



The Challenges of Conducting Language Research with African American Children

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Many researchers, clinicians, and educators are concerned about the status of African American children, especially as these youngsters enter and participate in formal education. Research addressing the needs of this population is sparse, however, and the generation of new knowledge is appallingly slow. This problematic situation exists within a pressing national context in which the numbers of African American children enrolled in big-city schools are steadily increasing. Unfortunately, many of these children live below the poverty line, putting them at high risk for a variety of educational and health-related problems. In Michigan, for example (University of Michigan Detroit Area Study, 1989), during the 1980s the population segment of the city of Detroit that was African American increased from 58.2% to 75.1%. Approximately one quarter of Detroit's African American adults are unemployed, and approximately 37% live in poverty with annual household incomes of less than \$10,000.

African American children who use nonstandard forms of English may be even more disadvantaged because their communication skills are different from the Standard American English (SAE) used in most learn-

ing contexts. Nonstandard forms may be more frequent in the discourse of African American children from poor than from middle-class homes (Ratusnik & Koenigsnecht, 1976a). Scott (1994) estimates that, if valid assessment instruments were available, communication disorders in minority populations might occur at two to three times the rate of that for the majority. In the context of these increasing numbers, the need for culturally fair, but diagnostically sensitive, methods for assessing the status of young African American children is urgent. Progress toward these goals, however, has been limited.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss issues, primarily methodological in nature, that present barriers to conducting language research with this population and to suggest some possible solutions to the problems identified. For speech-language pathologists, the research agenda for African American children has been framed primarily around a single issue: distinguishing language differences from language disorders. Three major types of challenges facing the language researcher attempting to study the language skills of African American children will be discussed: 1) how to prioritize the vast research agenda, 2) how to address this agenda with limited personnel, and 3) how to create appropriate research designs that can yield culturally valid data.

EMERGING PRIORITIES FOR LANGUAGE RESEARCH WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

Early Priorities

Past research in child language focused on two primary issues. The first addressed the viability and linguistic integrity of the nonstandard forms used by African Americans. A small number of early reports examining the language behaviors of African American children were part of a larger imperative to refute prevailing assumptions that the linguistic system of African Americans was a deficient form of SAE (Bailey, 1965, 1968; Baratz, 1970; Dillard, 1972; Fasold & Wolfram, 1970; Stewart, 1970; Wolfram, 1971; Wolfram & Fasold, 1974). The outcomes of these examinations clearly demonstrated that the differences from SAE were numerous and systematic.

The second research priority has generated the most scholarly comment and empirical effort. It involves a search for ways to accommodate a child's dialectal differences for language analysis and assessment purposes so that children with normal language skills can be differentiated from children with language disorders. The most frequently used language tests were developed for SAE-speaking children and normed on those in the majority culture. As recognition has increased that the nonstandard forms used by some African Americans have distinctive characteristics, recommendations have been made to develop scoring adjustments to accommodate response differences due to dialectal influences and to restandardize established tests applying locally generated norms. Evard and Sabers (1979)

observed that the development of local norms would be a very cost-effective approach if the established test could adequately measure the behaviors of interest. The work of Haynes and Moran (1989) offers an example of the efficiency of renorming (the sounds-in-words subtest of the Goldman-Fristoe Test of Articulation [Goldman & Fristoe, 1986]) for accommodating distinctive rule-governed phonological features of the dialect, such as final consonant deletions.

A notable example of the success of scoring adjustments is provided by Cole and Taylor (1990). They modified three well-known articulation tests: the Templin-Darley Tests of Articulation, Second Edition (Templin & Darley, 1969), the Arizona Articulation Proficiency Scale: Revised (AAPS-R; Fudala, 1974), and the Photo Articulation Test (PAT; Pendergast, Dickey, Selmar, & Soder, 1969). Each child's response received two separate scores: one consistent with an SAE rendering of the target and one based on the phonological rules of African American English (AAE) adult speakers. These adjustments improved the face validity of each instrument and yielded substantial improvements in the scores obtained for their 10 typically developing subjects. Cole and Taylor's methods offer a way to significantly reduce the number of false clinical diagnoses in dialect speakers.

Washington and Craig (1992a) pursued the accuracy of the adjusted AAPS-R, this time with a group of subjects judged to have "poor speech skills" by their classroom teachers. The AAPS-R did distinguish the children with reportedly "poor" speech skills from those judged by their teachers to have "good" speech skills, but the scoring adjustments failed to alter the associated clinical interpretations of the children's performances. Considered together with an item analysis of the children's response profiles, these results led Washington and Craig to conclude that a scoring adjustment was unnecessary when administering this test with these subjects. The scoring adjustment developed by Cole and Taylor (1990) seemed to address phonological differences reflecting the operation of the regional Southern Dialect of Mississippi as well as AAE, but was not critical to evaluate the articulation of the northern children in the Washington and Craig report. These studies demonstrate the importance of considering regional, as well as cultural, forces in performance outcomes and underscore the complexity of any adjustment or renorming practices.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that established tests for language fare as well as those for articulation in the development of scoring adjustments and renormings. Washington and Craig (1992b) found that a generous crediting system failed substantially to improve the performance outcomes of 105 African American preschool and kindergarten children on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R; Dunn & Dunn, 1981). Most children performed more than one standard deviation below the standard score mean of 100 established for the Dunn and Dunn sample. Crediting 16 different items missed by at least half of the children in the sample failed to make an appreciable difference in the performance distributions for Washington and Craig's subjects. This is particularly dis-

appointing because the PPVT-R is one of the most widely used tests of language and because the 1981 revision was developed in part to include African Americans in the standardization sample, a critical omission in the original version of the test (Dunn, 1959). In other work, Wiener, Lewnau, and Erway (1983) found that the administration of another major language test, the Test of Language Development (TOLD; Newcomer & Hammill, 1977), to 196 African American children resulted in a disproportionate clustering of their subjects below the mean, with little performance spread among subjects. This test included African Americans in the standardization sample as well, but like the PPVT-R is not suitable for renorming with African American children because it does not generate a statistically sufficient performance spread across the population.

A number of criticisms can be directed at these renorming and scoring adjustment approaches. Vaughn-Cooke (1983) noted that renorming may solve only the *technical* problem of administering a test normed on mainstream speakers to minorities. Renorming fails to address other more substantive issues and may create additional problems, such as establishing low normative values on the statistical revision of the test and then making these numbers available publicly for potentially inappropriate comparisons and interpretations. In addition, renormings do not resolve the fundamental problem of poor task validity for the minority population. Just because an instrument has been renormed does not mean that it is *valid* for the new application. Crediting alternative responses may not be equivalent to what eliciting the targeted response represented in SAE. Credits and renormings cannot consider the unknown developmental progression of the system of nonstandard forms, nor their associated linguistic and discourse contextual constraints.

Washington and Craig (1992b) observed that scoring adjustments and renormings are not diagnostically useful. The preponderance of African American subjects scoring at the low end of the distribution of a test, with little performance spread among subjects, does not achieve the statistical requirement for a test of a normal performance curve. The performance of an individual child then cannot be compared statistically with normal expectations for his or her own culture.

Washington and Craig (1994) observed that scoring adjustments typically have been developed from the study of adults and adolescents (especially from Dillard, 1972; Fasold & Wolfram, 1970; Williams & Wolfram, 1977). Adult language has a weak correspondence to child linguistic behavior (Berko, 1958; Brown, 1973). Attempts to generate child-derived data for African Americans are scarce and largely unsuccessful (e.g., Washington & Craig, 1992b) or are preliminary (e.g., Nelson, 1993). In the Nelson study, behaviors were synthesized from small numbers of children residing in diverse geographic locales and involved potentially heterogeneous dialectal variations.

In the critical absence of information about African American children's use of nonstandard forms, there is a tendency to give credit to any language difference even if it is not characteristic of AAE. A child may receive scoring credit for

any item on a test that would be spoken differently from the SAE target or that has been observed in adult usage. Vaughn-Cooke (1986) observed that this was a problem with an attempt by Hemingway, Montague, and Bradley (1981) to modify the Carrow Elicited Language Inventory (Carrow, 1974). These researchers used responses of a sample of African American subjects who produced language forms that were different from SAE, but not all of these forms were characteristic of AAE. Conceptually, it seems possible to overinterpret performances using a crediting process. Overinterpretation is as potentially dangerous to the child with a disorder as underestimation is to the child without a disorder. Both errors should be avoided.

It is not clear why these adjustments for language have been so unsuccessful. Their lack of success highlights, however, the importance of improving our understanding of the linguistic characteristics of the nonstandard forms used by African American children and of the developmental course of these distinctive behaviors. Overall, it would be efficient to avoid the creation of whole new assessment instruments if widely used tests could accommodate dialect by renorming or with a system of scoring adjustments. Unfortunately, the former method perpetuates the use of tests with poor validity for African American children, whereas the latter method is successful for phonological but not for language disorders.

New Directions

Research priorities must shift away from adjustments to existing tests toward the development of new and more appropriate assessment instruments for the analysis of language behaviors. In a guest editorial accompanying the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's (ASHA) position statement on social dialects, Vaughn-Cooke (1983) made this point clearly:

It is not an overstatement to say that a crisis exists in the area of assessment for non-mainstream speakers. Researchers, clinicians, and test developers must intensify their efforts to overcome this crisis and meet the needs of diagnosticians. Diagnosticians do not need more evaluations of the assessment problem, nor do they need more "interim" solutions. They need valid, reliable assessment tools. (p. 33)

The need for culture-fair tests is a long-standing concern and a primary research priority. Sadly, Vaughn-Cooke's statement continues to be accurate. Since 1983, the limitations of renorming and scoring adjustments have been discussed, but new assessment methods remain unavailable. Why?

The task of developing new assessment protocols appropriate to African American children is a huge and daunting undertaking. The following list is a partial rendering of the many areas that would require investigation in a fresh effort of this type and provides a flavor for the fundamental nature of many of the as yet unanswered questions.

Language Profiles There seems to be no substitute for characterizing the language behaviors of African American children in their own right. The ability

to appropriately analyze and clinically assess the communication status of children from this population is precluded without language reference profiles. Once reference profiles are available, criterion measures and norm-referenced statements can be developed.

Research into Language Acquisition The course of language acquisition is unknown and represents a serious limitation in our ability to judge appropriateness of verbal expression by age or grade, important referents for evaluating the development of linguistic skills. Most of what we know about AAE has been derived from the study of adolescents and adults, and many of these studies involved ethnographic descriptions of the language characterizing urban gang interactions. Washington and Craig (1994) provide one of the few published, child-centered descriptions of the distinctive language forms used by young African American children during connected discourse. Seymour and Seymour (1981) and Haynes and Moran (1989) have provided developmental information for phonological processes, but information of this type is unavailable for the morphosyntactic aspects of AAE. The course of acquisition of AAE forms needs intensive investigation.

Regional Influences A better understanding is required about regional influences on expressive language. A boundary must be defined between cultural and regional effects in order to determine the generalizability of new measures. It is as yet unclear which linguistic behaviors warrant the generation of local norms and which may be standardized more nationally.

Poverty More information is needed about the influences of social status variables so that the effects of poverty can be discerned from those of culture. African Americans are impoverished at disproportionate levels in the United States (Bureau of Census, 1990). It would be unfortunate and inaccurate to ascribe characteristics to the population as a whole that more accurately reflect a comingling of diverse influences, only one of which is culture.

Exposure to SAE The impact of exposure to SAE, especially the influences of the school curriculum and SAE-speaking classmates, should be investigated. What impact does explicit and systematic exposure to SAE have on the acquisition of SAE, AAE, and the continued use of nonstandard forms?

This research agenda is difficult to pursue in the absence of clear theoretical guidance. To say that AAE is not a deficient form of SAE, although a necessary first statement, is to declare what it is not, rather than what it is. Nonstandard forms used by African Americans most frequently are referred to as "dialect"; however, some argue that these characteristics are better conceptualized as a vernacular (Houston, 1970; Labov, 1970) or a language in its own right that is diverging from the parent language (i.e., SAE) (Bailey & Maynor, 1989; Taylor, 1988; Wolfram, 1987). Lack of theoretical consensus means that priorities within the research agenda for language are essentially unranked, so that all issues seem equally important to pursue. Even when trying simply to characterize the language behaviors of African American children, in the absence of theory it is unclear whether

syntactic skills should be prioritized over semantic and pragmatic ones, whether it is more critical to understand dialogue compared to narrative discourse types, and so on.

Theory would improve the researcher's ability to rank-order the many research questions and to select the most revealing methodologies. For example, the creation of a data collection tool would be significantly affected by the theoretical assumption that nonstandard forms are an English vernacular used by African American speakers primarily during informal as opposed to more formal interactions. Methodologically, the researcher would create informal data collection contexts, for example at home with a sibling rather than at school with a teacher. It is not yet clear, however, whether the development of these distinctive forms reflects the acquisition of two languages, a variation on a primary language, or the rules for code switching between linguistic styles. Overall, the magnitude of this research agenda and the lack of consensus on priorities are barriers in their own right.

A PAUCITY OF AVAILABLE RESEARCHERS

An unfortunately small number of scholars are studying the language behaviors of African American children. The need to address minority language issues is so critical that the African American scholar, unlike the majority researcher, faces pressure to develop a research program around the single issue of minority language and may be less able to determine individually the scope of his or her own research program. This pressure is unusual and differs from that of the majority scholar who is more free to develop and pursue a unique line of research. Even if all minority scholars direct their research programs toward this single issue, there are not enough African American scholars to answer all of the questions entailed by this research agenda in a timely fashion. Only 4% of the members of ASHA are minorities of any type, and fewer than 1% of Ph.D.s are minorities (Harris, Logemann, & Scott, 1994). Of course, not all minorities holding doctorates conduct research as a primary activity.

A small number of majority investigators are actively pursuing research programs with African American children, as well. There are some limits, however, on the kinds of answers these researchers can determine. Most obviously, access to the population and interpretation of the data obtained outside of the context of cultural membership are two of the aspects that are profoundly affected. The former can be addressed through collaborations. Ways to address the latter are less clear.

Perhaps the majority researcher can contribute most usefully to the language research agenda by focusing on the identification and description of regularities in the discourse of African American children. Underlying explanations for the rules governing these patterns then may best be made by African American scholars. All researchers of child language, regardless of culture, are sensitive to the

distinction between description and interpretation. As adults, for example, we are inherently restricted in our ability to ascribe intent to the patterns we see operating in children's discourse. As a result, we tend to be conservative when interpreting behavioral regularities. The majority researcher must be similarly cautious in interpreting the behavior of children from another culture. The identification and description of linguistic regularities is a huge task. If this task is pursued by majority as well as minority scholars, it can be accomplished.

CREATING INFORMATIVE RESEARCH DESIGNS

Any new investigation operating within an established theoretical framework benefits from consensus on both a prioritized set of research questions and the methodologies suitable for pursuing pertinent answers. The shortage of valid information about the language of African American children and of undergirding theory means that there is little guidance available for the researcher. Current methods still reflect those developed for the study of children who are speakers of SAE. Which of these methods need to be reframed, and how?

The following issues address a set of decision areas for the investigator approaching the study of the language of African American children. For discussion purposes, these issues are broadly grouped in terms of subject selection and of data collection and reduction decisions.

Subject Issues

Subject selection procedures could be improved in a number of ways, such as ensuring that the subject sample is representative of the population as a whole and assessing the effects of socioeconomic status and of cognition.

Representativeness For appropriate generalizations to be made, subject samples must be representative of the larger population as a whole. It is not clear how to ensure representativeness when studying the language behaviors of African American children. Researchers addressing minority language issues must, like other child language researchers, determine who constitute representative subjects. Are there two subsets, one comprising African American children, or are there only those who are known dialect users? Similarly, who constitute the most informative control groups? Washington and Craig (1994) found that percentages of utterances coding at least one nonstandard form varied widely, from 0% to 39%, in a sample of 45 typically developing preschoolers from low-income urban homes. Because the variables governing this heterogeneity remain unknown, it is unclear how variations in dialect use should be managed in designing research strategies. Should empirical designs hold constant levels of dialect use between subject and control groups? Alternatively, other variables may be just as critical and unique to interpreting the performance outcomes of this population.

In addition to reporting subject selection criteria, language studies usually provide some standard descriptive information. Most child language studies have

a developmental reference point such as chronological age or grade. When more information is available concerning the developmental milestones associated with the acquisition of AAE, the size of this unit of analysis should become obvious (e.g., a 6-month age span or a grade level).

Socioeconomic Status Socioeconomic status (SES) is another likely candidate for required inclusion in subject description protocols, as well as a subject selection variable. There is a rich body of literature showing that the language performances of children from lower SES homes are quantitatively different from those of children from middle-class homes (Howard, Hoops, & McKinnon, 1970; McCarthy, 1954; Shriner & Miner, 1968; Templin, 1957). Interestingly, however, not all reported performance differences have been in the direction of poorer outcomes. Entwisle (1968) found more advanced word association skills, suggestive of larger and richer lexicons, in both African Americans and Anglo-Americans living in slums than in their suburban peers. It is premature and probably incorrect to assume that the system of spoken language of poor African American children is not well developed. Socioeconomic status may affect the numbers of nonstandard forms used by African American children (Ratusnik & Koenigsnecht, 1976a) and also other major aspects of language production, but at this time it is unclear to what extent or in which way.

The effects of impoverished environments are not well understood and present a highly complex set of planning and interpretation issues. Language differences may be affected by lack of exposure to certain types of information and life experiences, as well as a tendency to preserve the linguistic status quo within communities because less affluent families tend to stay and not relocate as many middle-class families do because of job changes and career advancement. As a result, poor communities may not experience natural pressures for change because individuals do not come in contact with the language and cultures of others.

Furthermore, information about the language of middle-class African American children may be limited by observational opportunities. If children from middle-class compared with lower-class homes code-switch to a considerable degree, as suggested by Hall (1976) and Houston (1970), then factors such as the degree of structure inherent in elicitation techniques, the school setting, or the perceived status of the examiner may combine to reduce the likelihood of the middle-SES child using nonstandard forms in structured experimental language contexts.

Cognition An understanding of the child's cognition, a control variable and subject descriptor in most child language reports, is essential to interpretation of language outcomes. In particular, it is difficult to determine whether a child is presenting a language disorder when poor performance outcomes are obtained, without knowing whether the difficulties are specifically linguistic or are part of a generalized developmental delay. The planning of clinical management is profoundly affected by these interpretations. Unfortunately, there are no culturally valid intelligence tests available for African American children. As

Miller-Jones (1989) discusses, two underlying problems are the controversy over the exact nature of the mental processes examined in most standardized tests and the lack of agreement on a definition of "culture." Contextualist analyses of cognitive performance, especially cultural practice theory, propose that skills are acquired in specific learning activity contexts (Cole, Gay, Glick, & Sharp, 1971; Cole & Scribner, 1973; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Accordingly, culture influences cognition by determining the kinds of activities in which an individual typically engages and, consequently, the kinds of life experiences accumulated over time. When faced with a cognitive task, the individual will interpret the nature of the task and the range of appropriate responses from his or her own history of personal experiences within a particular cultural context. The nature of the task is experienced differently by individuals from different cultures, and the effects on performance may be profound.

Major tests of cognitive abilities were developed and standardized for use with white, SAE-speaking Americans. Unfortunately, these tests are often used to assess the cognitive abilities of children who are not part of that culture. At least two of these widely used tests seem technically adequate for assessment purposes in that African Americans do not cluster disproportionately at the low end of the performance scale. Ratusnik and Koenigsknecht (1976b) examined the performances of 4- and 5-year-old African American children and white children from low- and from middle-SES sections of metropolitan Chicago on the 1972 revision of the Columbia Mental Maturity Scale (CMMS; Burgemeister, Blum, & Lorge, 1972). The 1972 revision included children from different cultural backgrounds, SES, and urban or rural settings. Ratusnik and Koenigsknecht found that the children from middle-SES communities performed better than those from low-SES homes, regardless of race. They found no differences between African American and white children from similar SES backgrounds on the CMMS for other variables of interest, including gender of subjects and race of clinician.

The Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (K-ABC; Kaufman & Kaufman, 1983) is another test widely used to assess cognition and achievement. Although African Americans score lower than whites (Lamley & Rust, 1986), only specific subtests are problematic (Willson, Nolan, Reynolds, & Kamphaus, 1989). In contrast to subtests such as the Gestalt Closure Subtest, Willson et al. found that the Triangles subtest contained only two statistically biased items, one affecting the performance of African Americans and one that of whites.

The Triangles subtest of the K-ABC and the CMMS may be adequate in a technical sense for evaluating the cognitive skills of African American children. Developed as they were for children from the white, SAE-speaking segment of American culture, their validity for evaluating children raised in other cultural contexts remains questionable.

Summary and Potential Directions Considerable research is necessary to determine the most appropriate subject selection criteria to study the language behaviors of African American children. Gender and birth order are other variables

that can have a potential impact on the language behaviors of any young child, but no information is currently available about their effects on the nonstandard forms used by African American children. As yet there is no consensus on basic subject selection criteria or their descriptors when designing language research or when disseminating outcomes in research reports.

For researchers facing subject selection and description decisions, there are, however, some methodological possibilities worth pursuing. First, it seems important to determine within any subject sample the extent to which subjects are dialect users. Washington and Craig (1994) reported that the percentage of frequencies of utterances containing at least one AAE form varied widely across their subjects. It may be important to characterize subjects in terms of their level of AAE use, especially as Craig and Washington (1994, 1995) have proposed that high-level dialect users are more linguistically advanced than children of comparable SES and gender who use few dialectal forms. Control groups then could be language matched for levels of AAE in addition to other normal developmental characteristics, rather than on the basis of potentially invalid test scores or other devices borrowed from research protocols generated for SAE-speaking children.

In addition, as long as it remains unclear which variables SES affects and how it affects performance outcomes, subjects should be matched for SES and an SES comparison should be included in research designs whenever possible. Over time this literature will help tease apart the effects of poverty from those of culture. Similarly, if researchers routinely include one of the statistically unbiased cognitive measurements, over time these also may provide stronger normative statements in their own right, insights into tasks that are culturally facilitative and those that are not, and directions for the development of new child-centered cognitive measures for African Americans.

Data Collection and Scoring Issues

Like subject selection and description issues, data collection and scoring procedures could be improved in a number of ways. The race of the examiner, the nature of the data elicitation context, and the difficulties involved in studying linguistic structure when the AAE forms remain poorly understood are discussed in the following sections.

Data Collection Two important decisions face language researchers sampling the spoken language abilities of African American children. The first relates to the race of the examiner. Who should collect the data with African American children? Holding race constant across participants has merit when so many methodological issues have yet to be resolved. Race eventually may be only part of the issue, however, and a shared linguistic system and a shared culture may pose additional constraints on examiner qualifications.

With so few African American clinicians and researchers, ultimately we may need to establish performance expectations for children with examiners of different races and cultures. It may simply be impractical to meet the clinical and

educational needs of this increasing segment of the U.S. society if only African American examiners undertake these tasks. It seems important now to characterize the linguistic behaviors of African American children and to establish developmental reference profiles in the context of shared race, but practical requirements may then mandate a next step, which is to define expectations for language behavior in cross-racial interactive contexts. For example, my colleague Julie Washington and I described our preschoolers' dialectal forms during dialogues with African American female examiners. To translate these data into clinical and educational applications, it is important to determine how the frequencies of occurrence and types of forms vary when the examiner is SAE speaking and white. For preschoolers, dialect use may vary little with changes in race and culture of examiner. However, dialect use may vary significantly with increases in chronological age and exposure to SAE.

The nature of the language-elicitation task itself is a second data collection issue requiring thoughtful consideration. Structured elicitations constrain the types of responses from children that are judged to be appropriate or inappropriate. Structured elicitations would be inappropriate for the study of African American children's language if the task constraints originated in protocols designed to evaluate SAE-speaking white children—in other words, children of a different culture. Specific task constraints may be different for children from different cultures raised with different life experiences.

Low-structure elicitations, such as language sampling during free play, are more spontaneous and under the child's control, placing fewer externally defined constraints on the child's linguistic behaviors. With so many issues unresolved at this time, language sampling tasks have considerable merit for characterizing the natural language behaviors of young children. In addition, free-play contexts allow the child to determine the pace of the activity. Miller-Jones (1989) observed that, unlike white children, African American children evidence superior performances on tasks involving multiple changes in format. He hypothesizes that this may relate to the ambient noise and shifting attentional demands that typify urban living, the primary community for African Americans.

Data Coding African American English affects morphosyntax in primary ways. This presents a special challenge to the coding of language samples because most taxonomies are morphological or syntactic or both in nature and would be influenced by the as-yet-unknown effects of the nonstandard (morphosyntactic) forms. Mean length of utterance (MLU), for example, is a measure widely used in language research with young children for matching the expressive skills of subjects. A number of African American forms include and exclude morphemes based on principles that remain poorly understood. For example, an African American child might say either "the teacher she's goin' up here" or "the teacher goin' up here." The first sentence consists of a subject-noun phrase and a pronoun, both referencing the same person, but the second uses only the noun phrase. The appositive pronoun form is an example of including forms in some instances and

not in others. Any morpheme count like that involved in MLU would vary depending on the numbers of these additions and deletions in a sample.

Having descriptive reference profiles and normative statements of African American children's use of nonstandard forms would help us distinguish dialect from language disorder. Until this information is available, however, assessment methods that use units of analysis larger than the morpheme are advantageous. The following examples (from Craig & Washington, 1994) reveal how complex some of our preschoolers' sentences were and how this was obvious regardless of whether a nonstandard morphosyntactic form was operating within the utterance: "I like Michael Jordan but he ain't playin on the team no more." "When you done with this you get to play with this one?"

In a different analysis with the same preschoolers, Craig and Washington (1995) coded simple and more complex semantic relationships using a comparable technique. For this purpose, we selected prepositional phrases as a unit of analysis because, again, their complexity is largely unaffected by the morphological nature of the nonstandard forms used by African Americans and they express a relatively large and rich set of meanings. In the following example, it was possible to discern that the first utterance coded a fairly simple locative identification, whereas the second expressed a more complex spatial alignment, even though both utterances involved nonstandard forms: "it won't rain on they head"; "they holdin' onto each other."

The advantage of defining and coding scoring units like clauses and prepositions is important. These units of analysis permit the investigator to isolate the effects of one system on the other so that variables such as syntactic and semantic complexity can be described in the absence of a full knowledge of the ways in which nonstandard forms are expressed and operate. Units of analysis such as these need to be discovered for other linguistic systems so that the expressive language characteristics of African American children can be examined and reference profiles established for various linguistic skills.

Summary and Possible Directions Investigators must be cautious when designing research protocols to select methods for data collection and scoring that are not biased against children raised in the African American culture. This is more complicated than simply avoiding control groups of SAE-speaking white children or interpreting outcomes and making explicit cross-cultural comparisons to a prior literature for SAE-speaking white children. It means that methods used for collecting language data and the ways in which we approach their scoring and analysis should not be rooted in the majority culture. Although more subtle than comparing SAE control groups, it is equally problematic to study the behaviors of African American children with standards derived from the study of SAE-speaking white children. Tasks designed to examine the characteristics of African American children's morphology, syntax, semantics, and dialogue or narrative discourse skills need to probe the ways in which the elicitation techniques constrain AAE or inhibit our ability to determine its unique characteristics.

Data collection techniques that favor low-structure elicitation contexts place fewer majority culture constraints on the language data obtained. When taxonomies derived from the study of SAE-speaking white children are used, they should be considered as only a starting point and their usefulness in yielding culturally valid data should be determined in each instance. Language scoring procedures could be improved by creating taxonomies that are largely unaffected by the morphosyntactic nature of AAE.

SUMMARY

This chapter has discussed barriers to conducting language research with African American children. It has underscored the need to abandon a search for ways to adjust language instruments developed for SAE-speaking children and to refocus research inquiries on the many tasks involved in developing new, culture-fair, and valid language analysis and assessment techniques. Many unanswered questions remain.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to envision a timely response to the problems entailed in this research agenda with the small cohort of scholars involved in these endeavors and with the lack of theoretical consensus on the best ways to create revealing research heuristics. This chapter identifies a small number of critical methodological issues for immediate consideration. These are offered not as definitive recommendations but to stimulate discussion.

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