative of manipulation for stylistic reasons. That is, since the audience in these latter two contexts is national in the case of Merv Griffin, and predominantly white European men in the case of the Nobel Prize, King appears to be responding to the stigma associated with this iconic feature of Southern English.

PROSODIC RHYTHM. The attention paid to King’s prosody in the past (Queen 1992; Liberman 2007) has led us to examine his prosodic rhythm via the nPVI measure formulated by Thomas and Carter (2006). The measure is defined as the absolute value of the difference between the durations of adjacent vowels divided by the average of duration of those two vowels. Typically, the median of these values are taken as the measure for comparing speakers. Using just the median, however, reduces the amount of information available to any modeling procedure. Thus, the regression analyses conducted herein use all of the nPVI quotients with a random intercept for the utterance, the “breath group.”

Results from the mixed-effects regression model are given in figure 13. In this case, the figure shows the estimated coefficients rather than predicted point estimates. As such, the intercept term represents the conditional mean of MLK’s nPVI score net of the effects of the
other factors in the model. Accordingly, it gives us an estimate of where he falls generally in comparison to others. Comparison of his value (0.56) with those reported for African American’s (Thomas and Carter 2006) shows that he is very much in-line with the norms for his time. However, there is variation in $n$PVI as a function of the speech context.

Figure 13: Estimates of regression coefficients and standard errors for the PVI model comparing each speech context.

The factor entered for the speech in figure 13 shows that the Mountaintop and Nobel Prize speeches are not significantly different from the Dream (set as reference level), but that the Merv Griffin interview is significantly different from the Dream. This result makes sense when one considers the fact that the Merv Griffin Show is the only conversational recording among the different speaking events. The similarities between each of the speeches may be attributed to the genre and the deliberate, practiced nature of the oration.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of specific linguistic variables shows both stability and shift across the different contexts of King’s speeches, indexing a range of oppositions. King’s regional status as a Southerner is consistently indicated in his vowels; for example, in his ungliding of the BIDE vowel, arguably the most iconic Southern vowel trait. Other vowel features are more aligned with ethnic status, such as the relation between the BAT and BAN vowels and the relative non-fronting of back BOOT and BOAT vowels. In the South, the non-fronting of back vowels is an ethnic marker, unlike its indexing status in other regions (Thomas 2007). King’s vowel system
marks both regionality and ethnicity, and is fairly stable across different speech contexts and audiences, with the exception of ungliding differences in word-final and prevoiced phonetic environments. As noted above, the difference in prevoiced and word-final ungliding suggests stylistic manipulation for different audiences. King’s r-lessness, which again marks both ethnicity and Southernness, is not constrained by audiences or speech event, but his production of the tap variant for r is sensitive to audience; it shows increased usage in more formal speeches.

The heightened incidence of prevocalic cluster reduction is another trait associated with African American English (Wolfram 1969, Labov 1972), as is the deletion of the copula. Though cluster reduction is correlated with ethnicity, it is not a particularly salient feature and more immune to stylistic variation than other diagnostic features of African American speech. Notwithstanding the limited tokens of word-final clusters, King’s prevocalic cluster reduction is clearly more aligned with African American than European American varieties of English (Wolfram et al. 2000; Wolfram and Schilling 2016). On the other hand, King’s level of copula absence is very restricted, and limited to cases of are, aligning with middle class African America speakers (Wolfram 1969) as well as Southern European Americans (Wolfram 1974). King’s speeches show high levels of full forms for both are and is, a trait associated with more formal spoken and written style.

King’s use of a tapped r intervocally clearly seems to index performance, marking formal and performative style. The tap is used categorically for intervocalic r in the Nobel Prize and Dream speeches. Another variable indexing performance is the releasing of the word-final t, which is used more frequently in the more formal speaking contexts such as his Nobel Prize and the Dream speech. But the tap is used to some extent in all contexts, perhaps as a marker of a “preacherly persona.”

As noted, the indexical field for (ING) is relatively broad, ranging from informal/formal to educated/uneducated, and its differential distribution shows its sensitivity to context. Its distribution aligns with variables that are sensitive to different contexts such as released /t/ and tap /r/. Our analysis has revealed an array of indexical oppositions in King’s speech which may be summarized in figure 14. Figure 15 gives the distribution of the indexing in the different speech events.

Figure 14. Indexical oppositions in King’s speeches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Black --------------- Non-Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regionality</td>
<td>South--------------- Non-South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>Black------------------ Non-Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Performance-------- Non-performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formality</td>
<td>Formal------------------ Non-Formal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 15. Distribution of indexed features in King’s speeches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ethnicity (Black)</th>
<th>Southern</th>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Performanc e</th>
<th>Informal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dream</td>
<td>r-lessness</td>
<td>r-lessness</td>
<td>ING</td>
<td>Released /t/</td>
<td>Tap r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CCR</td>
<td>/ai/ungliding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Several conclusions about King’s sociolinguistic legacy emerge from the distribution of linguistic markers across the different speech events. First, we see that King’s speech is consistently marked as African American and Southern. His ethnicity and regionality are firmly embedded and consistent in all the speeches. While he does not use many salient vernacular features of African American English or vernacular features of general Southern English, his ethnic and regional identity is never compromised regardless of the speech event. According to the dimensions of blackness set forth by Michael Eric Dyson’s (2008), he meets the condition of **INTENTIONAL BLACKNESS**—“being Black through dialect, dress, and public prioritization of Black political issues.” (Dyson 2008:9) This dimension contrasts with **ACCIDENTAL BLACKNESS**, in which a person is black by the accident of birth with little bearing in terms of their life and **INCIDENTAL BLACKNESS**, in which a person is black and that status is an important part of their life, but this fact does not override who they are as an individual. In intentional blackness, a person’s life revolves around the fact that they are black, and this fact is essential and significant in the creation of their persona. The consistency of King’s ethnic indexing certainly supports the contention that his speech is intentionally black and perhaps incidentally Southern.

At the same time, King’s speech indicates how embedded he is in the traditions of the black church and preaching. His performance of sociolinguistic variables such as the tapping of the realization of \( r \) and the releasing of \( /t/ \) fall within this tradition, along with the relatively high incidence of full forms of the copula, is characteristic of formal presentation style. It is also noteworthy that these traits are found to some extent in all of his speech events, not just his preaching events. Supporting these performance traits are those that also index articulateness, effortfulness, and formality associated with preaching style. When these performance variables (Schilling-Estes 1998) are added to the more frequently discussed interactive, call-and-response preaching style and other homiletical strategies, there is little doubt of King’s historical, cultural role as a prophetic, revolutionary speaker within the tradition of the black cultural community (Lischer 1995; Britt 2011). The use of different sociolinguistic features goes hand-in-hand with other dimensions of the preacherly tradition. King is sensitive to audience, interaction, and other dynamics that might shift, but consistently his sociolinguistic persona is that of the black, southern preacher.
IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIOLINGUISTIC JUSTICE

Since King never directly addressed linguistic inequality or even publicly discussed his language variation, it might seem like wishful sociolinguistics to extend a sociolinguistic description of his speech to a call for sociolinguistic justice. Remember, however, that King’s Weltanschauung was inclusive, embodying the injustice-anywhere-is-a-threat-to-justice-everywhere creed. Such an approach may embrace a wide swath of social behavior, including language. Furthermore, King’s life exemplified an expanding sphere for applying social justice throughout his adult life (Garrow 1987). We therefore consider it reasonable to examine linguistic inequality as a kind of social injustice.

King’s performance of language set a model for addressing linguistic inequality that might be applied on a personal and institutional level. As observed, King’s speech consistently and pervasively embodied his African American and Southern identity, regardless of context or interaction. African American speech and Southern speech are arguably the most stigmatized and reviled varieties of English in the United States, topping the regional and social scales of “the worst English” (Preston 1996). These embodied traits were stably indexed by King, notwithstanding their traditional linguistic subordination. And that is apparent to anyone who listened to him speak. As one transformed racist noted in Beyond Fear: Twelve Spiritual Keys to Racial Healing, “I was so racist, I could not listen to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. because of his accent” (Ababio-Clottey and Clottey 1999: 131). But the content and rhetorical effect of King’s speeches ended up transcending the traditional associations of black and Southern speech, to the point where the New York City Daily News (January 9, 2015) describes King’s speech as portrayed in the movie Selma as “the rich cadences of King’s Georgia-based oratory.” This transformation is a lesson for promoting and embracing linguistic diversity.

While linguists are comfortably housed in their departments with other linguistic colleagues who share their language ideologies, they also reside in institutions where linguistic diversity is still largely ignored or erased in the institutional recognition of diversity programs. Most institutions in the United States acknowledge the importance of diversity in the workplace and in education, and now have dedicated, organizational programs focused on the promotion of diversity. These dedicated efforts support a range of cultural and individual lifestyles and behaviors—from race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, gender, etc. But they rarely address language variation which can index all of those characteristics (Lippi-Green 2012). Dunstan’s (2013) study of Appalachian students’ experiences in a Southern urban university, for example, found that a range of behaviors was affected based on students’ use of a variety of Appalachian English or “mountain speech,” including class participation, perceptions of intelligence by professors and other students, and to an extent, a sense of belonging on campus. Furthermore, these adverse behaviors did not necessarily align with traditional sociopolitical ideologies found in different academic fields; the social sciences and humanities, in fact, were perceived by some students as less tolerant of language variation than disciplines such as economics or the physical sciences. An article in the The Economist (January 29, 2015) summarized the irony of this situation by noting that

[t]he collision of academic prejudice and accent is particularly ironic. Academics tend to the centre-left nearly everywhere, and talk endlessly about class and Multiculturalism. (...) And yet accent and dialect are still barely on many people’s minds as deserving respect.
As the importance and benefits of diversity programs become recognized in our institutions of higher learning, it is unfortunate that language diversity is typically ignored or dismissed (Dunstan, Wolfram, Jaeger, and Crandall 2015). Meanwhile, incipient studies on dialect diversity education suggest that participation in programs specifically targeting language diversity can ameliorate some of the negative attitudes and beliefs about certain varieties of language, and by extension, the people who speak these varieties (Dunstan, Jaeger, and Crandall, 2014; Murphy, 2012). For higher education, Dunstan, Jaeger, and Crandall’s (2014) study suggests that, although students and professors may readily adopt the principle of linguistic subordination (Lippi-Green 2012), intervention can be influential in changing these beliefs and developing appreciation and tolerance. And language awareness training can, in fact, be effectively integrated into institutional programs on diversity as demonstrated in Dunstan et al. (2015). Language diversity can be added to any institutional program on diversity, but it is also essential to see how language issues intersect with traditional topics currently included within the diversity canon such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sex.

Why are there so few institutional programs that address language as a part of more general institutional concern for diversity? In fact, only a couple of institutional linguistic diversity programs exist, mostly prominently the one described by Dunstan et al. (2015). This program is comprehensive, multi-disciplinary, and cross-organizational, involving collaboration across the colleges and administrative units on campus in order to affect the entire campus community. Although the program is still relatively new, assessment evidence (Dunstan et al. 2015) suggests that it has been successful in meeting learning outcomes, reaches a broad audience across the campus community, and addresses a topic that is critical to the campus community. Institutional programs confronting linguistic racism and inequality are transparently aligned with King’s agenda to address inequality wherever it exists. Curiously, linguistics programs (with the notable exception of the University of Michigan) have been invisible as their institutions celebrate Martin Luther King Day, Black History Month, and other occasions where opportunities exist for addressing language inequality inspired by Martin Luther King’s sociolinguistic performance. There is ample opportunity; we simply need to be proactive and do better at operationalizing what we preach on about language inequality on an institutional level.
REFERENCES


NOTES

Special thanks to Robin Queen, who inspired this paper by inviting Walt Wolfram to speak at the University of Michigan Linguistic Program’s celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2015. It is dedicated to the hope that more linguistics programs will become engaged in celebrating this holiday as well as Black History Month and Juneteenth by sharing knowledge about the unique history and development of language in the black community.

1 Due to lack of variability for (ING) in two of the speeches, logistic regression could not be used. Though sample size was too small to make a clear statistical judgment, the internal constraints appeared to operate in the expected directions in all speech situations that exhibited variability.

2 This category was added to those included in Podesva et al.’s (2015) study due to King’s use of a voiced variant of /t/ at a high enough rate to warrant a separate category.

3 Internal factors show the same effects as those found Podesva et al. (2015). Medial and final /t/ were run separately in regression models, but showed the same differences in terms of Speech. Therefore, both medial and final /t/ are conflated in figure 5.

4 Due to low token counts, no statistical analyses were run on r-ful (e.g. rhotic, tapped) instances.