

On the utility of composite indices in longitudinal language study

JANNEKE VAN HOFWEGEN
Stanford University

WALT WOLFRAM
North Carolina State University

Although most longitudinal studies focus on a single structural variable or a limited set of variables, there appears to be some heuristic, analytical, and descriptive justification for objectifying language use in terms of composite language indices. This chapter considers the utility of composite dialect indices by comparing several different approaches to the assessment of African American Language (AAL) based on a unique, longitudinal language study of 70 African American subjects at 7 temporal points during their early lifespan (from 48 months through age 20). The comparison of different models for assessing AAL demonstrates the heuristic utility of composite measures for the correlation of language use trajectories over the lifespan as well as the correlation of language use with external social and educational factors.