

## TRENTON, NEW JERSEY: MARKED BY THE GLOTTAL STOP

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the production of the glottal stop, specifically t-glottalization in the word-final prevocalic position, by native speakers in Trenton, New Jersey, and the reasoning behind the feature's prominence exclusively within the city's limits. Further, data collected by the Census along with population statistics published by the Trenton Historical Society and personal encounters are examined for potential contributions to the nonstandard linguistic feature that is currently employed by those apart of the Trenton community. Significant contributions were made to the prevalence of the linguistic feature following two consecutive waves of the Great Migration and drastic demographic changes within Trenton, New Jersey throughout the twentieth century. The link between the constituents of Trenton, New Jersey, and the maintained production of t-glottalization in the word-final prevocalic position is highlighted in the data analyzed and supports the feature's distinct production boundary. Additional research may continue to observe and track this marked feature to address the community's speech patterns, whether the feature will be maintained as time continues, and if any other communities have experienced similar linguistic shifts.

### INTRODUCTION

Specific speech patterns often relay a story about the community who produces them. Over a 50-year period, the population that makes up the community of Trenton, New Jersey, changed entirely. As a result of this demographic inversion, a distinct linguistic feature became prominent and distinguishing to the narrative and people of the Trenton community. This linguistic element is referred to as "t-glottalization," specifically in the word-final prevocalic position, and is a distinct dialectal feature employed by native speakers of Trenton, New Jersey as a contribution from two consecutive waves of the Great Migration.

Despite Trenton, New Jersey's, current demographics, the city did not always have such a substantial African American population and was of white majority prior to the 20th century ("History of Trenton"). The city's current name, "Trenton," is actually a shortened version of "Trent-towne" ("History of Trenton"). The original name of the settlement was a nod to William Trent, one of the major landowners of the early settlement ("History of Trenton"). In fact, Jennifer B. Leynes' "Three Centuries of African-American History in Trenton: Significant People and Places" highlights that the few African Americans that were present in the early settlement were enslaved by white landowners in the area such as Mahlon Stacy and William Trent (2). Leynes' manual, prepared for the Trenton Historical Society within the last five years, states, "[t]his small group of slaves worked in a variety of capacities, making the small settlement on the Delaware River a viable and, eventually, thriving community. While little is known about their lives and struggles, these men and women formed the nucleus of Trenton's Black community in the Colonial period" (Leynes 2). These reports, collected by Leynes, all demonstrate Trenton as a town with a scarce African American population, but she does note how the population would not stay this way. On November 25, 1790, Trenton officially became the capital city of New Jersey, and although African Americans were present, it was not until 120 years later that the black population began to explode.

### WAVES OF THE GREAT MIGRATION

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans fled the destitute Jim Crow South in search of new lives, opportunities, and jobs, bringing with them their everyday speech patterns. The United States

## I. GUHL-ERDIE: TRENTON, NEW JERSEY: MARKED BY THE GLOTTAL STOP

government divides this massive emigration of black people out of the South into two separate waves (Census “The Great”). The first wave of the Great Migration occurred from 1910-1940 with a second consecutive wave occurring from 1940 through 1970 (Census “The Great”). Although the 1970’s mark the technical end of the Second Great Migration, many Northern cities see a continuous increase in African American populations well into the 1990’s (Gibson and Jung see table 31). New Jersey, as a whole, saw a tremendous influx of African American people during both the first and second waves of the Great Migration. For example, the United States Census Bureau reveals that “[b]y the end of the Second Great Migration, Newark, NJ, had realized the largest increase in Black population share, with the Black proportion of the city rising from 10.6 [percent] in 1940 to 54.2 [percent] in 1970” (Census “The Great”). But, these vast and swift population changes are no surprise based on New Jersey’s location. Not only is New Jersey situated along a major railroad line and a coastal state, but it is also located between two bustling cities: Philadelphia and New York City. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continuing through to present-day, these major cities are a hub for opportunities. As a result of these open opportunities and New Jersey’s proximity to such opportunities, African Americans flocked to the Garden State as a means to escape their oppressive history housed in the South.

As a direct result of the first and second waves of the Great Migration, a substantial increase is seen in the African American population of New Jersey’s capital, Trenton, and is supported by research conducted for the Trenton Historical Society (Leynes 2). Leynes notes the significance of the First Great Migration in her research stating, “this migration led to substantial increases in the African-American population, from 2,500 in 1910 to more than 8,000 in 1930” (Leynes 2). Further, Census data provides additional support for the continual surge of the black community in Trenton during the Second Great Migration (Gibson and Jung see table 31). In 1940, the Census identified the black community as only 7.5 percent of the total population within Trenton. By the time of the 1970 Census, African Americans rise to account for nearly 38 percent of Trenton’s total population (Gibson and Jung see table 31). Comparatively, the white population decreased from 97 percent at the beginning of the First Great Migration to roughly 61 percent at the conclusion of the Second Great Migration (Gibson and Jung see table 31). Along with African Americans rapidly establishing communities in the North many social changes for these communities occurred, and the capital of New Jersey was a main source of social change.

In New Jersey’s capital, African American people set out to build a thriving state capital and become wholly integrated into their new way of life through building institutions that could withstand the test of time. Leynes’ research into Trenton’s history supports this idea:

... during the 1920s a nucleus of the community emerged on Spring Street between Willow and Calhoun Streets. It became a home to the city’s Black middle class residents, including a number of doctors, lawyers, and other educated community leaders. It was also a center of Black-owned and operated businesses, a place where African-American residents could visit a beauty salon or barber shop, dine out in a restaurant, and buy groceries, clothes, and other items. In the age of segregation, the businesses on Spring Street provided Trenton’s Black community with the goods and services necessary to modern life. (3)

Clearly, African American people immigrating to the North wanted to make themselves known in their new communities in order to make it their own. In Trenton, New Jersey, up-and-coming black communities began to invest in the institutions around their homes. Not only were men forming these institutions, but black women were making sure their voices were heard within their city as well. (Leynes 4) For example, in 1915, a local chapter of the New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs was established (Leynes 10). This organization became well-known and even obtained property within Trenton to house the group’s operations in 1975. (Leynes 10). The creation of these organizations and their success within Trenton is a demonstration of the social networks developing as a direct result of the massive influx of African American people into the North following both waves of the Great Migration.

### **RESULTS OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE**

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African Americans fleeing the South and coming to new environments with shared histories became tight-knit across multiple platforms. Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes’ *American English: Dialects*

*and Variation* describe this development within the community as a dense and multiplex network (35). A multiplex network is when individual speakers interact with each other in multiple areas of everyday life, and density refers to the amount of contact between these speakers (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 35). A dense and multiplex network is true for the African American community in Trenton, New Jersey and is demonstrated explicitly in the institutions created and maintained by the new influx of African Americans highlighted in Leynes' manual. Interestingly, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes state, "[r]esearchers have shown that social network density and multiplexity can have a significant impact on the dialect maintenance and change" (35). Thus, it is no surprise that linguistic features are still able to be observed in communities such as Trenton, New Jersey that are exposed to constant maintained production of such features. In New Jersey, the production of t-glottalization identifies you as part of the Trenton community. A glottal stop is generally defined by Wolfram and Schilling-Estes as "[a] rapid opening and closing of the vocal cords that creates a kind of 'popping' sound" (400). Further, David Eddington and Michael Taylor's "T-Glottalization in American English" says, "[t]-glottalization refers to the pronunciation of /t/ as a glottal stop [ʔ]" (298). In Trenton, if you pronounce the state capital as "tɪntən", then presumably you did not grow up within the city. Oppositely, if you pronounce New Jersey's capital as "tɪnʔən," employing a glottal stop, then it is assumed you were born within the city limits. For example, I was born in Trenton, work at the New Jersey State Museum which is located in the capital and produce this dialectal feature. Visitors, most often not from Trenton, come from all over the world to learn more about the Garden State and the rich history of New Jersey. Intriguingly, when people hear me say, "tɪnʔən", they automatically tell me, "you must be from here [Trenton]," and recognize I was born in Trenton solely based on my dialectal variation. This single element thus matters significantly and solidifies the identity of those who are born within the city's limits.

The first and second waves of the Great Migration are crucial in understanding how dialectal variation, specifically t-glottalization, became prevalent in Trenton, New Jersey. Linguist Dani Byrd has done extensive research into glottalization rates across multiple regions of the United States (Eddington and Taylor 299). Her research supports my argument that the South-North travel pattern produced by African Americans fleeing the South during the Great Migration contributed to observable linguistic features today. This is evident when Eddington and Taylor say, "[h]er data indicate[s] that speakers from the North and South glottalize more . . ." (Eddington and Taylor 299). Further, the dense and multiplex networks developed by the massive influx of African American people allowed for the linguistic feature to continue production in everyday speech patterns, and thus become a prevalent marker of those who are born in Trenton, New Jersey.

## **CONCLUSION**

Dense and multiplex networks are needed for the continual production of linguistic features and help to keep linguistic features alive within communities. The dense and multiplex network developed by African Americans in Trenton, New Jersey, specifically following the waves of the Great Migration, contributes to the t-glottalization feature that is still produced by native speakers today. Through establishing overlapping networks of interaction, the prevalence of this distinct linguistic feature remains in the everyday speech patterns of those who live in Trenton. In the future, it will be interesting to return to Trenton, New Jersey, and see if this specific linguistic feature is still produced in everyday speech patterns. Further, additional research may be conducted to assess the vitality of t-glottalization over time and whether other communities have experienced similar linguistic shifts.

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I. GUHL-ERDIE: TRENTON, NEW JERSEY: MARKED BY THE GLOTTAL STOP

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