

2018

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

Barbara Zurer Pearson

Janice E. Jackson



# Evaluating Language Development in AAE Learners USING MORE MAE MORPHOSYNTAX OR DEVELOPING AAE SYNTAX? Or BOTH?

Janice E. Jackson  
DeKalb County Public Schools

Barbara Zurer Pearson  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

## Progress in AAE or MAE or both?

What does age-appropriate development look like for children from African American English (AAE)-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.

Recent research shows improved literacy skills from being able to switch to more MAE in academic contexts (Gatlin & Wanzek, 2015). Perhaps a benefit comes from lessening the 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 more AAE-like utterances are appropriate. The result is the children's increased ability to **switch flexibly between styles**. Indeed, there are now several programs to explicitly teach children how to notice the differences between varieties and then to practice moving between them (Wheeler & Swords, 2010; Toggletalk (2016).

Many authors call this "CODE-SWITCHING—i.e. between AAE and MAE. Following Green (2011), we prefer to call it **STYLE-SHIFTING** within AAE, along a spectrum.

## The AAE Spectrum

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

| AAE only  | AAE or MAE  | MAE-only  |
|---|---|---|
| Contrastive   | Non-contrastive<br>← more aae-like -- more mae-like →                         | Contrastive   |
| Aspectual "be"<br>Remote past<br>"bin" (a.o.)<br>Optional overt<br>MS marking | Indirect questions<br>with s-v inversion<br>Long distance<br>wh-movement      | person & number<br>agr. on verbs*<br>Obligatory overt<br>MS marking |
|   | Indirect questions<br>with "if"<br>complement<br>Long-distance<br>wh-movement |   |

## Evaluating Language Development in BOTH varieties

An important aspect of the flexibility hypothesis is maintenance—and development—of the first variety. That is, not just increased adoption of MAE, but developing skill in two varieties.

Unfortunately, relatively little is known about development of the many AAE-only syntactic structures, like aspectual Be noted above. See Green 2011 for descriptions of several small-scale studies.

More is known about age-graded benchmarks for contrastive optional overt marking and non-contrastive syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic elements from 3 nationwide data collections done during the development and standardization of **The Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation (DELV)** tests (Seymour, Roeper, & de Villiers, 2003, 2005). (This involved >3000 children, 2/3 of them African American (AA) and 1/3 European American (EurA), approximately 20% of each ethnicity identified with Language Impairment, 80% w/ Typical Development.)

The DELV Screening Test IDENTIFIES a child's variety at each age relative to MAE with a **Language Variation Status (LVS)**. LVS is **distinct from EVALUATION**. Using MAE levels established empirically in the standardization data, analysis of LVS findings (in col. 2) shows that LVS "some or strong difference from MAE" is **TOO PERVASIVE** among young **TYPICALLY DEVELOPING** AAE children to be a viable standard for evaluation, or a marker of language proficiency, *per se*.

The DELV tests accommodate **EVALUATION of language progress** in both AAE and MAE speech by using only **NON-CONTRASTIVE elements**. (See Seymour, Bland & Green, 1998; Seymour & Pearson, 2004).

## 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 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.

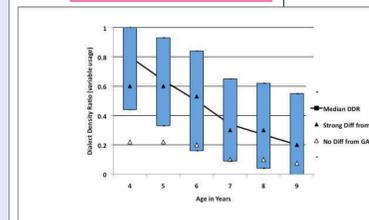
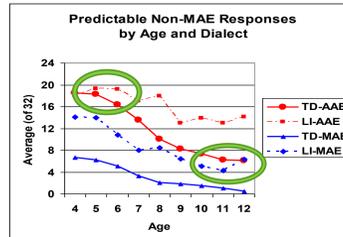
This is well-attested finding: we just quantify it for a large sample and help visualize it.

We tracked **10 contrastive target structures from ages 4 to 12 years** (pilot sample, n=1200, 800 AA, 400 EurA, 280 w/LI, 920 w/ TD (NIH norm-ref sample, N=1000, all AA, 920 TD, 80 LI) (TPC-Ventris. norm-ref sample, N=1000, matched to US general pop.)

- third-person singular /-s/ (3rd -s) for lexical verbs (*he sleeps*)
- past copula, invariant agreement (e.g., *they was*)
- 3rd -s with "do"
- 3rd -s with "have"
- "are" auxiliary
- "is" auxiliary
- "is" copula
- multiple negation
- possessive /-s/
- past tense marker /-ed/

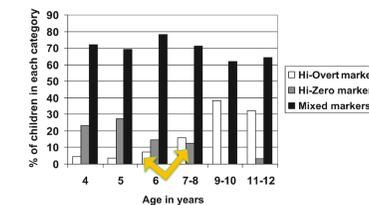
Morphosyntax Marking Profiles by Age (pilot data)

Less difference from MAE with age—by structure (pilot data). AAE-TD and AAE-LI same, ages 4-6yrs; AAE-TD and MAE-LI similar ages 8-12 yrs



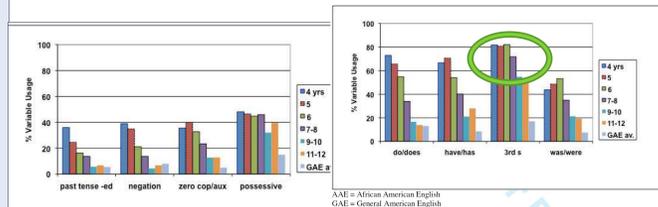
Bars are +/- 1 SD from mean 98% of TD children show some or strong difference from MAE at 4; 90% at 5yrs  
← All children TD, per DELV-NR (NIH standardization data)

Most children are mixers. At 4-5yrs, 20% gave 100% AAE responses; only 2% all MAE responses. Switch at 7-8yrs and older. (NIH data)



3<sup>rd</sup> s in many forms most persistent. (pilot data)

Percent of Variable AAE Usage for Four Most Contrastive Morphosyntax Features by Age (GAE control group by overall average, all ages)



From: Jackson & Pearson, 2010 (using NIH data)

84% of TD AA 9-12yrs used *is* and *are* copula 100% of opportunities  
69% of TD AA 9-12yrs used past ED 100% of opportunities  
**Only 17% of TD AA 9-12yrs used 3<sup>rd</sup> person /s/ 100% of opportunities**

## Development Type-2, Complex Syntax

Acquisition of a late-developing syntactic structure by mainstream & African-American-English-speaking learners

**Embedded Indirect questions** (Johnson & de Villiers, 2014)

Cognitively complex (shifting perspective to the OBSERVER distinct from agent—cf development of "evaluative language" (Burns et al, 2012) in narrative/ Requires linguistic form changes and constraints.

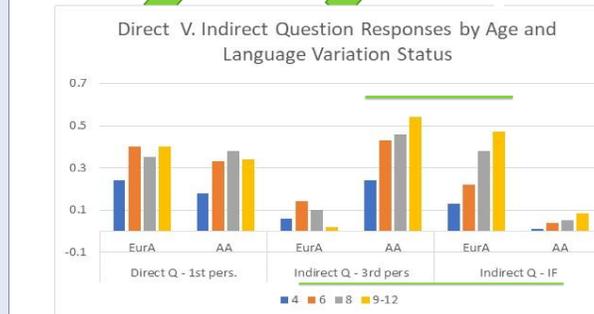


Figure 1 shows that both Direct questions (*asking, Can I go outside?*) and Indirect questions (*[asking] if he can go outside, or [asking] can he go outside*) were used at all ages. For both ethnicities:

- 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 EurA-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, TD only)

|      | All                 | Can-I               | Can-he              | If*                 |
|------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| AA   | 19% MAE<br>81% diff | 26% MAE<br>74% diff | 15% MAE<br>85% diff | 46% MAE<br>54% diff |
| EurA | 83% MAE<br>17% diff | 83% MAE<br>17% diff | 81% MAE<br>19% diff | 92% MAE<br>8% diff  |

\*"can-I and "Can-he" cells roughly reflect the % of MAE and "diff from MAE" speakers in the whole group. "IF" indicates a **stronger MAE orientation** than expected for both groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

We see both kinds of progress.

Progress for AA children not tied to losing AAE, even as they become more adept at producing MAE morphosyntax

AAE alternative form for indirect question emerged around same time that overt MS marking began to predominate. i.e. an indication that children are still talking AAE

(Note evidence from deV et al. (2011) that AAE inverted indirect question form appears to protect against "medial error" in long-distance wh-items. i.e. neutralizes the question force for them so they aren't tempted to answer the wrong question).

Need more study of RICH AAE SYNTAX

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

Can these data help us decide whether children are CODE-switching or STYLE-shifting?

Well, no. And luckily, it doesn't matter for language evaluation or diagnosis of LI. But perhaps the strong split by language variety indicates that the "If-alternative" is not part of AAE. AA children who use it are probably code switching.

Further, an element of MAE-MS that Green and Terry suggest is **not** part of AAE-grammar (person & number marking on verbs) is the most persistent. Might that indicate that the other elements tested ARE part of AAE, just used optionally. Easier to "stay in AAE and shift" than switch out of AAE into MAE?

## REFERENCES

- Burns, F. A., de Villiers, P. A., Pearson, B. Z., & Champion, T. B. (2012). Dialect-neutral indices of narrative cohesion and evaluation. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 43* (2), 132-152.
- Craig, H.K. (2013). *AAE and the achievement gap: The role of dialectal code-switching*. NY: Routledge.
- de Villiers, J. G., de Villiers, P. A., & Roeper, T. (2011). Wh-questions: Moving beyond the first phase. *Lingua, 121*, 352-366.
- Green, L. J. (2002). *African American English: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Green, L. J. (2011). *Language and the African American child*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, J. E. & Pearson, B. Z. (2010). Variable use of features associated with African American English by typically-developing children, ages 4 to 12. *Topics in Language Disorders, 30* (2), 135-144.
- Johnson, V. & de Villiers, P. A. (2014, June). Acquisition of embedded indirect question forms in Typically Developing and Language Impaired African American children. Paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Language Disorders, Madison WI.
- Pearson, B. Z., Velleman, S. L., Bryant, T. J. & Charko, T. (2009). Phonological milestones for African American English-speaking children learning Mainstream American English as a second dialect. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 40*(3), 229-44.
- Renn, J. & Terry, J. M. (2009). Operationalizing style: Quantifying the use of style shift in the speech of African American adolescents. *American Speech, 84*, 367-390.
- Rickford, J. R., Duncan, G. J., Gennetian, L. A., Gou, R. Y., Greene, R., Katz, L. F., . . . Ludwig, J. (2015). Neighborhood effects on use of African American Vernacular English. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 112*(38), 11817-11822.
- Seymour, H.N., Bland-Stewart, L. & Green, L. J. (1998). Difference versus deficit in child AAE. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 29*, 96-108.
- Seymour, H.N. & Pearson, B. Z. (Eds.) (2004). Evaluating language variation: Distinguishing dialect and development from disorder. *Seminars in Speech and Language, 25* (1).
- Seymour, H. N., Roeper, T., & de Villiers, J. G. (2003). *Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation, Screening Test (DELV-ST)*. San Antonio TX: The Psychological Corporation. (now Ventris Learning, publisher).
- Seymour, H. N., Roeper, T., & de Villiers, J. G. (2005). *Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation, Norm Referenced (DELV-NR)*. San Antonio TX: The Psychological Corp. (now Ventris Learning, publisher).
- Terry, J. M., Hendrick, R., Evangelou, E. & Smith, R. L. (2010). Variable dialect-switching among African American children: Inferences about working memory. *Lingua, 120* (10), 2463-2475.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BUCLD 43, November 2, 2018, Boston University, MA

We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of the DELV authors in permitting us to use data from the standardizations of the DELV-ST and DELV-NR.

Contact: [zpearson@umass.edu](mailto:zpearson@umass.edu) / [professorjackson@hotmail.com](mailto:professorjackson@hotmail.com)