Phonological Acquisition in Young African American English Children: The Case of Final Consonant Deletion

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Abstract

African American English (AAE) is a socioethnic variety of American English spoken by many African Americans in the United States, commonly known as the dialect of the Black population. Currently, there are approximately 40 million speakers of AAE, with the largest concentrations in major cities across the country and in the rural South. Syntactic and morphological features of AAE have been studied by linguists for over 50 years, but systematic investigations into phonology and phonetic markers of AAE speech are still rare. There is a consensus that AAE is not a monolithic variety spoken by all African Americans but represents a spectrum of pronunciation features that vary in strength with geographic location of the speakers, social networks, occupation, and the local regional dialects.

This study focuses on the acquisition of AAE speech by typically developing Black children as compared to White children who speak mainstream American English (WAE). The children in both groups were of the same age ranging from 3 to 5 years and grew up in the same geographic region in the South.

Developmental literature has mostly focused on the acquisition of mainstream American English, and other varieties such as regional dialects and AAE have not been considered in defining developmental milestones or studied systematically using experimental methods. This study addresses this gap and investigates the acquisition of word-final consonants by both AAE- and WAE-speaking children. While variability in the pronunciation of final consonants is expected by all children of that age because those consonants are acquired later than word-initial consonants, our research interests are in finding systematic differences between AAE and WAE. It is the case that African Americans often do not produce final consonants, and this common AAE feature is termed "final consonant deletion." To compensate for the consonant drop, AAE speakers prolong the preceding vowel. We seek to determine whether AAE children acquire vowel lengthening as a part of phonological organization of AAE, or whether they do not differ from WAE children, being influenced by the mainstream variety.

In our acoustic phonetic study, we investigated the temporal relationship between the final consonants and vowels preceding those consonants in a common set of words recorded by the children in a laboratory setting. The acoustic variables included vowel duration, stop consonant closure duration, closure-to-vowel ratio, and stop burst characteristics. We found that AAE children, particularly boys, produced longer vowels than WAE children, which is consistent with patterns reported in the literature for adults. This indicates that AAE children acquire vowel lengthening as a part of phonological organization of their ethnic variety, even if they may not always drop the final consonant. This finding has clinical implications for assessment of speech disorders in children. It indicates that final consonant deletion, if preceded by a longer vowel, is not a developmental disorder but a typical feature of AAE that does not require therapeutic treatment.