Abstract*

This study examines the progression of African American English (AAE) in the early lifespan based on a unique longitudinal dataset that followed 70 African American participants for the first 17 years of language development. The research used a variety of dialect measurements that include a token-based dialect density measure, a type-based structural index, a frequency-based variation analysis, and an acoustically based vowel analysis. The examination of trajectories of change at six different temporal data points (48 months, Grade 1, Grade 4, Grade 6, Grade 8, and Grade 10) indicates that there are different trajectories of progression in the use of vernacular AAE that include a 'roller coaster' and 'curvilinear' trajectory, as well as different peak periods for optimal AAE use; there is, however a common period of minimal AAE use between Grade 1 and Grade 4. The analysis of vowels shows that they are more stable than morphosyntactic structures over the early lifespan, with a couple of exceptions. Additional analyses indicate that children acquire stylistic facility between Grade 1 and Grade 6, but that there are alternative stylistic trajectories between Grade 6 and Grade 8. The most consistent effect in the regression analysis is grade/age, though gender, racial density of the school, mother's education, and mother's use of AAE may have an effect. Mother's use of AAE correlates significantly with child speech but its influence changes over time. The score on the dialect density measure shows a significant correlation with the Letter-Word ID task of the Woodcock-Johnson Test, suggesting a decoding effect related to the use of AAE.

KEYWORDS: African American English, language lifespan, language acquisition, age grading, language change

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