Teaching Reading to African American Children

WHEN HOME AND SCHOOL LANGUAGE DIFFER

By Julie A. Washington and Mark S. Seidenberg

Reading depends on spoken language.* This is a simple statement with profound consequences for children whose spoken language differs from the language they are expected to read. For most children, the language skills they bring to school will support learning to read, which is mainly learning to understand their spoken language in a new form: print. However, some children's language skills differ in important ways from the classroom language variety, and teachers rarely receive sound guidance on how to enhance their literacy instruction to meet these children's needs.

Teaching reading to children whose language differs from the oral language of the classroom and from the linguistic structure of academic text adds an additional layer of complexity to reading instruction. There is a large and growing body of evidence indicating that language variation impacts reading,[1] spelling,[2] and writing[3] in predictable ways. In particular, it has been demonstrated that mismatches between the language variety spoken by many African American children in their homes and communities and the written language variety encountered in books and other text can slow the development of reading and writing.[4]

The focus of this article is the impact of one language variety, African American English (AAE), on literacy development and on teaching, assessing, and learning. Our goal is to describe aspects of instruction, curricula, and assessment that may create obstacles to literacy for African American children (compounding the effects of other factors, such as growing up in systemically under-resourced neighborhoods) and to share ways to modify instructional practices to benefit AAE speakers in significant ways.

AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH

Many African American children are *bidialectal* speakers of English. That is, they speak two varieties of English: African American English and General American English (GAE). Whereas AAE is frequently spoken in the child's home and community, GAE is used in reading, writing, educational contexts, commerce, and the media. One of the major educational linguistic tasks for school-aged African American children who speak AAE is to bridge the two varieties in order to develop strong literacy skills. Importantly, for many African American children, particularly those growing up in communities enduring chronic poverty, though GAE may

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*The exception is the case of deaf children who use a visual-gestural, rather than spoken, language.

be encountered through media, such as television, it becomes prominent upon entry into school. GAE is the medium of instruction, and in school it is learned through exposure and modeling in the classroom. Also important, not every African American child speaks AAE, although most do.[5]

The history of AAE has been fraught with social, educational, and political judgments about AAE's legitimacy and value.[6] AAE is a systematic, rule-governed variety of American English spoken by a community of speakers connected by race, culture, identity, and language. That fits the linguistic definition of a "dialect," but the term is problematic for other reasons. (See "Changing Language About Language Variation" on page 28; although we support a transition from *dialect* to *language variety* in colloquial usage because of misconceptions about dialects, we also use *dialect* occasionally in keeping with how it is defined in linguistics.) AAE has been referred to as "bad English," "poor grammar," and "ghetto" by people outside of its community of speakers. As a result, attempts to introduce AAE into classrooms or to leverage it to teach children who speak it how to read have been met with great resistance.[7] Unfortunately, these negative views of AAE sometimes become conflated with the children who speak it, and expectations for them are lowered. It is important that teachers understand that language varieties are linguistically equal, even when they are not socially equal. The social stigma surrounding varieties spoken by linguistic minorities can be compounded by race and class, but they are as linguistically valid as other dialects and highly valued by the people who speak them.

When a child who is learning English as their second (or third) language lags behind in reading English, we recognize that the learning curve is steeper because the child is learning to both speak and read a second language. We have not given this same consideration to children who use two dialects. Although AAE and GAE overlap more than two distinct languages, research has demonstrated that using two varieties can complicate learning new, language-influenced skills (i.e., reading and writing) as much as using two languages. In fact, the subtle transformations between the cultural and the general varieties of a single language may be even more difficult for young children to detect and resolve than the more obvious differences between two languages.[8] By design, curricula and instructional activities for children who are learning English take their dual language status into account. Extending these same benefits and considerations to dual variety speakers could have comparable, positive consequences for African American children.

By far the most studied variety of American English, AAE's characteristics in the five primary domains of language (morphology, phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics) have been well-documented in adults and are becoming better documented in children.[9] These investigations have demonstrated that as used by young children, AAE primarily involves variation in verb morphology, syntax, and phonology (see "Key Features of African American English" on the right). Because reading depends on spoken language, AAE is significantly implicated in learning to read.

IMPACT ON READING

The influence of AAE on reading has been a particular emphasis for research focused on school-aged African American children. Because reading depends on spoken language, AAE is an obvious candidate for understanding disparities in reading achievement

Key Features of African American English

VERB MORPHOLOGY	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Variable past tense	The *-ed* marker is variably attached to verb forms in past tense contexts.	The cow jump_ over the moon. He fix_ the broken car.
Variable plural	The *-s* marker is variably attached to nouns.	She saw three cat_ in the window. A girl puttin' some glass_ on the table to drink.
Variable third person *-s*	The *-s* marker is variably included on the verb in third-person singular contexts.	My friend want_ to buy some candy when we get to the store.
Variable possessive	The *-s* marker is variably included to mark possession, and possessive pronouns are variably marked.	I rode in my uncle_ car. They waitin' for they car.
SYNTAX		
Variable subject-verb agreement	Subject and verb do not agree in tense and number.	My friends was runnin' fast to catch the bus.
Variable inclusion of *to be* in copula (linking) and auxiliary forms	Main and auxiliary forms of the verb *to be* are variably included.	This __ my red car. They __ watchin' the girls jump rope.*
PHONOLOGY		
Consonant cluster reduction	Consonant clusters in the final position of words are reduced to one final consonant.	col_/cold fiel_/field cas_/cast
Dropped "g"	Variable inclusion of *g* in the final position of a word ending in *-ing.*	jumpin_/jumping waitin_/waiting goin_/going
Intervocalic and postvocalic positions for f/θ, v/ð, and t/θ	Following a vowel, voiceless (θ) and voiced (ð) *th* sounds in medial and final positions of words are replaced by /f/, /t/, or /v/.	wif/with wit/with ba<u>v</u>e/bathe
Prevocalic positions for d/ð	Preceding a vowel, the voiced (ð) *th* sound in initial position of words is replaced with /d/.	<u>d</u>is/this <u>d</u>em/them <u>d</u>at/that
Consonant cluster movement	The /sk/ consonant cluster is transposed, becoming /ks/.	a<u>ks</u>/ask e<u>ks</u>cape/escape

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*These examples were taken from the transcripts of child speakers of African American English. Some examples include another AAE feature in addition to the feature being highlighted. In this sentence, for example, the child deletes the auxiliary form *are* and also drops the final *g*. Production of multiple AAE features in a single sentence is common.

between African American children and their white and Asian peers. Having documented these disparities for more than 50 years, perhaps it is time to examine potential solutions—such as materials and practices that are sufficiently sensitive to the needs of AAE speakers.[10]

One key issue is the amount of dialect present in a child's language, which is referred to as *dialect density*. Dialect occurs on a continuum from low to high use. For example, children for whom dialect influences less than 10 percent of their oral language are said to have low dialect density; those for whom dialect influences 50 percent or more of their oral language have high dialect density.* Differences in density impact reading and writing in impor-

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*The percentages of use constituting high and low dialect are not absolute and can vary by region.

tant ways.[11] The higher the dialect density, the further the child's speech is from the language used in reading and writing. Simply put, *linguistic distance* influences how much instruction and practice a child is likely to need to bridge the differences between oral language at home, oral language spoken by the teacher, and the written language of books and other texts.[12] The more AAE that a child uses, the more likely that reading, writing, and spelling growth may be slowed,[13] contributing to the reading struggles of African American children in later elementary school and adolescence.[14] Challenges in learning to read are not inevitable for children who speak AAE, but greater attention to the impact of their language on reading and writing development is critical.

The culture of education demands that AAE speakers engage in additional language learning compared with GAE speakers.

Changing Language About Language Variation

AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH IS A VARIETY OF SPOKEN ENGLISH—BUT WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

Many people think there is one "real" version of English, and dialects are imperfect versions of it. This is far from the truth. For linguists, *dialect* has a precise meaning: it is a version of a language spoken by a group of people distinguished by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, and/or geographic region. If the population speaking a language is sufficiently large and diverse, multiple varieties—dialects—will emerge. By this definition, African American English (AAE) is a dialect of English. Fifty years ago, the first thorough linguistic analyses of AAE established that it is a fully grammatical and communicative system, like other dialects of English and in other languages. This was a strong refutation of previous characterizations of AAE as a limited, defective communicative code.* Rather, it is a rule-governed variety of English agreed upon and used by a community of speakers.

THE TERM *DIALECT* IS FALLING OUT OF FAVOR—BUT WHY?

The contrast between the "nonstandard" dialects spoken by subgroups and the "standard" version of a language is questionable, and the terms are slowly being replaced.

"Standard" implies that there is an ideal form. "Nonstandard" suggests "substan-

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*R. Fasold and W. Wolfram, "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect," *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* 3, no. 4 (1972): 16–49.

dard." In reality, labeling a dialect *standard* is due to convention, not linguistic superiority. The variety labeled *standard* is typically codified, taught, and used in conventional written forms, and it is very close to the variety spoken by the people who developed, codified, institutionalized, and maintained it—historically, speakers who are white, more highly educated, and of higher socioeconomic status than most speakers of other varieties. As in other languages, the "standard" version exists because it serves as a common code in settings such as education, business, and medicine. That makes it useful, not linguistically superior.

This linguistic "standard" has also been called "mainstream" English (which negatively connotes that speakers of other dialects are out of the mainstream). In this article, the term "general" American English is used to both identify this code and denote the linguistic parity between this codified variety and oral varieties, like AAE, that are used in homes and communities.

There are negative connotations of *dialect* in everyday usage, such as dialect humor.

"Dialect" has a clear meaning to linguists, but they are not the only people who use the term! *Dialect humor* refers to a way of creating humor by using language that highlights characteristics of speech that are associated with particular groups of people. Often this imitation is by people who don't speak the dialect themselves.

In everyday communication, whether something is called a "dialect" or a "language" can depend on social,

cultural, and political factors—not just linguistic facts.

Hindi and Urdu are language varieties that share many similarities (their speakers usually can understand each other), but they have different writing systems and tend to be spoken by peoples of different ethnicities who live in different regions and follow different religions. Chinese languages are the opposite case. Several languages are spoken in China, including Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hunanese. They are frequently called dialects of Chinese, but there is no single Chinese language, and so calling them "dialects" is not accurate. Even though they are spoken in the same country, they are as different from each other as languages that have the same origins but are spoken in different countries (e.g., Italian, French, and Spanish).

FACTS TO REMEMBER

- "Standard English" is not a language. It is one variety of English, and it is not linguistically superior to other varieties.
- The term *standard English* is falling into disfavor because of its negative connotations about other varieties. Similarly, the descriptor *mainstream* gives this variety an elevated status. Accordingly, *general* American English is being used instead.
- The "standard" variety in the United States is different from varieties that serve the analogous role in India, England, Australia, Ireland, and other countries with large English-speaking populations.
- Most dialects are spoken, not written, and they are used by people who have less influence on business, schools, government, and other institutions.

–J. A. W. and M. S. S.

Requiring AAE-speaking children to switch to GAE without using their linguistic strengths in AAE to bridge the two varieties represents a significant encumbrance. Children are required to demonstrate linguistic flexibility[15] at the same time that their cognitive resources are being allocated to learning the language of the classroom along with a wide array of new academic and social skills.

Some children manage these additional linguistic and social demands, but many do not. For example, AAE speakers already know how to conjugate verbs but must also learn a second set of rules for conjugation in GAE. Learning the second dialect involves discovering what is different in GAE, compared with what the child already knows in AAE. Although progress in reading is related to facility with GAE, providing the additional time and relevant opportunities to acquire knowledge of AAE and GAE differences tends not to be a priority in most schools or curricula.[†] At school entry, AAE speakers' exposure to GAE varies and typically lags behind monodialectal GAE speakers simply because their language experiences prior to school entry do not always include GAE. Analogous effects are seen in bilingual children, who need extra time and support to become fully proficient in both their home language and English. Importantly, given that both bilingual and bidialectal speakers are typically stronger in one language or variety than the other, achieving parity between the two can take considerable time.

NONLANGUAGE FACTORS

In addition to the differences between AAE and GAE, other factors contribute to the difficulty many African American children experience with academic achievement in general and reading in particular. Some factors are related to the child's immediate environment, such as socioeconomic status and family factors; other factors are related to the broader social, economic, and political context, especially educational opportunity and quality, housing security, and access to adequate nutrition and healthcare. Of these, socioeconomic status (SES) has received the most attention. The impact of reading difficulties on many aspects of emotional health and well-being have also been examined, albeit to a lesser extent.

Socioeconomic Status

Income inequality and educational inequality have been linked historically.[16] Recent analyses suggest that disparities in students' academic achievement by race and socioeconomic status have remained virtually unchanged for the past half century.[17] In the United States, income, wealth, and access to higher education are unequally distributed. Although policymakers, researchers, and others have long talked about "achievement gaps," differences in academic performance between high- and low-SES students are more accurately referred to as *opportunity gaps*. For students from lower-SES backgrounds, their achievement often does not represent their potential to learn, but it does reflect the inequality in opportunity to learn resulting from lower-quality and less-abundant educational, social, and material resources that often plague children in both urban and rural environments.

[†]Although this assertion is anecdotal, it is based on our combined 70 years of experience.
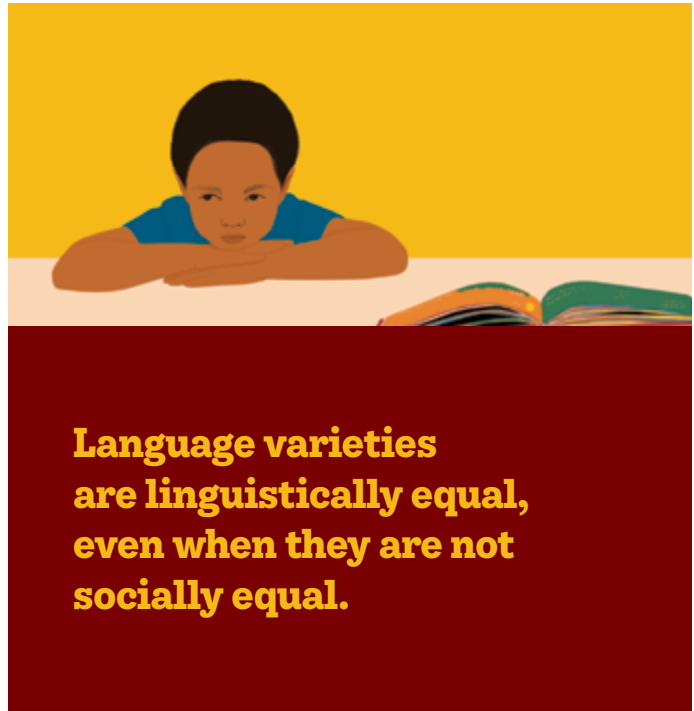
Language varieties are linguistically equal, even when they are not socially equal.

The opportunity gap has been calculated as a 1.0 standard deviation disparity in achievement between children in the highest- and lowest-SES ends of the distribution.[18] This difference represents a disparity of approximately four years' worth of learning in both math and reading, and it persists through high school. Notably, among AAE speakers, nearly 100 percent of high-density dialect users are from low-income families and communities.[19] Thus, high density of dialect seems to reflect the social isolation characteristic of neighborhood poverty[20] that limits experience with and exposure to GAE. In the classroom, this frequently translates into poor reading performance.

Emotional Health and Well-Being

The persistence of reading difficulties among most African American children, and the challenges it presents for other learning that depends on reading, often has negative effects on confidence, self-image, and willingness to engage in school.[21] Struggles with reading become aversive and can promote avoidance of the activity. Unsuccessful educational outcomes are associated with numerous negative consequences, many of which have lifelong impacts. Because these are well known, we turn to a less discussed concern.

For individuals who succeed at becoming bidialectal and managing the associated educational demands, there are other personal costs to consider. Biases surrounding the use of AAE can be very harmful to children, negatively affecting not only their motivation in the classroom but also their linguistic identities. Usage of GAE is expected and valued in educational and other institutional contexts. Effective use of GAE in such contexts involves not only learning and using GAE but also inhibition of AAE, which requires cognitive effort. Similar to bilingual speakers, bidialectal speakers engage in monitoring their own speech to evaluate its appropriateness and self-correct as needed. They may actively avoid speaking in fear of producing non-GAE expressions. They may consciously engage in mental translation from AAE to GAE before speaking, and they may compose utterances to conform

Impact on Assessment

Language variation complicates assessment among children who speak African American English (AAE) or any language variety that differs from General American English. This is a long-standing issue in both psychometric and clinical research. Psychometrically, many standardized instruments have been found to lack sensitivity when used with children from low-income families and with speakers of language varieties, making it more likely that their strengths will be overlooked. Clinically, studies focused on *language differences* versus *language disorders* have highlighted significant overlap between the linguistic features of AAE and features of language impairment, making it more likely that AAE speakers will be misdiagnosed and identified as language impaired when no impairment exists.* In both cases, psychometrically and clinically, it is important to acknowledge the shortcomings of standardized assessment instruments, which typically do not include these children in their normative samples, and thus tend to score language variants as errors.

For teachers, attention to assessment outcomes that do not capture students' strengths or weaknesses is warranted. Working with children day after day, teachers know about characteristics of their students that may not be captured by standardized assessments. Accordingly, teachers are in a good position to speak up and advocate for their students whose assessment outcomes do not appear to be representative of the students' demonstrated abilities (or needs) in the classroom.

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*H. Seymour, L. Bland-Stewart, and L. Green, "Difference Versus Deficit in Child African American English," *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* 29, no. 2 (1998): 96–108; J. Oetting and J. McDonald, "Nonmainstream Dialect Use and Specific Language Impairment," *Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research* 44, no. 1 (2001): 207–23; J. Oetting et al., "Index of Productive Syntax for Children Who Speak African American English," *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* 41, no. 3 (2010): 328–39; and K. McGregor et al., "The Use of Contrastive Analysis in Distinguishing Difference from Disorder: A Tutorial," *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology* 6, no. 3 (1997): 45–56.

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to linguistic expectations rather than speaking freely. Anecdotally, African American college students for whom switching from AAE to GAE does not occur automatically report great concern about participating in discussions in the college classroom for fear of "saying it wrong." When AAE is the speaker's culturally and personally authentic code, using GAE is an adaptation to external constraints, including pressure to assimilate. Corrections of AAE as "bad English" convey to the speaker that their cultural language (and therefore their culture) is inadequate or defective. As a result, the use of GAE may be performative rather than authentic.

Assuming different personas in differing contexts, in this case school and home, creates the "double consciousness" described by sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois.[22] Monitoring the presentation of self, which includes language, carries cognitive and emotional costs. Cognitively, it is an additional task to be performed while engaged in other activities (such as reading). Emotionally, it involves continuous self-evaluation, criticism, and correction. Research on this topic is almost nonexistent, but it is a part of the bidialectal experience that needs close attention.[23]

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHING

Speaking AAE is not inherently an obstacle to becoming a reader, but it becomes one when children's specific needs are not recognized or addressed. The issues we have reviewed suggest many supportive steps school systems and educators could take. We offer six recommendations below to help school systems and educators begin reconsidering how they engage African American children who are becoming bidialectal and learning to read. Collectively, the essential supports mainly involve (a) providing sufficient opportunities to learn; (b) using materials and practices that are effective given the students' backgrounds; and (c) eliminating the unwar-

ranted stigma associated with using AAE and instead focusing on effectively addressing the educational needs of AAE speakers in ways that build on their knowledge rather than disparaging it.

1. Expand teachers' knowledge of language variation.

As part of their professional training, prospective teachers usually are made aware of a number of cultural differences that may affect education. However, language variation and its impact on reading and instruction are rarely emphasized. Teachers who gain this background will know that language variation is a universal linguistic phenomenon and that AAE, like other dialects, differs from the codified, more general version of American English used in education but is otherwise linguistically unremarkable—it is a "standard" example of dialectal variation, so to speak. They could also gain greater understanding of how such variation affects educational goals and practices, as discussed below.

2. Expand children's knowledge of language and the world prior to school entry.

Many AAE-speaking children are less ready than their peers to benefit from reading instruction on the first day of kindergarten because they are not familiar with the school dialect. But young children are exceptionally good language learners; AAE speakers could gain greater facility with GAE in a language-intensive pre-K environment that provided rich and abundant access to both oral and written language. In 2018, only 38 percent of Black 3- to 5-year-olds were enrolled in preschool, compared with 43 percent of their white peers.[24] This disparity in early childhood education should not only be eliminated—we should invest in greatly expanding access to high-quality, language-focused preschools throughout our most under-resourced neighborhoods.

Children learn language via exposure and use, not explicit instruction. In the course of a school year, teachers whose own language backgrounds vary would provide thousands of examples of utterances in each variety and would model the ways that people who speak somewhat differently successfully communicate. Children can learn pronunciations of words and ways to conjugate verbs that differ from their own language use if given sufficient *opportunities to learn* them. Children can also gain greater awareness of conditions that govern movement between codes (e.g., their use in different settings or with different individuals), a critical skill for any child who speaks two languages or two varieties. Learning more about GAE does not require extinguishing knowledge of AAE, any more than learning a second language requires unlearning the first. Rather, it places AAE speakers on a more equal footing with children who have learned GAE in the home, while still honoring the need, and desire, to communicate with their families, communities, and friends who also use AAE.

Parents and other caregivers can also be encouraged to create additional language-learning opportunities for children outside of school. Efforts to gain families' participation will be more successful if their role in helping their children thrive is emphasized; parents and caregivers are committed to the success of their children but often do not know how to help. Reading books to children may provide a vehicle for introducing linguistic expressions and aspects of the world beyond their immediate experiences. The language in books for children includes vocabulary and grammatical constructions that differ from those in everyday speech, and thus are not available anywhere else except books.[25] "In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a leaf" is the first line of an enormously popular book for very young children,[26] but few people talk that way. Shared reading can provide a context for expanding children's world knowledge and giving them additional practice in using language. For parents who do not read well themselves or are uncomfortable with reading, educators (as well as librarians and others who engage with families) can help caregivers find books paired with audiobooks that parents and children can listen to together. The audiobooks do not take the place of books but allow parents and children to interact around the book, listening to the story together, and prompt parents when to turn the page.

Parents can also provide language-learning opportunities simply by having conversations with their children. Parents are often encouraged to talk to their children, but it is important to stress having *conversations* that are, by definition, interactive. This kind of talk encourages turn-taking, requiring input from both the caregiver and child. If teachers are concerned about how much conversation is happening outside of school, it might be helpful to send children home with conversation starters, encouraging them to be the catalysts for sparking family conversations. For example, educators could: teach or make a game at school, then send it home with children and encourage them to teach it to their families; encourage the class to ask a parent or caregiver to teach them how to make their favorite food and write down the recipe to share at school; or read a book to the class several times and then send it home with students to share. In each case, children rehearse the skill or activity at school first, making them eager to show what they have learned when they get home. Both parents and children get very excited about this kind of sharing; it removes the burden from both to figure out how to do or initiate what the teacher has instructed and makes children proud to share what they have learned.

3. Use classroom materials and practices that are effective with AAE speakers.

The curricula and support materials produced by major educational publishers assume that GAE is the language of the child and the classroom. With rare exceptions, these materials do not accommodate differences in language background or provide clear guidance about appropriate practices for children who need support to become bidialectal. Unfortunately, this means that it is left to classroom teachers to develop materials and practices on their own. The table on page 27 provides a list of the major features of AAE likely to be present in young children's language use. It is not an exhaustive list but provides some guidance regarding the language structures that children use and what they will need to learn to speak, read, and write in GAE. Especially in the case of phonology, the table highlights places where children may need extra time to learn a new phonological form because it differs significantly from their own sound system. Here, we note several key implications for instruction.

> **Learning more about General American English does not require extinguishing knowledge of African American English.**

Phonological awareness: It is commonly assumed that spoken word play, such as rhyming, develops phonological awareness (knowledge of the structure of spoken words), which facilitates later reading acquisition. The activity emphasizes perfect rhymes such as *bear-care*, which share the same rime (pronounced *air*). Perfect rhymes are less prominent in AAE word play than other types of phonological overlap, however.[27] Indeed, for any child whose language variety impacts the vowel system, the words that rhyme will differ. For example, for an African American child in the southern United States, the word *thing* may rhyme with either *king* or *rang*, depending upon how it is pronounced. Moreover, even perfect rhymes work differently because AAE phonology allows optional deletion of final consonants in some cases. For example, *cold* and *hole* can rhyme in AAE because of deletion of the final /d/. The net effect is that these activities do not always function in the same way as for GAE speakers.

Phonemic awareness: Tasks such as deciding if two words begin or end with the same sounds bring attention to phonemic structure, which is a key to learning spelling-sound correspondences. The validity of the exercise can again be vitiated by differences in pronunciation. When the task involves comparisons of initial phonemes (e.g., *ball*, *book*), AAE and GAE speakers perform comparably. In contrast, some AAE speakers may perform poorly on comparisons involving final consonants, because they are variably included in AAE. It may take AAE-speaking children as much as a year longer to master phonemic awareness in the final position of words.[28] Deciding

that *cold* and *hole* do not end in the same sound may be difficult if *cold* is usually pronounced *cole*. When children take longer to acquire such knowledge, we should not assume that they are less capable learners. We should realize that AAE speakers are learning both a new oral language variety and to identify final consonants (whereas GAE speakers only have to learn the latter).

Phonics: Learning the correspondences between the spellings of words and their pronunciations is an important step in learning to read. Instruction typically assumes that words are pronounced as in GAE. What happens if the child's pronunciations are different, as occurs for many words in AAE? For example, a teacher might write the word *gold* on the board, pronounce each of the component sounds, and model how they are blended to form *gold*. For a GAE speaker, the lesson is about the correspondences between four letters and four sounds. The lesson is different for an AAE speaker who pronounces it *gole*. AAE speakers may be able to figure out the correspondence between the teacher's pronunciation and their own, but translating between the two involves extra effort and a single spelling now corresponds to two pronunciations. Then, in a future phonics lesson, AAE-speaking children may be confused as they learn to spell the homophonic word *goal*.

We have investigated these conditions using computational models that learn phonics (i.e., spelling-sound correspondences).[29] The models first learned the GAE pronunciations of a large set of monosyllabic words. In the AAE condition, half the words had different pronunciations than in the GAE condition because of final consonant deletions. The models were then taught the correspondences between the spellings of the words and their GAE pronunciations. Although both models could learn the correspondences with sufficient experience, the AAE model took much longer because it was learning the alternative pronunciations of half the words at the same time. This model provided an explicit, mechanistic account of the impact of mismatches between the oral and written language system that children who are becoming bidialectal invariably encounter.

Reading aloud: Reading aloud is an important, widely used learning activity. Children's accuracy and fluency as they read aloud is an indicator of their progress and provides opportunities for feedback—but learning two varieties can make the task more difficult. A child who knows the AAE and GAE pronunciations of *cold* needs to produce one and suppress the other. The child may be able to generate the "correct" (for the school setting) pronunciation, but may do so more slowly, giving the appearance of lack of fluency. Researchers have found a tradeoff between rate and accuracy when African American children read aloud, such that they achieved a lower score on fluency because they slowed down

their reading in order to improve the grammatical accuracy of their oral reading.[30] In this same study, as the complexity of reading passages increased, students appeared to sacrifice reading accuracy in an effort to manage the lexical and syntactic complexity of passages. These outcomes provide evidence of the active decision making that can constrain the cognitive resources that bidialectal readers are able to apply to oral reading. In addition to reducing fluency while reading aloud, this may impact reading comprehension. (Similar results are found among children who are becoming bilingual, but their challenges with reading aloud in English tend to be better understood.) When reading aloud occurs in front of other students, the appearance of lower proficiency can be deeply embarrassing and can create aversion to reading.

Attention and effort: Children who are still learning the school dialect have to focus greater attention and effort on understanding the teacher's speech, which can detract from being able to focus on the content. In a busy classroom setting where the teacher is harder to hear or see, the impact will be greater. These difficulties can be lessened for children by providing in writing any important information that has been presented orally, as well as providing visual supports whenever possible. In addition, we encourage teachers to become more familiar with AAE in order to better comprehend and communicate with children and families who are high-density AAE speakers.[31]

4. Provide enough time on task.

Sensitivity to the time a child who is becoming bidialectal may need to master a new language skill is critically important. A child who has more to learn to reach a goal needs more time to get there.[32] It takes ample learning opportunities, sufficient practice, and, for many children, additional instruction. This requires rethinking our views about what constitutes "typical" developmental trajectories. Instead, teachers should offer as much learning time in early childhood and throughout the elementary grades as needed for African American children to enter the middle grades as confident readers and writers.

Bidialectal children may take more time to gain the knowledge that supports skilled reading, but that is a byproduct of acquiring more knowledge to connect with the knowledge that they already have.[33] Educational outcomes for these children are modulated by numerous factors, including educational quality, amount of experience using each language variety, and availability of educational resources in the home and community. Successfully addressing these initial challenges—and doing so in a way that values the home language variety—can eventually yield the many personal, social, and economic benefits of being bidialectal.

5. Respond constructively to AAE use in the classroom.

Teachers face difficult choices when students use AAE in the classroom. If AAE is viewed as "bad English," the response may be to provide a GAE correction, which conveys to children that their home language is bad. It should be possible to help children learn the classroom language variety without negative messages about AAE. With very young children, in preschool through first grade, simply providing full-form models of classroom language is helpful. For example, if a child is deleting the copula, a teacher can cheerfully produce the same utterance, making the copula salient and lengthening the child's production slightly.

Child: "This my backpack."
Teacher: "Yes, this *IS* your backpack. Let's put it away."

After several such opportunities to learn, children who were once deleting the structure will begin to include it. This is a common, effective technique used in interactions designed to enhance language development that can be easily applied in a classroom.

Based on a classroom observation, a researcher[34] provided an example of a teacher who corrects Joey, a third-grade boy, who pronounces the word *street* as *skreet* (which is a common cultural and regional variant). When Joey says *Orange Skreet* rather than *Orange Street*, his teacher replies by saying, "Not skreet. Say street." Joey responds, "Skreet." His teacher makes him read the sentence again, but Joey continues to say *skreet*. The classroom teacher corrects him again in front of the class. When the teacher finally leaves him alone, he continues to read aloud, but this time haltingly, mumbling and fearful of saying the wrong thing and being further embarrassed by the teacher. This is a great example of what *not* to do. By treating the phonological variation in the child's reading as an error, the teacher eroded Joey's self-confidence, making him likely to be more resistant to reading aloud in the future. It is an experience he will likely never forget! A more helpful approach would be for Joey's teacher to make a note of the skr/str pronunciation and include it in a whole-class language lesson without singling out Joey or any other child. This is typically a regional variant. Since Joey is doing it, there are likely others who are as well, and everyone would benefit from spending time learning the sound-phoneme mapping for this consonant cluster.

At the other extreme, many teachers are averse to commenting on children's use of their home language variety, concerned that it is not their role to encourage becoming bidialectal. The philosopher Jennifer M. Morton discusses issues of justice and ethics associated with dialect differences.[35] She acknowledges the perceived need to accommodate GAE given its importance for health, education, and employment under existing circumstances but also the threats to personal and cultural integrity that adopting GAE entails. The need for one group to adapt to the language and culture of another in order to thrive is an intrinsic form of inequality. She concludes that gaining knowledge of both GAE and AAE is nonetheless the most favorable accommodation to non-ideal circumstances.

Teachers need additional guidance and opportunities to engage in professional dialogue on this issue. Not responding to use of the home variety is an instructional choice that conveys information about linguistic expectations. The challenge is to balance the need to respect children's language and culture, while helping them gain additional facility with the classroom language variety because it serves other functions (as in learning to read).

6. Recognize the impact of bidialectal experience on comprehending and producing language.

Becoming fluent in using two languages or dialects is a positive achievement, but there are bumps along the way, such as the interference between codes that often occurs in comprehension and speaking or reading aloud. Slower responses, dysfluencies, and other "errors" occur because the child's knowledge of the two codes and how to use them is still developing, not because the child lacks the ability to learn. Many studies have demonstrated

Sensitivity to the time a child who is becoming bidialectal may need to master a new language skill is critically important.

that children who speak AAE also understand GAE. They may be slowed down in some areas where the two dialects contrast, as we noted above. With few exceptions, AAE and GAE are mutually intelligible. Given sufficient time and relevant experience, bidialectal speakers, like bilinguals, will learn to navigate the two codes in both oral language and print.

FINAL TAKEAWAYS

Most languages have several within-language varieties. An inclusive way to think about language varieties is that they occur along a continuum from those that differ little from the general variety to those that are more distant. This framing includes all communication practices across all speakers[36] and does not consider one variety to be superior. It allows us to put languages and speakers in their proper perspective as equally valued, especially as we support children learning to read and write. All children need to have the skills to make linguistic choices across contexts: formal, informal, home, school, speaking, reading, or writing. Even within these contexts, there are choices that require varied skills, such as writing a report for school, writing a thank-you card for a birthday gift, or writing a text to meet up with friends.

Above all, our shared goal should be for all children to become good readers; this requires practice with reading. For children who speak more than one language variety, learning to read requires learning the differences between their oral language and print, in addition to the inconsistencies of English orthography, making supportive instruction and abundant practice even more critical for mastering reading. The burden placed on the child can be tremendous, but it can be mitigated by effective, culturally responsive instruction and through being given the time needed to master new skills.

Finally, teaching children who are becoming bidialectal to read does not require an entirely new, separate theory of reading instruction. The same elements that have been identified for all developing

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readers to break the code are necessary for children who speak AAE as well. What differs is the delivery of these elements. Reading is a language-based task; introducing language variation affects the efficacy of many standard instructional practices and reading-related activities. The impact of language variation on reading is not an intractable issue. Adapting instruction and materials to encompass and embrace such variation reduces the load for both teachers and students, allowing them to reach their respective goals. ☐

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