Accommodating (ING): Individual variation in mixed-ethnicity interviews

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1. Introduction

Over the past few years I have been engaged in a collaborative research project examining a collection of *sociological* interviews with ten adolescent African American girls in Washington, DC (Froyum Roise 2004; Kendall 2009; Mallinson & Kendall forthcoming). A major thread of our work with these recordings has focused on assessing the degree and manner to which these recordings, conducted by the girls' youth counselor, can be compared with the *sociolinguistic interview,* the bread-and-butter data collection method of variationist sociolinguistics, and the degree and manner in which data from the speech of the girls in this set of recordings compares to sociolinguistic data collected for other young urban female African Americans (see, e.g., Wolfram 1969; Goodwin 1990, 2006; Fordham 1993).

In this paper, I examine the use of variable (ING), sometimes called velar nasal fronting or *g*-dropping, across these interviews.[1] (ING), a stable sociolinguistic variable that is ubiquitous in English dialects (Chambers 2003), refers to the fronted alveolar production of [n] (hereafter *-in*) for the velar nasal [ŋ] (hereafter *-ing*), as in such pronunciations as *talkin'* for *talking* and *walkin'* for *walking*. I begin by considering the rates of (ING) for these girls in relation to previous research on (ING) and on African American English (AAE). I then turn the analytic lens onto the interviewer to examine (ING) as a site of accommodation in the speech of the white interviewer and her young African American interviewees.

2. Data and methods

The data examined here come from ten interviews with African American adolescent girls in the urban center of Washington, DC, the capital of the United States (Froyum Roise 2004; Mallinson & Kendall forthcoming). In 2001, Carissa, a white woman in her mid-twenties, originally from Minnesota, began working as a counselor at a non-profit organization called 'Urban Youth Network' (a pseudonym; henceforth UYN). UYN is located in Northeast Washington, DC and was founded in the 1970s to serve 'at risk', troubled, and homeless youth in DC. From summer 2001 until summer 2002, Carissa lived

and worked at UYN. The next summer, in 2003, she returned to conduct an ethnographic study of the youths there as part of her master's project in sociology. She observed 65 teenagers, keeping detailed fieldnotes and writing in-depth analytic memos about each teen and their interactions at UYN, and she interviewed 20 of the teenagers.

At the time the interviews were conducted, Carissa had worked at UYN for nearly two years and had established herself as a trustworthy adult, counselor, and confidant to the youths (Froyum Roise 2004). The interviews were about an hour long, were semi-structured, and were all conducted in an office at the UYN center. Most of Carissa's substantive questions were pre-planned, but she also was flexible as an interviewer in both generating specific probes to each teen's answers and in generating new, pertinent, on-the-spot questions when the teens went off topic. The goals of Carissa's research at UYN were to study how low-income African American teenagers respond to the demands of inner-city life and whether these responses differ by gender.

All of the adolescents grew up in neighborhoods in and around Washington, DC that are about 90 percent African American. Around 20 to 50 percent of residents of these neighborhoods live below the poverty level, around 25 percent are unemployed, and around 25 percent have less than high school education (Froyum Roise 2004). While Carissa studied and interviewed males and females, the current project is limited to those conducted with girls in her study (cf. Mallinson & Kendall forthcoming). The girls were between the ages of 12 and 17 (with a median age of 14). All of the girls' names used in this study are pseudonyms, originally given by Carissa.

The analysis of the girls' interview speech follows in the tradition of variationist sociolinguistics. Since William Labov's (2006[1966]) study of New York City, the first systematic investigation of an urban speech community, sociolinguists have analyzed naturalistic speech by extracting, coding, and analyzing data on the variable patterning of linguistic features. As Feagin (2002) explains, the variationist process entails identifying various occurrences and non-occurrences of a given linguistic feature that is thought to vary according to social, stylistic, and/or linguistic parameters and then subjecting the data to statistical analyses to 'show whether the occurrence of a variable is happenstance or patterned, and, if patterned, to what degree in contrast to the occurrence in the speech of others of varying social characteristics' (Feagin 2002:26; see also Labov 1972, 2006[1966]; Tagliamonte 2006).

3. (ING) rates in AAE and among the African American interviewees

In prior sociolinguistic research (e.g., Fischer 1958; Trudgill 1972; Tagliamonte 2004; Labov 2006[1966]; Campbell-Kibler 2007; Hazen 2008), (ING) has been consistently found to be a stable sociolinguistic variable, correlating with social

class, speaker style, formality, and attention to speech (cf. Labov 2001). Despite the fact that (ING) has been a relatively heavily studied feature of English, and that, as of ten years ago, AAE had more than five times as many sociolinguistic publications devoted to it than to any other ethnic or regional dialect (Schneider 1996:3), variation in (ING) has been studied relatively little for AAE speakers. The general view of (ING) in AAE is perhaps best summed up by Green (2002:121), who states 'the sound *ng* (ŋ) in the *-ing* suffix is realized as *n* in most contexts.' The few studies that have empirically investigated velar nasal fronting in AAE have generally found high rates of *-in* use by African Americans. Labov (2006[1966]:257), for example, found that New York City African Americans used *-in* for *-ing* 62 percent of the time and 'out-of-town' African Americans used *-in* for *-ing* 77 percent of the time in *careful* speech – about double the rates for the white New Yorkers he studied. On the other hand, Hazen (2008) reports that the six African Americans in his large-scale study of (ING) in Appalachia have 54 percent *-in* for *-ing*, a rate equivalent to the rates of his study's white speakers.

The ten girls interviewed by Carissa exhibit, in the aggregate, 84 percent (ING) fronting (N = 1,309/1,554). Table 1 presents a logistic regression for the girls' data examining the effects of individual speaker and the linguistic factor of grammatical category. The R-based (R Development Core Team 2008) statistical package Rbrul (Johnson 2009) was used for logistic regression analyses, although readers should note that these logistic regressions are equivalent to GoldVarb runs (cf. Tagliamonte 2006). In the regression models presented here, the only linguistic factor discussed is grammatical category, since it has most often been found to be the most important internal factor in (ING) realization.[2]

Individual Speaker		$p < 0.001$	Grammatical Category		$p < 0.001$
Factor Weight	*Percentage*	*N*	*Factor Weight*	*Percentage*	*N*
Elisa 0.80	96%	53	Progressive 0.61	90%	819
Latania 0.71	94%	108	Gerund-Part 0.56	84%	45
Keisha 0.68	94%	227	Gerund 0.44	81%	222
Shantell 0.66	93%	274	Adjective 0.40	80%	44
Calandra 0.65	93%	111	Noun 0.33	76%	422
Grace 0.64	92%	169	*Range:* 28	*Total N:*	*1,552*
Asia 0.46	85%	87			
Shirlisa 0.24	71%	241			
Alayna 0.20	66%	231			
Shawna 0.16	55%	51			
Range: 64	*Total N:*	*1,552*			

Table 1. Logistic regression for (ING) for the ten girls

Following Hazen (2008), the grammatical category factor group was coded as one of five possible types: progressive (e.g., *he's running around*), gerundial-participle (*…without getting caught*), adjective (*an ongoing problem*), gerund (*growing up is…*), and noun (*the morning* or *something*). As reported in the literature, progressives typically show the highest degree of fronting (i.e., *-in* for *-ing* use), followed by gerundial-participles, and these two categories are often found in regression analyses to favor fronting (cf. Labov 2001; Hazen 2008). Adjectives, gerunds, and nouns typically have much lower rates and are found to disfavor fronting.

Data from Table 1 reveal that, although the UYN girls' group mean (at 84%) is quite high, there is also individual variation. Six of the UYN girls favor the fronted *-in* variant and use it at rates above 90 percent, while four girls relatively disfavor *-in*.[3] In terms of grammatical category, the UYN girls obtain the typical grammatical pattern (Labov 2001:79; Hazen 2008): progressive forms and gerund-participles favor *-in*, while the other categories favor *-ing*. In sum, the data on (ING) for the UYN girls appear to match our expectations from much of the previous research on (ING).

4. (ING) in interaction: examining the interviewer

While the girls speak AAE and have relatively high rates for several core features of AAE (see Mallinson & Kendall forthcoming), their interviewer, Carissa, a white Minnesota native, speaks with a self-reported Midwestern accent and, from an impressionistic assessment, has a standard-like American English morphosyntactic repertoire. In fact, Carissa even remarks on the differences between herself and the UYN teens:

> My Minnesota upbringing and dialect became a conversation piece, sometimes introduced by curious young people themselves, sometimes by me as a way to joke around with them. By the middle of my year [at UYN], I routinely responded to playful banter calling me 'Minn-esooota' (Froyum Roise 2004:1).

Both in terms of particular variationist inquiries into interview accommodation in mixed-ethnicity interactions (Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994; Hazen 2000; Schilling-Estes 2004) and broader sociolinguistic treatments of accommodation (e.g., *communication accommodation theory*, cf. Giles, Coupland, & Coupland 1991; *audience design*, Bell 1984, 2001), previous work has indicated ways in which interlocutors (may) vary their language use in relation to their interlocutors. It is at this point that we depart from the descriptive analysis of the girls' speech to consider Carissa, the interviewer. In doing so, it is hoped we can more fully understand (ING) in these interactions.

As for the girls, all instances of (ING) were extracted and coded for Carissa in each of the interviews. Figure 1 presents the data from each interview, showing each girl's rate of (ING) fronting along with Carissa's fronting for that interview. Carissa's overall rate is 28% ($N = 132/476$), but across the interviews it ranges from 15% (with Latania) to 46% (with Keisha). Notably, we do not see a relationship between the actual rates of the girls' and Carissa's (ING) use across the interviews. Latania and Keisha, for example, have identical (high) rates of velar nasal fronting, at 94 percent each. Are the differences in Carissa's rates free variation inherent in the basic facts of intra-speaker variation or are there other potential explanations? Can we explain Carissa's variation by appealing broadly to such approaches as *audience design* (Bell 1984, 2001) and *accommodation theory* (cf. Giles et al. 1991)?
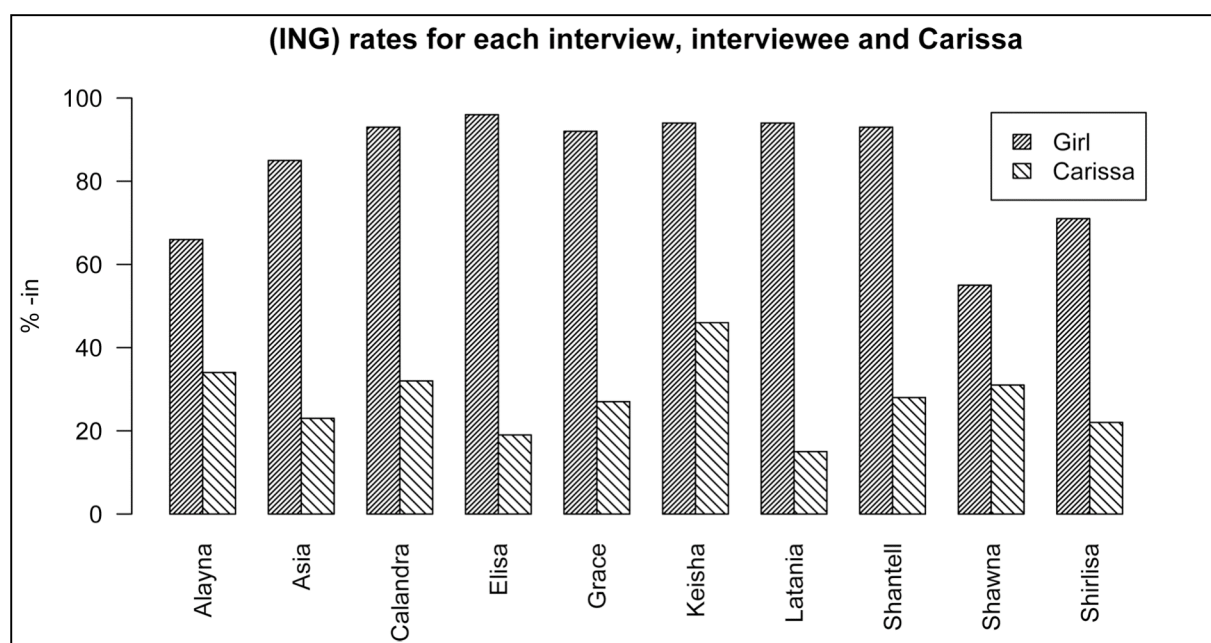
Figure 1. (ING) rates for the interviewee and Carissa in each interview

In order to move toward a potential explanation, we now consider Latania and Keisha further, the two speakers for whom Carissa realizes the widest range of variation in her (ING) rates. An examination of Carissa's notes and her sociological writing about the girls (Froyum Roise 2004) finds that Carissa describes Keisha as someone who 'is very talkative and likes to chat a lot,' as a heavy user of 'slang,' and as one of the most outgoing girls at UYN. Carissa describes Latania, on the other hand, as one of the 'most mature teenagers at the camp' (2004:100). I propose that we are seeing in the (ING) data Carissa's subtle attempts to *design* herself in ways that best align with her perceptions of the

girls. Of course this is a post hoc explanation based on the pattern observed in Figure 1. However, this claim can be bolstered with further linguistic evidence.

Table 2 presents the effects of grammatical category for Carissa's (ING) data from a logistic regression.[4] Importantly, we immediately see here that Carissa's grammatical categories are not ordered according to the expected hierarchy (progressives and gerundial-participles favoring *-in* and adjectives, gerunds, and nouns favoring *-ing*) found throughout the literature (e.g., Labov 2001:86; Hazen 2008) and also found in the regression for the girls (in Table 1). Nouns, as a class, have been shown time-after-time to be least likely to undergo velar nasal fronting, yet Carissa diverges from this pattern – and her divergence requires further consideration.

Grammatical Category			$p < 0.001$
	Factor Weight	Percentage	N
Progressive	0.65	39%	205
Noun	0.54	29%	117
Gerund	0.34	15%	80
Adjective	0.33	14%	21
Gerund-Part	0.19	8%	53
Range:	46	*Total N:*	476

Table 2. Logistic regression for (ING) for Carissa across ten interviews

In terms of tendencies in (ING) realization, there are, of course, exceptions to the disfavoring status of the noun class, and, through them, we can better understand this pattern. The pronominal forms, *something*, *nothing*, *anything*, and *everything* have been included in the noun category for both the girls (Table 1) and Carissa (Table 2). This is a common practice in the examination of (ING) variation (cf. Labov 2006[1966]:256-7; Hazen 2008:121), despite the fact that *anything* and *everything* are rarely found to exhibit variation away from the standard velar nasal form and *something* and *nothing* have often been found to exhibit higher rates of fronting than other nouns.[5] When we examine the actual tokens in Carissa's noun category, we see that all but one of her *-in* realizations are accounted for by *something* and *nothing*. This is shown in Figure 2.

That is, in the entire corpus, Carissa has one instance of *morning* that was fronted, six instances of *nothing*, all of which were produced with fronted *-in*, and 27 instances of fronting out of 52 total tokens of *something*. Clearly, Carissa's (ING) rates for *nothing* and *something* are out of line with the rest of her data. If we excluded these two lexical items, we would obtain only a single fronted (ING) out of 59 noun tokens (1.7%), which would bring these data inline with our expectations.
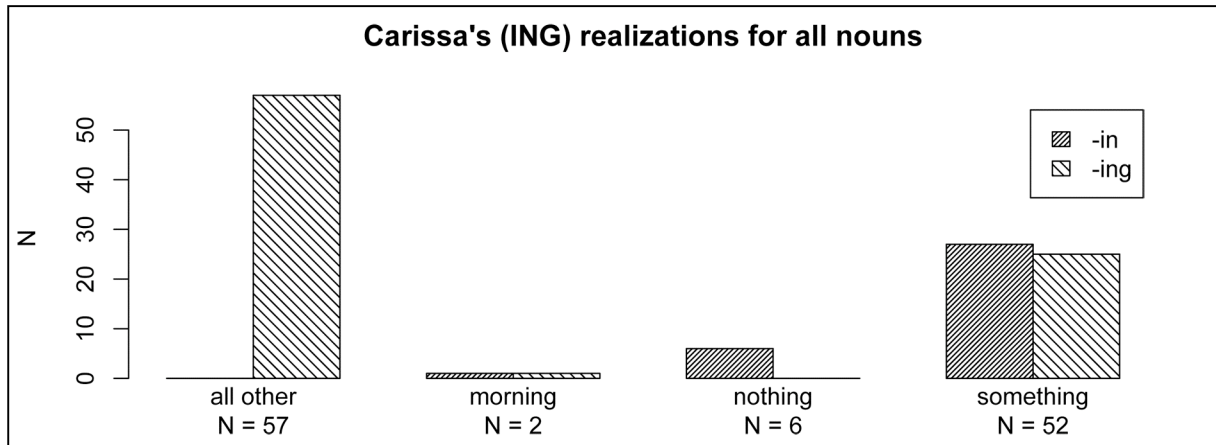
Figure 2. Carissa's (ING) realizations for all nouns

Instead of removing these lexical items from her analysis, it is argued that these data provide a clearer window into Carissa's accommodation to her interviewees. As a white speaker of a fairly standard dialect, Carissa does not have the AAE repertoire she would need to accommodate to the girls with respect to their own language use. Carissa instead achieves this linguistic accommodation by making use of the more *salient* and available forms in her repertoire. For (ING), these are the common and commonly fronted *something* and *nothing*.
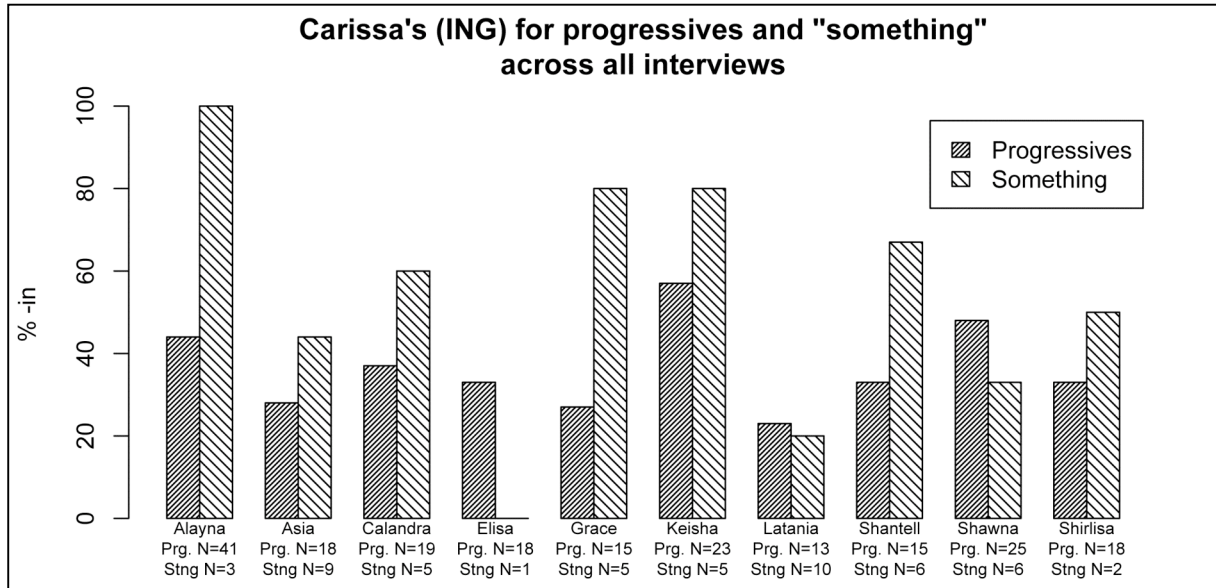

Figure 3. Carissa's (ING) realizations for all progressives and *something*

Figure 3 illustrates this point by displaying Carissa's percentage rates of (ING) across the ten interviews in terms of all progressive forms and the lexical item *something*. Looking specifically again at Keisha and Latania, only two out of ten

something tokens are realized as fronted in Carissa's interview with Latania, a pattern that reinforces Carissa's low rate of fronting in progressives, while with Keisha, Carissa has a heightened four out of five fronted forms, reinforcing her high rate of fronting for progressive forms.

5. Discussion and conclusion

With respect to previous studies of the (ING) variable, the data examined here confirm that rates of fronting of *-ing* to *-in* are quite high among speakers of AAE (the ten girls here realized an overall rate of 84% fronting). However, contrary to some descriptions in the literature (e.g., Green 2002), these data also indicate that there is substantial variation among individual AAE speakers.

Moreover, (ING) has proven to be a useful window into accommodation between the interviewer in these data, a white Minnesotan woman from an extensively different language background than her interviewees, inner-city African American adolescents. Through (ING), we see one way that Carissa, the interviewer, is able to accommodate to her interviewees. She does this, not in reaction to the actual rates of (ING) by her interviewees, but, more qualitatively, apparently in terms of her perceptions – her understandings – of the girls as individuals. As Giles et al. (1991:15) describe:

> Speakers who might converge psychologically toward their interlocutors or audience may not have the sociolinguistic experience or repertoire to enable them to achieve their desired convergent effect, and they may compensate by converging linguistically and nonverbally along some alternative dimension.

Importantly, while broad social factors, such as ethnicity, are surely important – at the most basic level, they impact the available repertoires each speaker has at her disposal – in focusing instead on the convergence between *individual* speakers, we have seen evidence that it is primarily aspects of the girls' individual identities that are central to Carissa's positioning of herself in each of the interviews. Carissa is an involved fieldworker with a stake in the interviews, and we see here one subtle way in which she is able to converge to individual interviewees through her language use. Certain forms are more available – more salient – than others and through these forms Carissa is able to align herself to her understanding of each of the girls.

In closing, while overall our principal research interest with these recordings is to better understand the language of African American women and girls, I believe, however, that the focus presented here on Carissa, the interviewer, has better enabled us to make sense of the girls in this study themselves. Through the analysis of Carissa, we have been forced to consider the 'data' of the

interviews more thoroughly than we otherwise might have and, in doing so, have enriched the long-term project.

Notes

[1] In our presentation at Methods XIII, titled more broadly 'On variation in discourse: Exploring the interview with adolescent African American girls in Washington, DC,' Christine Mallinson and I considered a broader range of questions and linguistic features. I have limited the breadth of this paper, believing that a deeper focus on one aspect of our original presentation would be more useful to readers than a broader but more cursory overview. I wish to thank Christine Mallinson, my collaborator in this larger research project, as well as Walt Wolfram, an anonymous reviewer, and the members of the audience at Methods XIII for helpful comments on this paper. I especially thank Carissa Froyum for access to these interviews.

[2] Fuller regression models have been analyzed, but are not discussed in this paper for sake of space. For example, more complete models indicate significant effects for the number of syllables in the matrix word (two syllable words favor fronting while longer words increasingly disfavor fronting) and the phonological environment following an (ING) token (apical following consonants relatively favor fronting while velar consonants relatively disfavor fronting). Although some studies have similarly found phonological effects (cf. Tagliamonte 2004 and discussion in Hazen 2008:121-2,125), Labov (2006[1966]:255) claims that (ING) is not phonologically conditioned and is primarily affected by grammatical type in terms of its linguistic conditioning. Determining the extent to which this is or is not correct is outside the scope of the current paper.

[3] Shawna, the interviewee with the lowest rate of *-in* for *-ing* (55%), stands out from the other girls. Her relatively low use of fronted *-in* for *-ing*, however, seems attributable to a peculiarity in her interview, which also had a low number of (ING) tokens. At one point in her interview Shawna emphatically lists a number of things that 'boys can do that girls can't' and vice versa. All of these items were gerunds and were fully velar, thus lowering her overall rate of fronting to *-in* with respect to what likely would have obtained without the enumeration.

[4] As before (note 2), phonological factors have been examined but are not discussed here for sake of space. The individual interviewee girls were also submitted as an independent variable to the logistic regression of Carissa's (ING) data, but this factor did not surface as a significant predictor despite Carissa's variability between the interviews.

[5] For this reason, Labov (2001:79) excluded *something* and *nothing* from the noun category in his 1973-1977 Philadelphia study. In Hazen's data (2008: Table 5, 126), the noun category surfaces with a factor weight above those for gerunds and adjectives even though Labov (2001) argues that nouns are the least likely to front. Hazen's hierarchy (noun > gerund & adjective) seems likely the result of his inclusion of *something* and *nothing*. Nonetheless, as mentioned in the text, Hazen still finds the noun category to disfavor fronting, even with the inclusion of *something* and *nothing*. Note that for the data on the girls (in Table 1), nouns also obtain the lowest and least favoring factor weight despite the inclusion of these pronominal forms.

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