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Lisa J. Green

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## I Child AAE: an introductory overview of the data and context

*LJG: Now I'm gonna read a story and you are gonna have to tell it  
back to me. You think you can do it!*

*Dawn: Yes mam.*

*LJG: I know you can. You can do everything.*

*Dawn: I'm smart.*

Developing African American English (AAE)-speaking children are no exception. Like other children who are acquiring language, they show ingenuity as they are acquiring AAE. Early on they show signs of using specialized words to indicate that an event is located in the distant past and that an event occurs regularly. They also make subtle distinctions in the meaning and use of *is* and *be* that are not made by speakers of other varieties of American English. That is, they make a distinction between the following two sentences that is often missed by speakers of other varieties of American English:

- He is eating chocolate.
- He be eating chocolate.

In addition they acquire *had* + VERB (e.g., *had jumped*) sequences early on and use them in simple past contexts, and they do not seem to confuse that *had* with the past perfect *had* that is acquired later. They are mastering a complex system and learning to make subtle differences between words and constructions that may or may not be made in other varieties of American English.

I would like to state what may or may not be obvious at the outset. It has become the norm, for reasons I will address in Chapter 2, to characterize AAE as being maximally different from mainstream American English (MAE), and by association child AAE is viewed

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in the same light. There are some stark contrasts between the two varieties, subtle differences and similarities, and considerable overlap, all of which will be reflected in the data presented in this book. Indeed some language patterns that will be addressed in the chapters of this book certainly occur in the speech of children from other language, dialect, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

More research has been conducted on AAE than on any other variety of American English; however, research on developmental patterns in child AAE makes up a small percentage of that body of literature. I believe that one of the major reasons that developmental AAE or the acquisition of AAE was not a major focus of the linguistic research on AAE in the 1960s, during the first significant wave of work on the variety, is that a goal of the pioneering research was to show that AAE was logical and not a reflection of cultural deficit or linguistic deficiency. Specifically, the aim, then, was to show that AAE was rule-governed, and speakers who had already acquired it were adhering to rules in using the language system. A second reason that developmental AAE was not a major topic in the first wave of AAE research was that given the approach to the study of the variety, it was important to focus on the group that appeared to represent the “most vernacular” form or, in a sense, the most developed form of AAE that was least influenced by the standard or MAE. That group seemed to be adolescents, teens, and adults – not young children.

However, starting in the 1970s, questions about the development and use of AAE by children began to be addressed, especially in relation to patterns and variation that had already been observed in adolescent and adult AAE. Much of that early research, although limited, was primarily in the domain of communication sciences and disorders, and the trend has continued such that a majority of research on developmental patterns in child AAE is from the perspective of that discipline. The contributions made by researchers A. Fay Vaughn-Cooke and Ida Stockman were groundbreaking, especially in the area of frameworks for analyzing developing AAE-speaking

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children's language, and continue to serve as the foundation and impetus for work on child AAE, especially in the area of semantic categories and morphological forms (e.g., Stockman and Vaughn-Cooke 1982). The history of interest in child AAE in communication sciences and disorders is due, in part, to the questions about the line of demarcation between legitimate dialectal patterns and disorders. Not understanding where the line should be drawn can lead to misclassification of normally developing AAE speakers as having speech and language disorders because their language reflects properties that are not the norm for standard varieties of American English. On the other hand, speakers may be misclassified as not having disorders in the development of AAE when they actually do because without clear descriptions of AAE patterns, it is possible to lump all speech patterns that are not in line with the standard variety into the AAE category, without recognizing that not all patterns may qualify as AAE. Researchers in communication sciences and disorders are faced with the task of developing tools that can fairly assess language of children acquiring AAE, tools that do not automatically identify it as pathological (Stockman 2007; Vaughn-Cooke 2007). Along these same lines, researchers in communication sciences have to think in general about assessment tools that can be used for MAE, AAE, and speakers of other varieties of English alike, without penalizing any group of speakers for using language that is consistent with patterns of their speech communities. Some significant strides have been made in this domain, especially with the development of the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation Screening and Norm-Referenced tests (DELV) (Seymour, Roeper, and J. de Villiers, with contributions by P. A. de Villiers 2003). The DELV is significant in that it is not an assessment tool only for AAE-speaking children; it can be used as a diagnostic test for all American English speakers, MAE-speaking as well as non-MAE-speaking. A major advantage is that the assessment tool will not overidentify non-MAE-speaking children as having speech disorders because, unlike some of its predecessors, its focus is on commonalities shared among English

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speakers, not their differences. That focus alone is an innovative approach, but there are other features of the DELV that distinguish it from other assessment tools. For instance, it is based on research in the areas of universal grammar, descriptions of patterns in AAE and in other dialects within theoretical linguistics frameworks, and specific language impairment cross-linguistically (Seymour, Roeper, and J. de Villiers, with contributions by P. A. de Villiers 2005).

Research on child AAE, from the 1970s to the present, can be divided into six major categories:

1. Studies on morphological forms (e.g., Steffensen 1974; Stokes 1976; Cole 1980; Kovac 1980; Wyatt 1991, 1996; Oetting and McDonald 2001)
2. Meaning and use of words and phrases (e.g., Stockman and Vaughn-Cooke 1986, 1992; Ross, Oetting, and Stapleton 2004; Horton-Ikard and Weismar 2007)
3. Comprehension and development (e.g., Craig, Washington, and Thompson-Porter (1998); Jackson (1998); Jackson and Green (2005); Horton-Ikard and Weisman (2005); de Villiers and Johnson (2007))
4. Syntax and semantics (or linguistic structure and meaning associated with structure) (e.g., Stokes 1976; Benedicto, Abdulkarim, Garrett, Johnson, and Seymour 1998; Coles-White 2004; Green and Roeper 2007; de Villiers, de Villiers, and Roeper in press)
5. Assessment (e.g., Seymour, Bland-Stewart, and Green 1998, Seymour 2004; Pruitt and Oetting 2009; Stockman 2010)
6. Literacy (e.g., Charity, Scarborough, and Griffin 2004; Connor and Craig 2006; Craig and Washington 2006)

The sources above do not take the place of a bibliography on child AAE, but they do serve as a sample of the type of work that has been done in this area over the years. The research is separated into discrete categories; however, it is possible to cross list the references, such that the sources may be associated with more than one area. For

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instance, there is a separate assessment category, but the research in most of these areas has some type of assessment component. Take, for example, research by Oetting (and colleagues) represented in the categories, which also discusses AAE in the context of comparison of some morphological features in AAE to those used by children with specific language impairment. Research in these areas underscores the importance of shining the light on the types of problems that could arise in the absence of normative data on developing child AAE and on the consequences of using developmental MAE as the yardstick for the language of developing AAE speakers. Seymour, Bland-Stewart, and Green (1998) highlight the importance of considering non-contrastive features, or those that are shared between AAE and MAE, in assessment of disorders in AAE, especially given that the differences were greater in the use of non-contrastive features between normally developing AAE and AAE with disorders than the differences in the use of contrastive features, or those associated with AAE, between the two groups.

Some of the earliest studies on child AAE were on morphological forms that included suffixes such as plural (-s) and its forms, possessive (-'s), and tense and agreement (third person singular -s) marking and the extent to which they appear in the speech of developing AAE speakers (e.g., Steffensen 1974; Stokes 1976; Cole 1980; Kovac 1980). The production of such forms has continued to be an area of research in the study of child AAE. In her work on the copula in the speech of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, Kovac (1980) found that due to the interconnection between developmental and sociodialectal processes, it was virtually impossible to determine the different effects of these processes on variation in the occurrence of forms of the copula. That is, children could start off producing sentences without the overt copula *be* (i.e. zero copula *be*, Ø) forms such as in *The truck Ø in the driveway* ('The truck is in the driveway') due to developmental properties, but may also produce such sentences because they are the norm in the language they are developing. The challenge according to Kovac was to sort out which factors influenced

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such language patterns. Extending findings from prior research, Wyatt (1991, 1996) noted that variable copula forms were governed by pragmatic constraints as well as by other linguistic factors. To some extent, Horton-Ikard and Weismar (2005) address the question about factors in the development of child AAE. One of the goals of the study is to evaluate the “non-standard” features in the speech of 2.5-year-old and 3.5-year-old toddlers from AAE backgrounds as a means of trying to determine whether the features were due to normal developmental issues and whether there were indicators of dialect-specific influences. They conclude that not all non-standard features in toddlers from AAE backgrounds can be characterized as general development; some appear to be AAE-influenced.

Some of the more current research on child AAE in the area of syntax and semantics is relevant for assessment, too, but the work also pays considerable attention to the acquisition path (e.g., Coles-White 2004; Green and Roeper 2007; de Villiers, de Villiers, and Roeper in press). One of the advantages of that research is that it begins to bring child AAE in line with developmental research on other languages and naturally provides more concrete support for the long-standing claim that AAE is systematic. The research provides data for comparison with general acquisition developmental patterns that have been reported in the literature, and it begins to raise questions about the nature of variation in child AAE and the general principles of language that can be used to account for it. For instance, de Villiers, de Villiers, and Roeper (in press) compare AAE- and MAE-speaking children's interpretations of *wh*-questions such as *How did the woman learn what to bake?* What they found was that AAE-speaking children were less likely than MAE-speaking children to answer the *what* in such questions and more likely to answer the *how*. They attribute AAE-speaking children's success in correctly answering these complex questions to a particular strategy of forming certain types of questions in AAE. The claim is that because these children are developing a variety in which a certain type of strategy for asking questions (to be addressed in Chapter 6)

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is allowed, they are able to use that strategy in answering complex *wh*-questions. In another study, Green and Roeper (2007) raised questions about AAE-speaking children's development of tense and aspect properties in comparison with cross-linguistic generalizations about past tense.

While sociolinguistic variation has been the dominant theme of research on adolescent and adult AAE, it has not always been taken into consideration in the study of the development of AAE-speaking children's overall system, but there are some noteworthy exceptions. Kovac (1980) and Wyatt (1991, 1996), for example, who have reported on variation, considered children's variable production of the copula and frequency rate of production in relation to that of adults.

The characterization of AAE as a variable system has important implications for the study of the acquisition of AAE. To what extent is variation part of the early acquisition process or development? In addition, as noted in Seymour (2004), questions about variation and relation to dialect influence as well as disorders should be addressed. In more recent discussions about the effect of language on the academic success of African American school-age children, the question about variation and variable linguistic forms is at the forefront, and it would be worthwhile to link the acquisition of variable dialect-specific forms to the language of school-age children. It is not uncommon to link the variable use of AAE by school-age children to the influence of MAE used in the school environment. Consider the well-known example of the auxiliary *be* ('s) below, in which AAE speakers may or may not include it in some contexts:

1. (a) Sue's playing ball today.
- (b) Sue Ø playing ball today.

In (1a) the auxiliary *be* is in its contracted form ('s), and in (1b) it is in its zero form or not pronounced, indicated by "Ø". Both sentences could be produced by speakers of AAE, and according to some analyses, the probability of producing one or the other depends on linguistic as well as extra-linguistic or social factors. However, a

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speaker who uses two copular forms variably, that is, who uses (1b) in some contexts and then (1a) in others, may be said to be exhibiting an instance of dialect-shifting from AAE to MAE in using (1a). Dialect-shifting continues to be addressed in relation to issues regarding AAE speakers' academic success and use of classroom English. In fact, it is somewhat of a hot topic in work on literacy and AAE. Charity, Scarborough, and Griffin (2004) reported a correlation between familiarity with MAE and better reading achievement.

In their book of work on child AAE, which is based on a large database and long-term data collection of AAE language samples, Craig and Washington (2006) maintain that there is a direct correlation between knowledge of MAE and reading achievement; thus, AAE-speaking children who are able to dialect-shift (or "code-switch" in their terms) have a higher rate of success than those who cannot. They go on to note the following: "Students with better language skills acquire dialect-shifting abilities as part of early schooling" (p. 99). If dialect-shifting boosts reading skills and, in the long term, academic success, then it is beneficial to understand the process and how children acquire skill in it. What does it mean to dialect-shift, and how is it determined when a child is indeed dialect-shifting? The crucial question here is to what extent is it possible to distinguish variable use of AAE "features" (e.g., as illustrated in (1a, b)) from dialect-shifting or to determine whether variable use of AAE is dialect-shifting. Craig and Washington's view on this topic is not clear, but if it is the case that there are academic advantages to dialect-shifting, then it is necessary to determine what that process entails and how to create environments for it so that all AAE-speaking children have the opportunity to be dialect-shifters and benefit from strengthened reading skills. If dialect-shifting is a strategy that will foster the skill in use of different language varieties by native AAE speakers and play a positive role in sustaining children's early confidence, then it is still worth pursuing theoretical and practical issues related to it. In the wave of reports on the African American achievement gaps in reading such as those published by the National Assessment of



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Educational Progress, it is useful to research strategies that might help to reduce the gap, although it is clear that dialect-shifting will only be relevant to that part of the achievement disparity that is due to barriers emanating from differences between classroom American English or MAE and AAE. Similar educational issues are beginning to be addressed in research in the area of AAE and literacy.

The children in the study on which the data for this book are based are 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old participants who were enrolled in an early childhood development program in a parish seat in southwest Louisiana. They were from three neighboring towns in the parish, including the parish seat, and met certain needs criteria to participate in the program. Most of the children in the program were born in the area and have lived there all of their lives; however, a few participants were born in other regional areas. The distance between the two towns that are farthest from each other, one ten miles south of the parish seat and the other about ten miles west of the parish seat, is twenty miles. The population of the two towns is approximately 3,000 to 3,500, and the population of the parish seat is about 12,000. About 150 children enroll in the program each year. The developing AAE-speaking children in the study are African American and the Southwest Louisiana vernacular English-speaking (SwLVE) children are Anglo American. The number one subject selection criterion was community, so children who were members of the AAE-speaking community (and had lived there all of their lives) were automatically assumed to be members of the AAE-speaking group.

The social, political, economic, and racial history of the South has left certain marks on the linguistic patterns. Like many other small towns and areas in the southern United States, the towns in southwest Louisiana where I have focused my research are still very much divided such that African Americans live in one area and Anglo Americans in another, although the situation is changing in some pockets or sections of the towns and residents are not confined to either community. These areas may be divided by railroad tracks, streets, or some other boundary marker, imaginary or real.

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Such division makes it relatively easy to refer to the AAE-speaking community. While African American and Anglo American children attend the same schools now, that was not always the case, and integration has not erased all of the divisions that were established early on, although there is significant interaction between the groups.

It is true that given the historical contact between African Americans and Anglo Americans in the southern United States, the groups share linguistic patterns. In fact, the developing AAE- and SwLVE-speaking children share some patterns that may be uniquely associated with AAE in other areas of the United States and not with non-AAE in other regions. For instance, children from both groups expressed the existence of some object by using what has been referred to as expletive *it* followed by a form of *have*.<sup>1</sup> The example in (2a) was produced by a developing AAE-speaking child, and in (2b) by a developing SwLVE-speaking child:

2. (a) It have a bowling ball in there, too. (Barry, 5, M, AAE)  
           'There is a bowling ball in there, too'
- (b) It had a green crawfish in my yard. (Sami, 4;7, F, SwLVE)  
           'There was a green crawfish in my yard'

Also, African Americans and Anglo Americans in southwest Louisiana share patterns that are not shared by speakers in other areas in the southern United States, or in northern Louisiana for that matter. For instance, African Americans and Anglo Americans in southwest Louisiana use "yes/yeah" (affirmative) and "no" (negative) tags, as in (3):

3. (a) affirmative tag: Go before they close the store, yeah.  
           'Do go before they close the store'
- (b) negative tag: Don't try to drive that car, no.  
           'Do not try to drive that car'

These constructions are referred to as tags here because either an affirmative ("yeah") or negative ("no") response is tagged onto the end of the sentence.