

AAE 2000-2002

Research on African American English at the University of Massachusetts

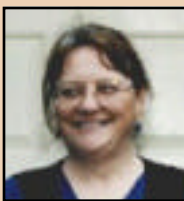
Distinguishing Language Difference from Disorder in AAE Child Speech

Local professors lead study of speech at UMass

In 1998, the National Institutes of Health awarded a six-year multi-million dollar contract to Dr. Harry Seymour of the University of Massachusetts to study speech and language patterns in African American children. The research contract, which runs through 2004, is the culmination of a national competition. The winning team brings together experts in child language development from Communication Disorders, Linguistics, and Psychology. Major collaborators are Dr. Jill de Villiers of Smith College Psychology and Dr. Tom Roeper of UMass Linguistics, pictured below with Dr. Seymour, Chair of the Department of Communication Disorders.



Seymour



de Villiers



Roeper

The research addresses a long-standing problem within the field of communication disorders—the absence of standardized tests appropriate for children whose language backgrounds are other than the standard variety of American English. The problem is very relevant for African American children, but it is not unique to them.

The end product of the contract will be a **Dialect Sensitive Language Test**. The test items will be drawn from the actual language observed in typically developing African American children. It will be published by the Psychological Corporation in San Antonio, Texas, and standardized on African American children around the nation.



Operation "Child Find" Calling all SLPs and Teachers

We are looking for children who meet these criteria:

- Language Impaired
- Normal Hearing
- African American
- 5 or 6 years old

Do you know a child or children meeting this description? Do you have any such children in your caseload? Please help us so we can reach the parents for their consent to participate in this important study.

The children will be interviewed and recorded for the AAE archive. The samples for the archive are the basis for the items in an innovative language test.

Participation will be for one or two sessions of 30 to 45 minutes, which will take place at the child's school.

For more information or materials, send a request to:

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The University of Massachusetts Working Groups on AAE NIH Contract N01 DC8-2104

Harry Seymour, P.I.
with Tom Roeper and Jill de Villiers
Barbara Pearson, Project Manager

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Goals of the UMass NIH Working Groups

University of Massachusetts Amherst
1998-2004

The AAE Working Group at the University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to the objective study of AAE as a legitimate dialect of English. We are establishing guidelines to distinguish between language differences and similarities between AAE and Standard American English (SAE) so that language problems in AAE speakers can be more readily diagnosed by language professionals.

The challenge that the language clinician faces is distinguishing the good language learner from the deficient one, regardless of the language variety being learned. The clinician aims to help the child become a more effective language learner in order to participate fully in his or her language community. We hope that our work will help clarify the relationships between AAE and SAE, so that the social and educational issues can be addressed from a larger knowledge base—logically and without prejudice or emotion.

We, like most African American spokespeople and parents, feel that children should be encouraged to learn SAE and add it to their repertoire of language competence, rather than subtracting AAE. Like most people who learn a second language or dialect after a “critical age” (perhaps 5-8 years old), AAE speakers

of SAE will rarely eliminate all traces of their native dialect while speaking SAE.

There is evidence from Sweden, the US, and other countries that speakers of other varieties can be aided in their learning of the standard variety by pedagogical approaches which recognize the legitimacy of the other varieties of a language. From this perspective, the 1996 Oakland School Board’s decision to recognize the vernacular of African American students in teaching them Standard English is linguistically and pedagogically sound. (Taken from the Resolution by the Linguistic Society of America on Ebonics, URL: <http://linguist.emich.edu/topics/ebonics/>)

We agree with the educators and language teachers who say that instilling shame about one’s dialect is a poor way to teach SAE. After all, no one is asked to disparage English in order to learn French. Likewise, there should be no need to eradicate the child’s native dialect in order to add a new dialect.

“The student who is led to greater competence in English by systematic contrast with Ebonics can switch between the vernacular and the standard as the situation merits, and as Maya Angelou and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X undoubtedly did too, drawing on the power of each in its relevant domain.”

—John Rickford, Professor of Linguistics,
Stanford University



What kinds of questions do we ask the children?

Children by age 5 have little trouble with “wh” questions: “Who” is in the class? “When” do we eat lunch? and so on. But how do they understand a sentence with two “wh” words: Shown a picture of a father and a baby eating an apple and a banana, and asked, “Who ate what?” does a 4-year-old know that she must give a “paired” response, “The father ate an apple and the baby ate a banana.” Are the patterns the same for AAE-learning children as they are for SAE learners?

In one question set, the child is shown a picture of a boy who fell and bruised his arm while climbing a tree in

the late afternoon. A second picture shows the child discovering the bruise that evening in the bathtub and calling to his dad to tell him, “Look, I must have hurt myself this afternoon when I was climbing the tree.” When did the boy say he hurt himself? Do 4’s as well as 5’s and 6’s know that there are two possible answers, “in the afternoon” and “in the evening”?

Can they tell that when you add “how” the grammar changes: “When did the boy say *how* he hurt himself?” Now there is only one answer: “in the evening in the bath.”

The Schools Behind our Success

A look at the schools that help make our project a reality.

Many schools in the Hartford, Springfield, and Amherst areas have played a major role in the UMass AAE research. For 10 years, with the blessing of the Directors of Speech and Language Services for the school systems, UMass clinicians and research assistants have been welcomed into kindergartens up and down the Connecticut River Valley, where children of many ethnicities are found.

In the long term, the schools recognize the benefits they will have when the new dialect-sensitive test is available and language diagnosis is improved for all children. They will be among the first to profit from the new test. In the short term, the UMass clinicians provide screenings for the schools and other services. From the children's point of view, they get extra attention one-on-one. They also improve their test-taking abilities. They get valuable experience with the kinds of testing that will follow them throughout their schooling.

In Phase I of the current NIH contract, we worked mostly with typically-developing children. We asked parents and teachers to let the children be our "child language experts." Indeed, theories about how language develops are important, but they must be based on what children actually say and understand. For us to find that out, there are no better consultants than the child speakers themselves. **Mark Twain School** in Hartford with kindergarten teachers, **Mrs. Stamos** and **Mrs. Prensky**, was the home school for 24 typically developing children in our archive of AAE child speech. General testing, dialect evaluation, and language sampling were accomplished during the 1994 and 1995 school year, followed by two years of intensive transcription and database entry. The resulting files formed the basis for item selection for preliminary versions of the test.

The potential items were tested and refined in **Twain School**, **Martin Luther King**, the **CRT Headstart** in Hartford; **Milton Bradley** in Springfield; and at **Woodside Children's Center**, **Sand Hill School**, **Smith Lab School**, **Marks Meadow Elementary**, and **Sunderland Elementary** in the Amherst-Northampton area. In Spring 2000, a comprehensive set of test items was delivered to The Psychological Corporation. The preliminary or "Tryout

Edition" contains 226 picture stimuli and 255 questions distributed in the four main linguistic categories of Phonetics, Syntax, Semantics, and Pragmatics in 14 subtests.

New work with the tryout items is underway in the 2000-2002 academic years. We are also intensifying the focus on the language of AAE Language Impaired children, especially in relation to Language Impaired children of other dialect groups. Transcriptional and experimental projects are underway with a target completion date of February 2002, when Phase 3 will begin.

In addition to the wonderful schools we worked with last year, we welcome **Rawson Elementary** and the **Early Learning Center at MLK** in Hartford, and **Gerena School** and **Homer Street** in Springfield to this exciting project.

We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and generosity of the children, faculty, and staff of these schools.



Do you speak a language or a dialect?

There's a saying in linguistics that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy." In other words, there is no official ranking system with languages on top and dialects on the bottom. If you have vocabulary, a system of sounds, and grammatical rules, you have a language. And if you have a big army and navy, you may decide to call your way of speaking a language, and the speech of people with smaller armies and navies dialects. That is a distinction based on political power, not language structure.

Most languages with more than a handful of speakers have numerous dialects. Dialects are versions of the same language spoken by different social or geographical groups.

British people sometimes think that they speak the true English language, while Americans speak an inferior dialect, but a linguist would not recognize such a distinction. From a linguistic point of view, everybody's language is a dialect and everybody's dialect is a language. Standard American English is a dialect just as much as Appalachian English or Cajun English. All are full-fledged linguistic systems which are the best means of communication within the communities where they are found.

—from C. C. Smith, UMass *Synergy*, Fall, 1998



Differences between SAE and AAE:

Language scholars believe that the AAE of today originated before the American Revolution in the speech of West Africans enslaved in English-speaking colonies. Slaves had to pick up the slave owners' language with little or no formal instruction. This resulted in a dialect that combined English vocabulary with the grammar and pronunciation of various African languages. Estimates vary, but SAE and AAE today share most grammatical rules and the majority of their vocabulary. The sound systems also correspond closely, with only a few systematic differences. The differences stand out, while the elements in common do not.

There is, however, at least one important area of the grammar where AAE is more like certain African languages (also Gaelic and Russian) than it is like Standard English. In the verb system, for example, AAE marks with a special verb form whether an action is habitual as opposed to ongoing. "He be swimming" does not mean "he IS swimming now." It means he swims regularly. To convey the same information, SAE would need to use an adverbial phrase,

"he **usually** swims," or "he swims **all the time**." "Be" is not a mistaken form of "is" but rather an element with special meaning. Other forms like "done" and "been" are also used in AAE to make more distinctions than are available in Standard English verbs. These areas are being investigated by scholars around the world.

To find out more about different approaches to African American English, you can surf the Worldwide Web. Check out these locations on the Internet:



- Linguistlist.org • Topics Page
- www.africana.com
- www.cal.org • CAL (Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington DC)
- nbashl.org • The National Black Association for Speech, Language, & Hearing
- www.umass.edu/aae • African American English, University of Massachusetts Amherst



AAE Project TIMELINE

PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3
<p><i>1998 – 2000</i></p> <p>Designing test, piloting items, collecting speech samples.</p>	<p><i>2000 – 2002</i></p> <p>Collecting Milestone Data on a nationwide sample of AAE 5-year-olds; identifying language-impaired children for sampling and analysis.</p>	<p><i>2002 – 2004</i></p> <p>Standardizing the proposed test on a nationwide sample of AAE-learning 4- to 6-year-olds.</p>

- Jan. 2001:** Linguistic Society of America, Washington, DC
- Apr. 2001:** Nat'l Black Assoc. for Speech, Language, and Hearing, Milwaukee, WI
- Jne 2001:** Symposium for Research in Child Language Disorders, Madison WI
- Nov. 2001:** American Speech, Language, and Hearing Assoc., New Orleans, LA



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