

Nuances of Error: Considerations Relevant to African American Vernacular English and Learning to Read

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the presence of African American Vernacular English patterns in the reading of one child over a 20-week period. In this paper, I present insights from linguists about African American Vernacular English, list linguistic patterns characteristic of African American Vernacular English speakers, examine the relationship between the African American Vernacular English and learning to read, and examine the particular demands of book language. A case study of an African American Vernacular English speaking Reading Recovery student is then presented. This case study explores this student's use of both African American Vernacular English patterns and the language of books.

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It was the third time during the lesson that I had corrected Marquise for reading the word *was* for *were*. The muscles in my neck tensed as I told him the word should be *were* in a voice carefully calibrated to mask my frustration. I breathed a sigh of relief as he read the word correctly for the remainder of the story. It was last spring and Marquise was nearing the end of his Reading Recovery series of lessons and reading fluently at Level 14. He was definitely going to successfully complete the program. Yet much to my frustration, Marquise continued to make what I considered to be careless errors.

Why did this capable young reader continue to ignore the ends of words as he read despite many reminders from me? Marquise was obviously capable of doing this and would easily correct his errors when they were brought to his attention. It was during the following year that I would begin an exploration of African American Vernacular English that would help me to understand some of Marquise's deviations from the written text and enable me to better align my teaching with Marquise's development as a reader.

My interest in the intersection between language variation and reading peaked earlier that winter when one of my Latina students, Gabby, read *George the Porcupine* (Scott, Foresman and Company, 1979), a story that is part of the assessment packet used to assess children at the end of Reading Recovery. It is a simple story about a man who pets a variety of animals that come to visit him. The quality of her reading on this text would be one of the variables we would consider in making the decision about whether Gabby's Reading Recovery program should be discontinued. As many of us know, in this book Mr. Jay pets all the animals except for George, the porcupine. Mr. Jay does not pet George because of his "sharp, pointed quills." The words *pet*, *petted*, or *petting* are used eight times in this 202-word text. Gabby pronounced *pet* as *pit* consistently throughout the book despite my correcting her early in the story. Later, I learned that it is very common for Spanish language speakers to use the short *i* sound in place of the short *e* (Helman, 2005). What does this pronunciation tell us about Gabby as a reader? How should I respond to this error? Should I respond to the error if the meaning of the story is not compromised?

Discussions about language are often difficult. Language is something we routinely use to communicate but rarely reflect upon. The ways we talk are closely linked to our families and to the identities we assume. Furthermore, language is public; when we speak we reveal information about ourselves to others. It is important to consider that all ways of speaking are not equally valued in our society and these differences can become problematic in classrooms. Thus, the ways we talk about language can be controversial and warrant careful consideration.

In this paper I use the term African American Vernacular English to refer to what many people would call African American dialect or Black dialect. While the term dialect is often used to describe African American patterns of

speech, many ethnolinguists maintain that African American Vernacular English is not a dialect of English. Because languages are classified on the basis of the rules used for sound production, word pronunciation, and sentence grammar, African American Vernacular English is sometimes classified as a Niger-Congo language rather than as a form of English (Duncan, 1999). While the vocabulary of African American Vernacular English is English, many of its syntactical structures and pronunciation patterns reflect its Niger-Congo roots. In addition, the term dialect brings with it historical baggage that implies that dialectal ways of speaking are inferior to *standard* English. This is not the case. It is important to recognize the form of language I am discussing is not teenage slang or street language. African American Vernacular English has a long history of use and has been influenced by a range of linguistic and cultural factors related to enslavement, discrimination, and a long history of resilience and activism.

Joan Wynne (2002) explains that teachers often do not know how to respond to the language diversity they encounter in their classrooms. As a European American teacher I do not speak African American Vernacular English. I speak a relatively standard form of English and have often wondered whether language variations affect children's initial attempts with reading and how to support young readers who display linguistic differences. This interest has led me to read extensively within the field of linguistics and has revealed several insights about African American Vernacular English that are important for teachers. Primarily, teachers must make a distinction between reading difficulties and language differences and recognize that young readers bring the linguistic resources that they possess to texts. These linguistic resources will not always concur with the language of books. In this article I will review understandings about African American Vernacular English that have been documented by linguists, many of whom are speakers of African American Vernacular English. I will then list linguistic patterns characteristic of African American Vernacular English. Next, I will review research that examines the intersection between African American Vernacular English and learning to read and present considerations related to standard English and book language. Finally, I will present a case study of Lashanda, an African American Reading Recovery student. This case study examines Lashanda's use of both African American linguistic patterns and the language of books over the course of her 20 weeks in Reading Recovery.

AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH

In 1979, 11 African American students were diagnosed as being *linguistically handicapped* when they were assessed by a speech pathologist who failed to acknowledge the fact that their primary language was a vernacular form of

English. A judge ruled in favor of the students (Baugh, 1999) ruling that linguistic *differences* are not evidence of linguistic *deficits*. As John Baugh, a linguist at Stanford University explains, speaking divergent forms of English does not indicate pathology. African American Vernacular English is a viable, rule-governed language system.

It is important to recognize that African American Vernacular English has “unique grammatical forms that serve important communicative functions” (Baugh, 1999, p. 6). For example, the word *be* is often used in African American Vernacular English to describe something as habitually occurring. For example, “He *be* late” implies that this person is habitually late (Duncan, 1999). This habitual form of *be* has no corollary in standard English. Few people who speak only forms of standard English are aware that African American Vernacular English has communicative capabilities that do not exist in standard English.

Unfortunately, many speakers of standard English continue to harbor negative attitudes and assumptions about people who do not consistently speak standard forms of English. As Baugh explains

Many native speakers of standard English assume that nonstandard speakers are ignorant, lazy, and less capable intellectually. The common stereotype is that nonstandard English speakers, including many blacks, could speak “properly” if only they put forth sufficient effort. This view, while perhaps understandable, is woefully uninformed and simplistic. (Baugh, 1999, pp. 4-5)

Schools tend to value a narrow range of linguistic resources denying many of the language abilities of children from linguistically diverse backgrounds. This tendency of schools to privilege particular forms of language creates challenges for teachers who work with young readers. We must be wary when speakers of nonstandard languages are described as language deficient; classrooms and schools rarely provide teachers with opportunities to learn about and appreciate the rich linguistic abilities that children bring to school. In the following quote, Marie Clay uses the term *dialect* to refer to language variations including those displayed by my African American students:

A good teacher would not destroy this first language that children use so fluently. She would try to add to their speech a dialect for Standard English to be used in some oral situations and to open the world of books to them. She would leave them their first dialect for family and friends. This poses two real problems for the teacher. She must first establish communication with the child despite the fact that she may speak a strange and unusual dialect. Beyond this, she must help the

child to work in the new dialect, knowing that for most of his waking life he is going to live and speak among people who use his home dialect. (Clay, 1991, p. 71)

Baugh makes the important point that African American Vernacular English is intimately tied to children's personal and collective identities. Clay (1991) refers to a child's *nonstandard dialect* as

“. . . an intimate possession, understood by loved ones. It reflects their membership of a particular speech group and identifies them with that group. It is personal and valuable and not just an incorrect version of a standard dialect.” (p. 71)

Lisa Delpit (1998) agrees:

[Teachers] “. . . should recognize that the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity. To suggest that this form is ‘wrong’ or even worse, ignorant, is to suggest that something is wrong with the student and his or her family.” (p. 19)

Recently there has been a call for educators to learn more about language as a means to counteract the negative attitudes that often surround nonstandard language use (Adger, 1999, p. vi). This knowledge is critical to teachers who may be susceptible to making judgments about children based on mistaken notions about language differences that reveal their own negative attitudes about nonstandard forms of English. Thus, teachers often fail to help students develop an appreciation for their home language and to convey the validity and value of language varieties. It is crucial that teachers recognize and understand these differences as they work with young readers.

Linguistic Patterns of African American Vernacular English

In her work with the Los Angeles Unified School District, Norma LeMoine (1999) draws on the work of several linguists to identify linguistic features of African American Vernacular English that should be understood by teachers who work with African American students. It is crucial that teachers realize not all African American students will display these linguistic patterns; many African American students are speakers of standard English.

- There are several English pronunciations that are unfamiliar to speakers of African American Vernacular English. The *th* sound is almost nonexistent in Niger-Congo languages. The substitution of *dat* for *that* is a typical pronunciation for many speakers of African

American Vernacular English. Likewise, the *er* found at the end of many English words is also unfamiliar and may often be pronounced as *ah* rather than *er* (i.e., *brothah* rather than *brother*). Another unfamiliar pronunciation involves the *l* sound when located in the middle of words; thus *billion* becomes *bi(l)yon*.

- The African languages that are the linguistic basis for African American Vernacular English tend to follow a consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel pattern; consonant clusters do not occur at the ends of words. Some speakers of African American Vernacular English tend to delete the final consonant when two consonants occur together; thus, *left* is pronounced as *lef*, *best* as *bes*.
- Niger-Congo languages do not use two unvoiced consonants, such as *ed* to denote past tense. Speakers of African American Vernacular English often delete the *ed* endings from words as they speak or read.
- The possessive *s* is also absent in Niger-Congo languages; thus children who speak African American Vernacular English will often delete the apostrophe *s* when reading. “That’s Tymika’s pencil,” becomes “*That Tymika pencil.*”
- The final *s* is also deleted when indicating plural if used in conjunction with a number word. In Niger-Congo languages, redundancy is eliminated in the sentence “I found four *cent.*”
- As Marquise’s reading illustrates, speakers of African American Vernacular English tend to regularize verb structures. This results in “I was”, “you were”, “he was” being translated into “I was,” “you *was,*” “he *was.*”
- In addition, Labov (1972) reports that the *s* used for third person singular verbs is often deleted (i.e., *looks* becomes *look*, *works* become *work*).

African American Vernacular English and Reading

In a review of research studies that explore the effect speaking African American Vernacular English may have on learning to read, Washington and Craig (2001) explain studies that have attempted to explore this relationship have had very mixed results. While the ways African American Vernacular English affect reading remains unclear and more research is needed to begin to understand this relationship, researchers have suggested it is the attitudes of teachers about language differences that may be the most detrimental to children learning to read (Goodman & Buck, 1997; Labov, 1972):

There is no reason to believe that any nonstandard vernacular is itself an obstacle to learning. The chief problem is ignorance

of the language on the part of all concerned. (Labov, 1972, as quoted in LeMoine, 2001, p. 177)

As my experiences with Marquise illustrate, I often experienced frustration when my students made what seemed like careless mistakes. In actuality, it was my own ignorance of the language variations of my students that left me confused and without an appropriate pedagogical response that would help my students to develop as readers.

Within any given student population, a variety of language forms and languages will be brought to the classroom. As we listen closely to the language patterns of our students we begin to realize the question of whether a student's attempt to read a word is correct depends on whether that attempt fits within the range of acceptable responses that we have personally and collectively constructed. What are the boundaries for that range of responses? What should our responses as teachers be when a child's attempt matches his home language rather than the language in the book? When the child's reading reflects his home language yet maintains the meaning of the story, should we be concerned? These are critical questions for those of us who teach students who bring linguistic diversity to our classrooms.

Based on their work with miscue analysis, Goodman and Buck (1997) share some important points. First, in order for a child to orally read and understand a standard English text, that child must use the visual symbols on the page while making sense of the text by engaging the linguistic resources that he/she possesses, and then orally reading the text as written. This shift may require the deletion of an *ed* ending, substitution of a more culturally familiar word, or a shift away from standard pronunciation; however, *accurate* reading requires the child use the language of the book.

It is easy to misinterpret and fail to appreciate the complex processing that diverse language speakers apply when reading. Knowledge of the language systems that children bring to classrooms is necessary so we can interpret children's attempts at text correctly and respond to them in ways that support the child as a language learner without demeaning the language that he speaks.

A second point made by Goodman and Buck (1997) focuses our attention on the fact that children are not consistent in their application of African American Vernacular English to their reading. A student may delete an *ed* at one point in a story and include it on the next page. It may be *Mother Bear* on page 4 and *Mama Bear* on page 6. Studies cited by Goodman and Buck indicate language variation in reading does not correspond to clearly identifiable patterns. Rather, most children switch between their home languages and the language of the texts readily and with fluency.

THE DEMANDS OF BOOK LANGUAGE

Expecting African American Vernacular English speakers and other home language speakers to become competent speakers and readers of standard English reveals a systematic preference in our culture for standard forms of English. Standard English is not qualitatively or communicatively superior to African American Vernacular English. The dominance of standard English is a culturally constructed phenomenon intimately linked to the ways power is distributed in our society. Because the larger society expects people to be able to function in standard English and because the general public has not developed a respect and an appreciation for nonstandard forms of English, our obligation to our students must include helping them to be able to gain the linguistic resources that will allow them access to institutions of power within our society (Delpit, 1995; Rickford, 1999).

One of the languages of power that all children must learn, including children who learned forms of standard English in their homes, is the language of books. Books often use literary forms of language that differ from the language patterns used in speech. Phrases like “Once upon a time. . .,” “And when he came to the place where the wild things were. . .,” (Sendak, 1963) or “In two straight lines they broke their bread. . .” (Bemelmans, 1958) are language patterns that are found in books but rarely occur in speech unless the speaker is telling a story. Marie Clay describes learning to “talk like a book”; our use of the language we speak differs from our use of language in written form. With or without a special dialect the children’s own speech habits must be modified so that he can produce sentences like those in texts. This is particularly true if the texts are rich in literary devices (Clay, 1991, p. 77). While all children’s spoken language differs from the language of books, our challenge is intensified when children bring with them language patterns that are significantly different from the language forms they experience in texts. Following, the case study of an African American Vernacular Language speaker will be presented. This case study illustrates how children expand upon their own language resources and incorporate new language forms as they learn to read.

A CASE STUDY: LASHANDA

Last year I had the pleasure of working with a remarkable young lady named Lashanda. Lashanda was an excited young reader who moved quickly through Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery is a short-term reading intervention that serves struggling first-grade students. In Reading Recovery, a teacher devotes 30 minutes daily to each student. These sessions continue until the child’s reading abilities are commensurate with those of the other children in her class. Lashanda lives with her grandmother and her father who are both speakers of

African American Vernacular English. An examination of Lashanda's running records will reveal several instances where her home language has surfaced in her reading.

In her sixth lesson, Lashanda substituted the word *rain* for *falls*. Here, she has not only changed the wording of the sentence but has deleted the *s* that is conventionally used for third person singular verbs.

Text: Rain

Level: 2

✓	rain	✓	✓	✓
It	falls	on	my	head.

By Lesson 22, Lashanda continued to utilize African American Vernacular English, but often monitored and corrected her reading when she deviated from the text.

Text: Ben's Birthday Cake

Level: 5

✓	look/sc	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mom	looks	at	the	birthday	card.

Two lessons later, we find Lashanda still working to match her reading with the text.

Text: Hide and Seek

Level: 5

Page: 3

✓	looks/look/sc	✓	✓	✓
Dad	looked	in	the	box.

Page: 4

✓	looks/look/sc	✓	✓	✓✓
Dad	looked	in	the	chair.

Page: 5

✓	looks/look/sc	✓	✓	✓
Dad	looked	in	the	tree.

Lashanda is working hard to use the visual information on the page to match her reading to the text and she is successful. However, as we observe, this is an active process for Lashanda. Unlike speakers of standard English, Lashanda

cannot rely as much on her home language syntax to support her in this reading task. In fact, Lashanda has to actively suppress her home language syntax patterns in order to translate the ideas that she is reading into the language of books.

Over the course of her lessons, other characteristics of African American Vernacular English were evident. In Lesson 77, we find Lashanda deleting the possessive *s*; she substitutes *Duck* for *Duck's*. In Lesson 53, Lashanda regularizes the verb structure of the word *was*.

Text: The Lion's Tail

Level: 9

✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	was	✓	✓	✓
You	couldn't	find	your	tail	because	you	were	sitting	on	it.

This happens again in Lessons 66 and 86. These miscues appear to be more difficult for Lashanda to monitor and she makes no attempt to self-correct.

Text: Mr. Cricket Finds a Friend

Level: 11

✓	was	✓	✓	walking	✓	✓
They	were	too	busy	working	to	talk.

Text: Stop That Rabbit

Level: 12

✓	✓	was	bend	✓	✓
The	roses	were	bent	and	broken.

After Lashanda read "Stop That Rabbit," I chose this miscue as my teaching point. While my first inclination was to direct Lashanda's attention to the ending letters of the word, I instead chose to read the sentence back to Lashanda and ask her if it sounded "like a book." Lashanda immediately reread the sentence correctly. I then drew her attention to the final *s* and asked her to check her response to see if she was correct. We must remember that language interference miscues are not simply careless reading. These are times when children are applying their home language patterns to text rather than the language of books they are reading. Part of the process of learning to read is being able to hear, identify, and correct patterns of language that deviate from the types of language generally found in books.

While still not consistently using book language, toward the end of Reading Recovery Lashanda was providing a more sophisticated translation.

Text: Rosie at the Zoo

Level: 13

Page: 3

√	√	√	√
We	lifted	Rosie	up.

√	/l/look/sc	monkey/sc	√	√
"I	like	monkeys,"	said	Rosie.

Page: 4

√	√	√	√
We	lifted	Rosie	up.

√	lookeded/sc/look-ed/sc	√	√	√
She	looked	at	the	lion.

√ R7	walkeding/sc	√	√	√
It	walked	up	and	down,

Page: 8

√R	√	√	√	√
The	elephant	looked	at	Rosie.

The/sc	lift	√	√	/t/tr/√
It	lifted	up	its	trunk.

Wish!

WOOOSH!

Lashanda readily corrected her reading on page 3 to match the language of the book. On page 4, Lashanda made an attempt at *look* that exaggerates the *ed* ending, a self-correction with the conventional /t/, a second attempt in which she again exaggerates the /d/, and finally a return to the correct pronunciation. Because Lashanda cannot rely on her oral language patterns alone to monitor the syntax of her reading, she implements a complex series of attempts and checks before she confidently produces the correct reading. In the following line, Lashanda is again faced with another *ed* ending. This time she simultane-

ously applies both the *ed* ending and the *ing* ending and quickly self-corrects. On both of these occasions, Lashanda is searching for and exploring various pronunciations and successfully correcting her reading. As Marie Clay explains

. . . the child who does not use such inflection rules in speech is not going to be able to anticipate them in print. . . Such learning is not a matter of memorization in the preschool years. It has been shown to be a process of learning rules for forming plurals, for forming verb tenses, for relating verb forms to the person who is speaking, and for applying appropriate pronouns (Clay, 1991, p. 74).

Interestingly, however, on the last page Lashanda reads *lift* for *lifted* with no attempt at self-correction. The points made by Goodman and Buck (1997) apply well to Lashanda's reading. Lashanda is faced with the task of translating between her home language, African American Vernacular English, and the language of the book. We can observe this occurring as she works through several of the grammatical features of the text. Although in many cases she is successful in reading the book language of the text, African American Vernacular English patterns continue to reappear in her reading even in later lessons when she has clearly exhibited the ability to monitor and self-correct her reading to conform with book language. Lashanda can readily switch between her home language and the language of books; however, there continue to be times when she is enjoying and engrossed in the story that her home language enters the text uncorrected.

As with all readers, the ultimate goal for Lashanda is to construct meaning from texts and to experience reading as enjoyable and meaningful. Overcorrection of miscues that do not interfere with meaning and an over-emphasis on accuracy interferes with meaning construction and is counterproductive to helping children become accomplished readers.

CONCLUSIONS

I was very pleased with the progress Lashanda made with reading and recognize that during Reading Recovery she made substantial growth in both learning to read and in learning the language of books. When she continued to make language-based miscues in Lessons 77 and 86, I resisted the temptation to dwell on these miscues or to create drills that focus on *was/were* or *ed* endings. Lashanda is doing what we hope all good readers do—making sense of text and using the linguistic resources that she has available. It can be expected that with good teaching, strong language models, and an accepting attitude on the part of educators that Lashanda will continue to learn and utilize *book language*

conventions as she progresses through school. To expect Lashanda to produce these consistently within a 20-week span during the intervention is unrealistic. Demonstration of her ability to regularly hear, identify, and address language variations in her reading is perhaps a more reasonable goal.

It is important to realize that overcorrection of linguistic variations in oral reading actually increases the percentage of non-standard speech (Cazden, 1999; LeMoine, 1999) used by students. When teachers respond negatively to African American Vernacular English patterns through constant correction and nonacceptance, the use of these linguistic features actually increases as a means of resistance to the school's degradation of their home language (Delpit, 2002). Ironically, Delpit (1998) explains that teachers are more likely to correct reading miscues that are *dialect-related* even though these miscues rarely affect meaning. This tendency reflects a socially constructed mainstream assumption shared by many teachers about the superiority of standard English and a view of language variations as *incorrect* or *inappropriate*. These preferences for standard forms of English are extremely powerful forces in our society (Delpit, 2002).

This brings us to the distinction that Clay clearly makes concerning running records. When analyzing running records it is essential that teachers pay attention to the qualitative analysis of the running record rather than just the quantitative score. When listening to a child like Lashanda read, we must be careful to consider the significance of the errors that the child has made. I would challenge all teachers to ask themselves the following questions:

1. Does the miscue disrupt or significantly change meaning?
2. Is the child sometimes/often able to self-correct miscues that reflect his home language patterns?
3. If a child reads a particular word, inflection, or pronunciation in a way that reflects his home language, does he read that same construction in accordance with book language at another point in the story?
4. Are miscues that reflect the child's home language patterns becoming less common and are the child's attempts moving closer to book language over time?

The answers to these questions will help the teacher choose the correct response to these miscues and determine whether these miscues reflect difficulties with reading or they are merely situations in which the child utilized his/her extensive linguistic resources to make sense of text.

However, this is not to say that Reading Recovery teachers or classroom teachers can abdicate their role in supporting children in learning the language of books. There are many things we can do to support children with language

differences. Clay (1991) recommends several modifications we can make in children's instructional programs that will support children with language differences without demeaning the languages that they bring:

- Children with language differences will benefit from many opportunities to participate in one-to-one conversations. Make an extra effort to speak informally with children. For example, Reading Recovery teachers can talk with children on the way to and from Reading Recovery lessons and before and after school.
- Several times a day provide children with opportunities to talk with teachers and peers.
- One of the best ways to provide a good language model is to regularly read interesting books to the children. Classroom teachers should read to children often and engage older students to read to younger students. Reading Recovery teachers should read with children during *roaming*.
- Initially, when choosing books for children to read independently, choose books with simple, speech-like sentences; avoid complex, literary language until the child is comfortable reading simple book language.
- Finally, allow children to write about familiar topics using their home language patterns. Children's first stories often reflect their home language patterns. Value these stories and focus on the message. As Clay writes, "What the child can produce he can also anticipate" (Clay, 1991, p. 89). Opportunities for children to read their own texts that reflect their home language patterns provide children with opportunities to read fluently and comfortably. In later lessons, when children show evidence of being able to translate their reading and writing into book language, teachers can begin to move children toward using book language in their writing journals. Restating their message and asking them how it would sound in a book is often an effective means for helping children learn to manage the language of books.

African American Vernacular English is a rich linguistic resource that many children bring to classrooms. It is extremely important that we demonstrate respect for this complex language, yet also help children to develop the linguistic resources that are valued in mainstream society. As teachers, we must build upon the language abilities that our students bring to classrooms while preparing them to participate in the larger community.

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