African American English Features Produced by Dialect Shifting and non-Shifting Students

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Many African American students speak African American English (AAE). A large number of these students become bi-dialectal without explicit instruction as a byproduct of their exposure to Academic Classroom English (ACE), which characterizes the curriculum, instructional discourse, and text. Bi-dialectalism is advantageous for a number of reasons, including recent empirical reports for AAE-speakers of a positive association between increased use of ACE and better scores on measures of academic achievement. These recent studies have depended on feature production rate analyses. Understanding the acquisition of bi-dialectalism for AAE-speaking students will remain critically incomplete without more fine-grained analyses at the feature level. The present study examined systematic variations in feature production by AAE-speaking students who showed evidence of dialect shifting towards ACE (+S) and those who did not (–S).

Spontaneous oral language narratives were collected from 22 African American children from a mix of low and middle socioeconomic status homes. The students resided in mid-size central cities and all were kindergartners at study entry. Spontaneous oral narratives prompted by an action picture were collected as repeated measures from kindergarten through first grade. Students were sorted into +S and –S groups based on whether their rates of AAE feature production decreased or not.

Analyses revealed systematic differences between dialect shifters and nonshifters. The +S decreased their use of the most common features: zero copula (COP) and zero past (PST) over time. The –S did not vary in their use of COP over time and actually increased their use of PST. In contrast to these patterns for the common features, both groups increased their use of rare features (e.g. zero article) over time.

Discussion focuses on the importance of understanding the acquisition of bidialectalism in the broader context of growth in structural language knowledge by young children.