

African American English Research: A Review and Future Directions

INTRODUCTION

African-American English (AAE) is a systematic, rule-governed linguistic system that is spoken by many African-American people in the United States. The linguistic features that characterize AAE have been well-documented in the literature (Labov, 1966; Wolfram, 1969; Dillard, 1972; Labov, 1972; Wolfram & Fasold, 1974). The rules governing AAE allow both additions (e.g., multiple negatives: “ I didn't hear nobody ask that question”) and deletions (e.g., This ___ my first time hearing about that”) of linguistic elements commonly found in Standard American English (SAE). African-American English also contains linguistic constituents not found in any other American English dialects (e.g., invariant be: “ Whenever we go down South, she be lookin' for figures to add to her collection”), and shares some constituents with regional American dialects such as Southern English (e.g., “do” support: “I done worked on that car all day”). Throughout its history AAE has been identified using various terms including Negro Nonstandard English, Black English, Black English Vernacular and Ebonics. The terminology has changed with shifts in racial name identification, but the characteristics of the dialect have remained constant.

REVIEW

In the 1960s and 1970s investigations into the use of AAE were characterized primarily by attempts to support or refute its legitimacy. Proponents of the ‘deficit hypothesis’ purported that the language forms used by African Americans reflected lower intelligence, ungrammaticality, and an inability to handle the complexities of Standard American English (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Deutsch, 1965). Proponents of the ‘difference hypothesis’ refuted these claims by presenting the regularities or rules that governed use of the dialect. These early linguists demonstrated that AAE was neither random nor ungrammatical, but affected the morphology, syntax and phonology of English in predictable ways. They concluded therefore that AAE represented a legitimate dialect that was different from SAE, rather than a deficient form of it (Stewart, 1970; Wolfram, 1969; Labov, 1972). Although there is a small minority who continue to question the legitimacy of AAE, among linguists and other language researchers it is widely accepted as a legitimate dialect form that differs in systematic, identifiable ways from SAE. Dillard (1972) and Wolfram (1986) present detailed discussions of the features which characterize AAE.

Not all African Americans use AAE, and among those who do the degree of use differs significantly. In a chapter entitled “Who Speaks Black English?” Dillard (1972) suggested that several variables likely influence the use of African American English, including age, gender and socioeconomic status. Relative to age, the work of Stewart (1970) suggests that ‘age-grading’ occurs in the use of AAE. Stewart proposed that dialect features which appear prominently in adolescence may level off in adulthood. A more specific example was presented by Wolfram (1990) who suggested that among his adult subjects invariant “be” as in “They be doin’ that all the time” showed evidence of a linguistic life cycle. Middle-aged African Americans used this form more than adults of the previous generation, but not nearly as much as when they were young. Stewart (1970) and Dillard (1972) also reported changes in the structure of the dialect between late elementary school and adulthood. They reported that children use a “basilect” form of the dialect. Basilect forms are considered the “least prestigious” forms of the dialect, or those that differ most from the mainstream language. As children get older, they continue to use dialect forms, but reportedly move toward increased use of “acrolect” forms. Increased acrolect form use represents an adjustment of linguistic features toward those that appear closer to the mainstream language, in this case SAE.

Gender differences in the use of AAE have also been reported. Wolfram (1986) reported that males often exhibit increased use of ‘socially stigmatized’ phonological and grammatical features of the dialect. For example, both males and females may use multiple negation and ‘g’ dropping (e.g., “ I didn’t see nothin’), but males appear to use them much more frequently than females. Wolfram suggested that these quantitative differences represent differential socialization among males and females, whereby more positive values of masculinity are associated with frequent use of vernacular forms. Conversely, women have been found to make much more use of prestige forms (Trudgill, 1972; Labov, Yaeger & Steiner, 1972). This is particularly true of middle-class women.

Differences in the use of AAE by socioeconomic status (SES) are also apparent. Lower and working class African Americans reportedly use AAE significantly more frequently than middle or upper middle class African Americans. These differences in usage by SES often reflect differences in educational background as well. Terrell and Terrell (1993) suggest that there is a continuum of dialect usage among African Americans that ranges from those who do not use the dialect at all to those who use AAE in almost all communicative contexts. This continuum is significantly influenced by social status variables. Further, African Americans from middle and upper middle class backgrounds appear to be more adept at switching codes based upon context than their lower and working class counterparts. Use of AAE when

interacting with family and friends who are dialect users, and then switching to the use of SAE in more formal contexts and among non-users of the dialect appears to be commonplace.

THE FUTURE

Much of this early work on AAE was based upon the study of language forms used by African American adolescents and adults. What we have learned based on these investigations is that AAE is a legitimate, rule-governed dialect influenced by several variables as outlined above. As a result of the focus on older children and adults, however, surprisingly little is known about the development of AAE in children. History has shown us that this information is critical if we are to provide appropriate educational and linguistic services to African American children.

In the landmark case known as the *Ann Arbor Black English Case* (1980) a group of African American parents at one predominantly white elementary school challenged the Ann Arbor School Board, claiming that their children were being placed in Special Education classrooms at a disproportionate rate. The parents and their attorneys maintained that the African American children were being unfairly stigmatized and discriminated against because of their language differences. The children's use of AAE was believed to present a barrier to reading and academic progress; a barrier that the teachers were reportedly not sensitive to because of their preconceived biases about the linguistic abilities of impoverished African American children. The court sided with the parents. The Ann Arbor School District was ordered to develop a plan that would: 1. help the teachers to identify AAE speakers and accept it as the language of their homes and communities; and 2. use that knowledge to teach children to read SAE. (p. ii, John Dewey Society, 1980).

Despite the precedent set by the Ann Arbor decision, African American children continue to be represented on Special Education caseloads in disproportionate numbers. The Statistical Profile of Special Education in the United States (1994) indicates that 14% of the general population of youth are enrolled in Special Education. Twenty four percent of those youth are African American. It would be naive to assume that AAE was the only factor impacting these numbers. Other important variables, especially poverty, certainly have a profound impact as well. However, language skills are critical for success in academic settings. As the Ann Arbor case illustrates, children who use nonstandard forms of English are often disadvantaged because their communication skills are different from the SAE used in most learning contexts (Baratz, 1969; Heath, 1986), placing them immediately at risk upon enrollment in formal education (Vaughn-Cooke, 1986). These children are often unable to access the curriculum in the same ways as children who speak the language of the school. In addition, the bias inherent in standardized testing with this population also results in overselection of African American children for Special Education services, especially speech and language therapy (Washington, in press; Washington & Craig, 1992).

Our research program at the University of Michigan Communicative Disorders Clinic, has focused on improving our understanding of the language skills of African American children at the time of school entry. Our subjects are low and middle SES preschoolers, kindergartners and first graders enrolled in Metropolitan Detroit area public schools. The results of this ongoing work have shown that children use AAE to varying degrees (Washington & Craig, 1994), ranging from those who use no AAE at all to those for whom nearly 40% of their utterances contain one or more AAE forms. Washington and Craig (1994) also found that there are child forms of AAE that have not been identified in the adult literature, and that many forms identified in adult speech are low frequency for children. In Craig and Washington (1994; 1995) we also found that among low income preschoolers those children who use the most AAE forms also produce the most syntactically complex language forms. In other words, low income children who were characterized as moderate to high producers of AAE also had the most sophisticated language skills overall.

A great deal of work needs to be done before we fully understand the African American child as a communicator. Specifically, it will be important to determine the rules governing inclusion and exclusion of AAE forms, the social status variables that influence where a child falls on the continuum from 0% to nearly 40% usage of AAE, and the ways in which dialect use changes over time. A sense of urgency has arisen as more and more communities have begun to discuss openly the gap in academic performance between African American and White children and the disproportionate numbers of African American children receiving Special Education services,. It will be impossible to impact the reading, writing and oral language difficulties reported for these children without knowledge of their language development.

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