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## Language and the African American Child

How do children acquire African American English? How do they develop the specific language patterns of their communities? Drawing on spontaneous speech samples and data from structured elicitation tasks, this book explains the developmental trends in the children's language. It examines topics such as the development of tense–aspect marking, negation, and question formation, and addresses the link between intonational patterns and meaning. Lisa J. Green shows the impact that community input has on children's development of variation in the production of certain constructions such as possessive *-s*, third person singular verbal *-s*, and forms of copula and auxiliary *BE*. She discusses the implications that the linguistic description has for practical applications, such as developing instructional materials for children in the early stages of their education.

**Lisa J. Green** is Professor of Linguistics and the founding Director of the Center for the Study of African American Language at the University of Massachusetts. Her previous publications include *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge, 2002).

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**In memory of my father**

**Charles Joseph Green**

**1926–2006**

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## Foreword

When a pre-eminent scholar in theoretical linguistics turns her hand to the topic of child language, one can expect novel insights and expository innovation. Lisa J. Green has brought her incomparable knowledge of African American English to bear upon conversations with black children. Many of these exchanges have emerged from her seminal experimental work, but, with a touch of genius, she elucidates the intricate grammatical tapestry behind ordinary conversations. She preserves our sense of real children as she exposes how they bring together elliptical discourse, intonation, and subtle semantic implications when they just answer an ordinary question or make a heartfelt assertion.

Thus she is able to illustrate the most tantalizing features of AAE with careful situation-grounded discussions: aspect, tense, negation, and question formation. Her explorations of and sensitivity to verbatim and elliptical meanings constitute an advance in acquisition research as well. We learn a great deal from this kind of microscopic dissection of real conversations that cannot be gleaned from statistical summaries of naturalistic data or cross-sectional experimental work. Children's own explanations reveal much more about their grammars than first language researchers have thus far realized.

The result is a linguistic tour de force at once making the reader eager to meet these children and eager to understand the structure behind the language they use. Her work here is informed by her earlier landmark book on African American English, but in a sense this book is a good prelude to that one. A number of sophisticated theoretical ideas about the theory of concord, question formation, and tense are skillfully embedded in her observations about what children do.

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Green also takes an important leap into the world of practical application, a world so complicated and interwoven with social attitudes that most researchers shy away in uncertainty. She advocates the D.I.R.E.C.T. Model, which has the major goal of teaching students to use the English variety of the marketplace, that is, MAE, alongside their own native variety by capturing the nuances in the mainstream dialect that they are accustomed to expressing in their native variety.

It has been my belief for a quarter century that understanding AAE is part of what it should mean to be an American citizen. In Canada, a bilingual country (as in many other such countries), all children are obliged to learn French as well as English, even though some parts of Canada are thousands of miles from where French is spoken. In America 20 million people, found in every state, speak varieties of AAE. It is often at the advanced edge of the direction of the mainstream dialect. For instance, mainstream English has lost most of its inflections – we no longer say “thou singest,” and it is only a matter of time before the last inflection on the third person disappears (he runs => he run), but this step has already been taken in AAE. (See Roeper (2007) for discussion.) In addition, popular songs and TV incorporate many expressions of AAE. Nevertheless the most sophisticated aspects of AAE are more challenging and need to be treated with the care and rigor of teaching a foreign language, though of course it is much closer than a real foreign language. Therefore, I think all American citizens should be taught the contrasts and differences between dialects and I believe that a one- or two-month high school course could accomplish this very well. Thus one can argue that some version of the D.I.R.E.C.T. program should be in everyone’s curriculum.

The ultimate goal should be to fight language prejudice as we fight race prejudice. While teaching the “cash” language or “standard” English should be advocated, we need to be aware that actually eliminating all traces of dialect or origin is very difficult to do. I, for instance, say /rum/ for /room/ and /ruf/ for /roof/ reflecting

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my middlewest upbringing. Thirty years in Massachusetts has not changed this, nor do I wish to change it. If we use tiny pronunciation differences as a basis of judgment, even if it is linked to a visceral response, there is no way to educate everyone so carefully that these telltale signs do not arise. The only approach is to educate people not to be judgmental and prejudiced against them. I would much rather see a society where we each wear these dialect features as a badge of individuality rather than a source of social differentiation. It is not reasonable to expect that education in different dialects can eliminate dialect-traces even when people ostensibly are able to “code-switch.”

Programs such as D.I.R.E.C.T. can be naturally paired with other efforts to articulate the legitimacy of AAE in pedagogical language policy and classroom teacher programs. One example is the Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation, which has been developed by Harry Seymour, Jill de Villiers and me, with Lisa J. Green's work in the background.

The test seeks to identify important kinds of language disorders beyond the usual realm of inflection – where dialect often interferes – for instance in the realm of quantification. Children with disorders do not understand that a sentence such as *who bought what* refers to sets of *whos* and *whats*, not just one *who* and one *what*. This deficit has nothing to do with a particular dialect and is currently being studied in languages all over Europe. Thus we have to avoid having dialect stand in the way of identifying other linguistic problems that are far deeper than dialect differences. An analogy may help: differences in vision lead to the prescription of individually crafted glasses. Color-blindness or astigmatism is a problem of a different order which needs a different approach.

And finally Green addresses the question of code-switching with an observation of fundamental importance: it is not clear how much of the MAE dialect and AAE dialect can be considered part of one big English grammar where dialect variations can be represented in a single grammar (see Green and Roeper (2007)). Thus in

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many respects the special features of auxiliaries (*be, done, BIN*) can all occupy a position in the word order of a sentence. For instance, a sentence that I heard at the airport from an airline person ran “I could have done BIN checked you in already”; that is compatible with MAE, which gets most but not all of the same meaning with the expression “I could have checked you in already” but the “done BIN” emphasizes that it would have happened significantly earlier. It should be noted that the use of this dialect-laden sentence did not disqualify him from his job nor impair our communication.

Let me make a foray into the substance of a couple of Green's concerns. As an able teacher, she brings a light touch to guiding the reader through the options that a child has, for instance, in using negative concord. The negative system has a number of subtleties to integrate for the AAE dialect child as it does for the MAE dialect child. Often differences look to be parallel: *some* => *any* after negation in mainstream English, but *some* => *none* in AAE:

- (a) Mainstream and African American English: I have some
- (b) MAE: I don't have any
- (c) AAE: I don't have none.

But the acquisition path for negation in both MAE and AAE is much more complex – leading beyond even the examples that Green discusses. Neither kind of acquisition happens instantly but the deviations in the acquisition path can be quite intricate. Consider Labov's famous example from teenagers:

“it ain't no cat can't get in no chicken coop”

First in the example above the meaning that many MAE speakers obtain is: every cat can get in the chicken coop, but for (one sub-dialect of) AAE it means: no cat can get in any chicken coop where negative concord crosses a sentence boundary [S1 ain't no cat [S2 (that) can't get in ... ]].

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Negative concord does not cross the sentence boundary in MAE dialect, hence it is easily misunderstood. It resembles the case where Green finds that children allow negation across a noun phrase boundary:

he didn't see the dog with no hair

which is taken by MAE dialect speakers to mean that the dog has no hair, but some of the children allow the negative meaning to cross into the noun phrase and therefore understand the second *no* as just an echo of the first, without a semantic shift: didn't see the dog with hair.

This looks like a simple contrast, but the MAE dialect is not consistent on this point because the MAE dialect seems to allow exceptions just like AAE, but elsewhere:

- (a) he didn't feed his dog because someone told him to
- (b) he didn't feed his dog because anyone told him to

where (a) is ambiguous about whether he did or did not feed his dog, and (b) means he didn't feed his dog. The *anyone* responds to the higher negation in the first sentence since we cannot say:

\*he fed his dog because anyone told him to

although its meaning is not simply negative. The important point is that here the negation is crossing a sentence boundary in MAE, so now the MAE dialect appears to be inconsistent where AAE is consistent.

This dialect question seen across the country is still more complex. In Iowa it is acceptable to say:

anybody can't do that

where it means 'nobody can do that'. Here the usual rule that a verbal negative can mark a nominal negative, but not the reverse, does not hold.

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The mature speaker of these dialects ultimately gets it all right, but linguistic theory has not yet found a natural way to state exactly how and when these boundaries are respected for adults, nor do we have more than a rudimentary grasp of the acquisition path for children. The challenge is most clearly seen in the AAE examples, but in many respects goes to the heart of the concept of “barriers” in linguistic theory.

As she explores the pragmatic and human background of these exchanges, Green zeroes in on how questions in the AAE dialect deviate from mainstream English:

- (a) why you don't like it
- (b) they have some Playstations
- (c) what else we gon do

Everything seems to be the same, but there is no inversion of subject and verb. However, she notes that the intonation of subject–verb inversion in mainstream English questions is carried over to uninverted structures, and then notes that the final intonational section fails to rise in AAE as it does in mainstream English for (b). We are left with an important mystery: how exactly does this novel form of question intonation work? How do children get it so quickly? Does it convey a meaning unlike any meaning in mainstream English? We might go further and ask: is there perhaps a presupposition present that resembles the difference between tag question and a non-tag question in mainstream English:

Can you go outside  
 You can go outside, can't you

Yet, although with a different acquisition path, AAE also has tag-questions. So now we might ask: is there a unique kind of question being asked here? It is certainly not unique in its information structure – its relation to truth or falsity in the world – but it might be unique in the interpersonal assumptions that it carries about what knowledge the hearer shares.



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This delivers us to the question that lies behind our intuitive sense of dialect: something unusual is actually conveyed in the subtle structure of one dialect that is not easily translated into another dialect. Some of that impression is due to our awareness of social context. Other aspects of it reflect an awareness of real, but subtle, differences in meaning not directly obtainable in another dialect. Thus the habitual *be* carries the notion of habituality in a way that is different from adding the adverb habitually to the end of a sentence. That is what we intuitively seek to appreciate, and that is why we need Lisa J. Green's work and its pedagogical extensions to understand it.

One virtue of Green's book is that we come to grasp how much of theoretical linguistics remains in its infancy – much is still in the form of descriptions whose role in theory and acquisition remains a challenge. The informality of style found in this book, coupled with rigorous knowledge and a light conversational approach, makes it engaging in a way that should inspire students and scholars to explore these questions. They are questions that can be explored by both PhD students and middle-schoolers alike. This book, along with work by Maya Honda and Wayne O'Neil (2007), as well as a popular book of mine (Roeper 2007), seeks to make us all engaged in linguistics, just as other forms of social progress require knowledgeable commitments and efforts from us all.

Tom Roeper

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## Preface

First and foremost descriptions of language used by 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old developing African American English (AAE)-speaking children give us some insight into their general patterns and norms of language use. Descriptions such as those in this book serve as a starting point for presenting child AAE as the native variety of some children that they acquire and develop systematically in stages. Owing to ever-present discussions about race, ethnicity, and education, questions about language use and child AAE are often raised in the context of the quest to overcome barriers to academic success. To what extent do differences between AAE and mainstream American English (MAE) impede academic success? This is an important question and considerable focus has been placed on different angles from which the topic is addressed. It is my hope that the information in this book will have practical application in a number of areas and disciplines related to linguistics and that it might be useful not only in showing how the language of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old developing AAE-speaking children differs from that of their peers from other speech communities but also how it is similar to their peers' language. In trying to learn more about developing-child AAE, it is important to describe it in its own right; however, given what we know about inherent variability in adult AAE, we raise the question about developmental patterns of variation in child AAE, also.

This book can be used in linguistics and general education courses that address properties of developmental and adult AAE and in general courses about early language use in different speech communities. It can also be used in courses designed to introduce teachers, early childhood specialists, and speech pathologists to language patterns in the speech of some African American children.

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The language samples and linguistic description are geared toward illustrating what is meant by systematic language use and patterns in development. In addition the data collected from scenarios and elicitation tasks should also be useful in discussions about the developmental paths child AAE speakers take in using certain constructions.

I started this project on child AAE when I was a member of the faculty in the Linguistics Department at The University of Texas at Austin, and the faculty, students, and staff helped me in significant ways. The late Carlota Smith gave me valuable feedback on scenarios and elicitation tasks, especially those relating to tense and aspect. Graduate students Qiwana Lopez, Rebecca Quigley, Nikki Seifert, Jessica White-Sustaíta, and Kendra Williams helped with transcriptions, data analysis, and story creation and sketches. What was most rewarding for me was that they also became interested enough in the child data to engage in their own research projects on various topics such as tense–aspect properties of past marking and question formation. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Shadetra Rouwtt, an undergraduate at The University of Texas Austin. I have also received assistance from faculty, students, and staff in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Graduate students Tracy Conner, Noah Constant, and Helen Stickney assisted with the data. Minta Elsmann's work on the index was indispensable. Dinah Gorelik's assistance and organization were right on time. I am very grateful for Barbara Pearson's help along the way. It was also my good fortune to be able to talk with Tom Roeper about many different issues related to child language and to receive very useful feedback from the reviewers. I understand that many issues in developing child AAE are still unfolding, and I am grateful for all of the feedback that is so very crucial in helping me to take these beginning steps. I am so fortunate to have benefited from Andre Jones's talent and willingness to work on the illustrations for this project. I also wish to thank Sarah Green and Andrew Winnard at Cambridge University Press, for their help in the process of moving this project

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along. Part of the research for this project was funded by National Science Foundation grant BCS-0003158 and research support from the University of Massachusetts. I also express my thanks to Matt Davies, Out of House Publishing Solutions, for his assistance and patience in answering my questions. I am very grateful for being on the receiving end of Lorraine Slipper's copy-editing services. I am eternally grateful to Mrs. Carolyn Simon and the staff and parents at the Jeff Davis Parish child development centers. I am especially grateful to the many children whose voices are represented in this book.

My family has always been and continues to be a source of strength for me. My mother, Ramona Green, still has the gift of encouraging me. She is great! My niece, Haley, has played such an important role in my life in her own special way. I was certain that she would stop calling me as she got older and found more interesting things to occupy her time, but at eleven, she still calls me just about every day, as she has done since she was five years old. I appreciate all that my husband Vincent Jackson does for me. Sometimes I think he can do everything.

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## Note on the text

Throughout this book mainstream American English (MAE) glosses or African American English (AAE) sentence correspondences are indicated in single quotes (').