Acquisition of a late-developing syntactic structure by African-American-English-speaking learners of the mainstream dialect.

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Progress in AAE or MAE or both?

What does age-appropriate development look like for children from African American English-speaking communities?
- Decreasing use of AAE-like morphosyntax (MS)!
- Increasing use of mainstream (MAE)-like MS?
- Development of complex syntax that is both AAE & MAE?

All of the above may be true.

Recent research shows improved literacy skills from being able to switch to more MAE in academic contexts (Gatlin & Wanzek, 2015). Perhaps a learning language mismatch between the child’s own speech and materials and media in MAE. Another hypothesis, (Craig, 2013, among others), claims the positive impact comes from the greater metalinguistic awareness that is required to know when a more MAE style is appropriate and when MAE-like utterances are appropriate. The result is the child’s increased ability to switch flexibly between styles. Indeed, there are now several programs to explicitly teach AAE and MAE speech.

The AAE Spectrum

Green (2011), chap 2) envisions AAE as a spectrum that includes both contrasting elements, including some specific to AAE and fewer elements associated only with MAE at its endpoints and non-contrastive elements in the middle.

Development Type-1, Less Difference from MAE

We present evidence (from our nationwide samples) that, indeed, younger AA children (below age 7-8) are most likely to speak primarily AAE and older children speak a mix of AAE and MAE and all that on average becomes more MAE-like. That is, as children become more competent language users in MAE-speaking contexts, they can produce speech that shows less difference from MAE.

This is well-attested finding: we found it for a large sample of children in a very high SES area.

We tracked 9 D contrastive target structures from ages 4 to 12 years (pilot sample, N=120, 800 AAE, 400 Eurk, 280 yrs, 920 yrs TD (NIH norm-ref sample, N=1000, matched to US general pop.)
- third-person singular (+/-3rd/s)
- 3rd-s with “do”
- 3rd-s with “have”
- “am” auxiliary
- “is” auxiliary

This is all non-MAE.

Bars are +/- 1 SD from mean of 98% of TD children show some or strong difference more from MAE at 4; 50% at 5yrs +
- All children TD, per DELV-NR (NIH norm-ref data)

Figure 1 shows that both Direct questions (asking, Can I go outside?) and Indirect questions (asking if I can go outside, or [asking] can he go outside) were used at all ages. For both ethnicities:
- Direct questions hovered around 35% to 45% of responses from age 6, but
- the proportion opting for Indirect questions increased from about 20% at 4yrs to over 50% at 10-12yrs.

One sees a clear divide by language variety between the alternative formulations.
- Among EuroA participants, the if-complementizer without inversion predominated, whereas
- among AA children, third-person subjects with auxiliary-inversion predominated (Green, 2002; Johnson, 2014).

LVS of groups by response type by ethnicity (pilot data, TD only)

| Ethnicity | All | Can-I | Can-he | If
|-----------|-----|-------|-------|---
| AA        | 19% | 26%   | 15%   | 46%
| Can-I     | 81% | 74%   | 68%   | 54%
| Can-he    | 83% | 92%   | 81%   | 68%
| If        | 17% | 19%   | 13%   | 8%

84% of TD AA 9-12yrs used it and are copula 100% of opportunities 69% of TD AA 9-12yrs used past ED 100% of opportunities

Most children are mangers. At 4-5yrs, 10% gave 100% AAE responses, only 2% all MAE responses. Switch at 7-8yrs and older.

AAE only

MAE only

Development Type-2, Complex Syntax

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Embedded indirect questions:

Cognitively complex (shifting perspective to the OBSERVER, 2014)

Among agent of development of “evaluative language” (Burns et al., 2012) in narrative/ requires linguistic form changes and constraints.

What is he asking her?

Can I go outside?

He's asking Can he.

It's been already agreed that MS is not a viable standard for evaluation, or a marker of language development of “evaluative language” (Burns et al., 2012) in narrative/ requires linguistic form changes and constraints.

Children (Note evidence from deV etal. 2011) that AAE inverted indirect question forms appears to impose a “do” and “help”-type distance which i.e. neutralizes the question force for them so they aren’t tempted to answer the question for the speaker.

Need more study of RICH AAE SYNTAX

Need greater awareness that MAE-MS NOT prerog for functionally advanced syntactic options (like the challenging questions in the DELV-NR).

Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in America, 56 (1), 139-154.


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Trends in Language Development, 30, 135-146.


Seymour, H. N., Roeper, T., & de Villiers, J. G. (2003). Evaluation of Language Variation Status (LVS) and DELV-Screening Test IDENTIFIES a child’s variety at each age.
