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ABSTRACT

This paper points out some linguistic and stylistic features of Black English as spoken by children and discusses the occurrence of particular language patterns. Examples of distinct intonation patterns, paralinguistic effects, language rhythm, and other phonological features are all considered. A statistical survey of particular age-group usage of clause and sentence complexity is included. The discussion is based on six tapes of the speech of children in grades 1-3, aged 9 to 12. (VM)

Some linguistic and stylistic features of Child Black English

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This paper is a result of a linguistic seminar[1] and further individual study which focused attention on Child Black English. In becoming acquainted with the varieties of Black English (hereafter BE) we became increasingly aware that it is a language of power and vitality. Besides exemplifying the well-known abilities of rhyming and rhythm, it is a language rich in vocabulary, much of which is not known to the mainstream community; creative in metaphor; innovative in compuounding and replete with subleties of irony and humor, which undoubtedly result from the exigencies for survival.

While revieving the literature on Black English we collected a list of terms such as the following, which are used in some types of publications to describe BE or the speakers of this variety of language: pathological, disordered, lazy speech, disadvantaged, therapy, remedial, substandard, deviant, difficulties, corrective, handicapped, impoverished, inability, limited, deprived, deficient, nonverbal. None of these terms could be applied to the texts that we have transcribed and analyzed. Above all we found that these children have adequate language with a wide range of vocabulary and ability to express themselves in their own settings.[2] Recognizing the language differences and attempting to understand the children will, hopefully, strengthen the hands of the educators who have

been stunned by the numbers of dropouts and failures in schools. From the various studies now across the nation, there is enough information available so that language exercises and lessons can be constructed that will be productive in carrying the children over to a second dialect which they will find useful in other realms of society. It should be emphasized that the language we speak of here is not the language of all Black children, i.e. those who learned mainstream English from infancy. Also it should be emphasized that there are many styles and varieties of BE, as in any other language. As one Black scholar has reminded us, unfortunately, BE has sometimes been associated only with pool-room language and this has added to the confusion and difficulty in defining BE.

When we went over the tapes the second time Smith listed examples where the investigators heard or interpreted wrong or did not understand the children. Some of these were simply not knowing the vocabulary, for example, "cause dat gran'father got jugged in his heart" (II, p. 11[3], "jug" means to stab[4]). A more subtle kind of misunderstanding involves the intricacies of Black grammar, for example, tense-aspect, referents, and styles of speech. At the beginning of one taping session a cooperative child volunteered, "One haf to say it". (II, p. 1) It appaered that the investigators did not understand that the child was trying to establish the procedure, i.e. that only one person at a time could talk on the recorder. At another recording session, the investigators misheard "it" when the child said, "Whon' chu make it go fas', so i' kin go..." (I, p. 6) meaning "Why don't you make

the recorder go faster, so our recording session will be more effective?" The investigators thought the children meant that they wanted to leave and launched out on a discussion of why the children should stay put.

A further example of misunderstanding occured when the child used a play on words which is called "opposites".[5] The children were discussing their favorite records, and when Stevie Wonder's recording was mentioned, one of the children said, "he bad, huh". (IV, p. 24) The investigator said, "No, I think he's good." The child answered exasperated, "Oh you know how I mean." A final example illustrates how the speaker of standard English has difficulty hearing the phonological arrangements of BE. The children were discussing the Jackson Five and used this name 23 times in the text. The preliminary transcription shows that the term never was heard correctly.

Throughout the studies on Black English there is reference to the distinct intonation patterns, the paralinguistic effects, and different rhythms. Nvertheless, there is not yet a very clear understanding of just how these patterns are different and what elements make up the rhythm. The following text (with an ersatz phonetic transcription) illustrates some observations which we believe are crucial in understanding the distinctive features of Black English.

I were góin' to the béach. Dén when we gót córe, we sat on the róck's, den 1

I stárted lóok, we see...we séen a whóle búnch o' múscle-dúck, um 2

I tréine' t' gét one it wz óu' o' sight...uh túrnin' aróum'. Den I 3

púlled it, den it came off, den w' Í wa' tréine' t' gét a lóok at it... 4

I thrówe' it. Den...I séen dis crab, hé was dís...dis bíg, den I 5

tól' d' téacha t' cóme hére, but she din' cóme, so dén win I wén' on th' 6

ótha' side w' dese bíg ól rócks. I séen dis...um...bédda... 7

were/with (?) better (?)

cave, dén when I called the' téacha' . . . when I called . . .uh . ..m. . . 8

uh sómebody mótha', den when néy came, ít had sómethin' whíte up in nére, 9
(there was)

an' it was móvin' thín' was góin' jus' like that. 10

(conversation: teacher, children--sea flowers, crab) 11

Den, den. . . when Í seen nát. . . Dat thín' was góin'. . .bé was goin' 12

fás'. . .n' . . . I was rúnning. . .n' dis líddler cr'. . . Dis líddle 13

thín'. . . déy was hóppin' an' flýin' aróun' . . . n' wálkin' on th' rócks, 14

...mos'ly éverybody got scared but cép...Wé din' rún awáy from 'em, 15

dén...when Í was góin' to gét s' . . .when I wz góin' in the wáter. . . 16

(silent pulse-beat) lóok for mé some sán'crábs I wen't déeper, den we 17
to (?)

The canonical form of the syllable in Black English is strongly a CV pattern. Previous studies have described the deletion of final consonants such as the stops and /-t/ and /-d/ and /-r/ and the reduction of final clusters such as -st, -ft, -kt, -ld to a single consonant. When a syllable does end in a consonant there is a tendency for the consonant to carry over and begin the next syllable. For example "get a look" is syllabically divided into /ge.ta.look/; "all the" /a.lə/; "cause I" /ka.zai/; "down there" /dau.ner/; "than that" /den.nat/ or /de.nat/; "trying to" /trai.na/.[6] This strong tendency toward the CV structure influences sound change, as is heard in a phrase "was this, this big" (line 5 above text). The final -s of "was" makes the following /d/ of /dis/ "this" sound affricated and can be easily misheard as "was just dis big".

While the rhythm of SE (Standard English) has been described as stress-timed, BE should be described as syllable-timed,[7] with a fairly even beat: /ᴗ/ᴗ/ᴗ/. Some stresses are stronger than others, and the strong ones have a tendency toward higher pitch in rhythmic cadences. Occasionally there occur two stresses continguously, for example in line 2 "a whóle búnch"; line 6 "t' cóme hére"; and line 7 "dese bíg ól' rócks". It is possible that these occur under certain syntactic and semantic circumstances, such as emphasis, quotation, and description. They usually occur in the final position of a rhythmic group.

The pulsating beat is maintained by what goes in between these strong and less-strong stresses in measured rhythm. Function words usually occur

in these spots and these morphemes are articulated in various degrees. They may even be phonologically deleted and occur as "silence" but with the pulsating rhythm maintained. In the text above where the deletion seemed especially apparent, we have tried to indicate it by spelling. Thus, when morphemes such as "was, when, to, the, with" are phonologically diminished, we have spelled them, respectively: wz (line 3) win (line 2) and w' (line 4) t' (line 3), th' (line 6), w' (line 7). For the interpretation of diminished or silent morphemes such as 'w' , "when" (line 4) or "with" (line 7), we have depended upon native speakers and phonetic cues surrounding the contiguous elements. When silence occurs, as in line 17, we have indicated it by ( ), and in this text have labelled it "silent pulse-beat". Partial deletion of a phrase may occur as in 'over to my house' /o' m' house/ (V, p. 5). Function words of more than one syllable are reduced in order to keep the beat rhythmical: didn't /din' /, except /sep/, supposed /pos/. Careful attention to this silent pulse-beat will show the difference between such items as the following where tense is involved. "He'll stop it" and "He stopped it" sound very much alike because of the deletion of final consonant /l/ and reduction of the consonant cluster /-pt/ to /-p/. The pulse-beat indicates the difference: /he ( ) stop it / and /he stop ( ) it /.

Other morphemes that occur in these rhythmic spots are: will ('ll) /ɔ/, could /ku/, of /ə/. These delated entities might be called "silent morphemes" but they should be considered in the grammar as valid; this

is not grammatical deletion but phonological deletion with a grammatical pulse-beat. This might explain the apparently aberrant behavior of some morphemes which have battled grammarians. For example, Lot lin speaks of the optionality of the infinitival to. Schotta gives examples of the "absence" of the article.

In analyzing pulsation features, one must distinguish between these and hesitation phenomenon. In the case of the latter, the rhythm is broken, however soon recovered. An example of a hesitation pause which wasn't recognized in our first rough transcription gave us a peculiar grammatical form: "he got blowed his head off..." (H p. 3). Listening carefully and checking with Smith revealed that there was a hesitation pause following the 'got', where the child changed his mind and started a new structure.

In a study of Black preaching style, Rosenberg (p. 76) maintains that the over-riding influence in the style is not language but rhythm. One can postulate that in general, the language of BE carries a high priority in rhythm and that even in the selection of words, rhythm takes precedence. The consequences on syntax are inevitable.

We do not consider this to be a complete nor a final statement on the suprasegmentals of BE. However, enough of these observations are indisputable, and the implications, for example, in learning to read should be of interest to educators. During the course of our investigation, one of the parents wanted to discuss the problem of "breathing", which,

he believed, interfered with his children's learning to read. This was a naive, but extremely insightful observation on the phenomenon which we have discussed here, even though tentatively.

Regarding other phonological features, the children used structures described elsewhere in BE studies in varying degrees, depending upon their grasp of SE, and with some articulations which could be acknowledged as developmental. Some of the consonant substitutions in BE are considered developmental in SE speakers, e.g. the /t/ and /v/ replacements of /θ/ and /ð/: "mouth" /mout/ and "breathe" /breav/. Some forms, however, are not described in BE studies and these should probably be considered developmental even though most of these children are 9 to 12 years of age. For example, the difficulty with /r/: "electricity" /electwicity/, "rob" /wob/, "rather" /wather/. We also recorded a fluctuation between /l/ and /r/: "Irene" /Ilene/, "playing" /prayin'/ (line 18 of above text). It should be noted here that /l/ and /r/ are a common source of interference from languages where a phonological distinction is not made, as for example in West African Ewe.[8] Difficulty with some initial consonant clusters, not characteristic of BE, could be attributed to developmental: "throwed" /thowed/, "brought" /bought/ "swim" /trwim/ (but note that /r/ is involved in these also).

Some articulations could be considered Malapropisms, not related to phonological structre in a strict sense: "detective" /pertectil/ (IV, p. 12). "nodule" /novel/ (IV, p. 13).

Phonological features which affect morphology have been discussed in studies of BE, particularly with regard to forming plurals, possessives, and the tense system. Some analogical forms which are considered child language in SE are common in adult BE: "teeth" /teeves/, "children" /childrens/, "funnier" (more funny), "the best car" (the goodest car), "threw" (throwed). Some verb forms which occur in BE are older forms from Early Modern English: clamb (climb), holp (help), and whup (whip). Some syntactical constructions might be remnants of earlier forms, e.g. the Biblical double subject, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Note that this construction also occurs in West African Hausa, "The chief he came."[9]

Stewart discusses child language in relation to archaic forms among BE speakers and among children in the Appalachian region.[10] As he points out, this is only recently recognized because child language had hardly been recorded. Neither is there much information about white child language in those earlier plantation days when the white and Black children played together and white children were entertained by the tales of Uncle Remus and the like.[11] It is consistent with linguistic principles to recognize the possibility of linguistic exchange during these encounters. Before leaving the topic of child language and BE, it might be appropriate to mention a suggested connection between baby talk and pidgin English, where the sailors might have "talked down" condescendingly to the "ignorant savages".

Grammatical analysis is complex and lengthy, and we were limited by time and data in our study. Therefore we have chosen to highlight Noun Phrases by showing the great variety and types which we found in the six tapes only. It is possible that other types could be found in a more extensive study; it is also possible that some of these could turn out to be unique or slips of the tongue.

Noun Phrases

Simple noun phrases

a solid hit
the newest routine
all the girls
all those rocks
all these white mens
some little fishes
a real little pig
a old drunk man
a steel natural comb
your little skinny head
that shrimped up chest
double teaming

Noun + noun

sea flower
blood brother
soul stuff
a vampire bite
my pellet gun
my little tent home
that big old clown head
black eye pea juice

Pronoun substitution

a little one
the biggest one in class
one little one and another big one

Appositive

a shotgun, a double-barrel
that girl, this pretty girl
we, all of us

Noun phrases with prepositional phrases

a whole bunch of souls
a little bit of beer
kind of little beads
tomorrow in the morning time
that black girl from Africa
that girl from blackest Africa
the goodest car in the world
ugly boys with marks on their face
this casket knife with a mummy on it
a trip you from (a trip away from you) (developmental)
all of them
the name of it

Possessive modifiers

the worlds greatest champion in the world
his daughter birthday party
that other monster's mouth
all Clay and Frazier's money what they won

Relative clauses

that man who got bit
this lady we seen
a mountain what you could run down and you can't even stop
a what you call it
my sister next to the biggest
a ape coming from Tarzan
that boy named Billy
Link tied on the back
the heart like worms
only little kit about my size

Our final comment on linguistic structures has to do with clause and sentence complexity. We did not try to do analysis of these structures, but did a statistical survey to make some preliminary comparisons with the language of children in similar age groups.

In analyzing structural complexity in the writing of school children and adults, Hunt used as a measuring device the T-unit or "Minimal terminable unit". He defines it as one main clause plus any subordinate clause or nonclausal structure that is attached to or embedded in it.[12]

O'Donnell, Griffin and Norris used the T-unit in their analysis of the syntax of kindergarten and elementary school children. Their investigation deals with speech and writing.

The clauses of Tape II (first half) were analyzed using the Hunt method. The results were compared to the third grade norms of the O'Donnell study:

	Words per T-unit		Sentence-combining transformations per T-unit: Rate of occurrence per 100 T-units
	Range	mean	Mean
O'Donnell 3rd	7.4-10.8	8.73	1.01
MV 3rd grade		7.27	0.86

Considering that in the O'Donnell study the discussion topic was somewhat controlled since the children retold stories seen on film (with no sound track) and that in our study extemporaneous speech was recorded, the results seem to be similar. The mean figure of words par

T-unit of utterances are well within the range of words per T-unit given by O'Donnell, et al, in their study. No individual ranges were measured in our study.

A difficulty in analyzing speech is the matter of code-switching. In the school setting where the tapes werde made the children were perhaps more aware that their speech should be "proper". Nevertheless the recorded texts evidenced many of the features of oral narrative which scholars have discussed in various genre, for example, Rosenberg, in his study of the Black preaching style; Dorson, in Negro folktales; Abrahams, Kernan, Kochman, Labov, et al concerning verbal art. Even at this young age, the children were experimenting, perhaps unwittingly, with various speech styles and forms.

One of the most significant things we noticed was the increase of paralinguistic effects when the children moved into casual style[13] and talked about things dear to their hearts, such as the Clay--Frazier fight, vampires, and girls (the boy speakers). A trait often noticed about young white males is that when they tell a story their voices are dull and expressionless. On the contrary the Black males in this study opened up all the stops when they got interested in narrating and they produced a wide variety of voice quality, expressive pitch differences, and noises.

Dorson has given, perhaps, the fullest description of paralinguistic and kinesic effects that can accompany Black narrative, and even he has not completed the description of the exceedingly rich repertoire of possibilities. His chapter on the art of Negro storytelling could easily be applied to the children's narrative in such stories as the Monsters, King Kong

(Tape I), the vampire, the rabbit party (Tape II), the Clay-Frazier fight, the Mod Squad, soul (Tape IV), okra, a back yard tent-home (Tape V). The following paralinguistic effects are all recorded in these texts: alveolar trill, bilabial trill, gasp, sigh (communicative), humming, singing la de la, snapping fingers, long consonants for effect /usssss /, vowel change for effect, additional syllable for effect "vampire" /vam.pai.ah /, chanting, laryngealization, falsetto, whispered, tremolo, emphatic stress, sudden extra-loud stress, extra-high pitch, extra-soft quality, gravelly voice, deep voice, breathy voice, quivering voice, spooky voice, mocking voice, bragging voice, threatening voice, speech mimicry (baby talk, character representation), various qualities of laughter, giggles, snickers, intonation substitute for words, "I don't know" /m̄m̄m̄m̄m̄m̄ /, and wide variety of noises, rhythmic sounds, and sound effects. These features were particularly noted in quotation passages (Kernan calls this "marking" (pp. 70, 137-143).

A description of a Black sermon would include the following (among other things): begins in normal prose style; builds up a crescendo of delivery, with marked intensity, higher pitch, and vocal effects such as tremolo; elicits significant audience response. The same description (among other things) could be given for the vampire story which the boys recorded on Tape II.

When the children were narrating, at times it was difficult to tell which child was talking when we played back the tapes. (For example, the Clay-Frazier discussion, IV, pp. 7-8). We are calling this "conversation cooperation"; different speakers fill in with the consent of the first speaker. It is almost as though the speakers were forwarded in their narration by the interjection of the listeners-faintly reminiscent of the "call and response" which the preacher and audience participate in during the sermon. This filling in by others was perfectly acceptable to the speaker-almost expected. A different athmosphere in this give-and-take response can be noted in the agonistic exchange that occurs in Playing the Dozens.

Repetition of a clause connector is common throughout the texts. It usually takes the form "Then..." or "And then..." This is not unusual in oral literature described elsewhere.[14]

One child used an introducer "Because" to begin her narrative: " 'Cause when we was goin' on the rock..." (Field Trip, p. 4). As far as we know, this is not described in discussions on BE, but Smith reminded us that it is a common introducer among Black people who feel that every time they are stopped by the authority they have to explain.

Repetition occurs often in the texts. There are precedents in Black verbal art for this repetitive, adding style, for example, in the chanted sermon and in hymn singing, where the leader gives a line

which the congregation then sings.[15]

Creative constructions and metaphors occur in the children's speech. On the beach trip a youngster saw piles of muscles and called it a muscle-dump (line 2 of above text). In discussing boxing, the boys described one unfortunate as "pregnant in his lips" (II p. 18). They carry on the tradition of the Black "bold spirit for word usage" as Dorson expressed it (p. 23).

In the language project started last year at the Monte Vista school[1] the teachers have introduced the terms "everyday talk" and "school talk".[16] The children have understood and accepted this concept remarkably well. One little girl, while working with various language forms, told a teacher, "I'm gonna dress up this sentence for you." At the beginning of one of the taping sessions, the investigator wanted to clarify which variety of language he wanted to record, "Do you think I'm looking for school talk or everyday talk ? " The boys answered, "...everyday talk!" and then one little boy, with a twinkle in his eye, said, "I talk ev'ry day!"

Footnotes

[1] Six tapes were recorded and preliminary transcriptions were made by the students in a graduate seminar conducted at California State College at Fullerton: Fernando Canedo, Laila Fiege-Kollmann, Michael Kohne, Mary Sanchez, Ingeborg Stotz, Sandra Ward, Katherine Watson, and Rudolph Wilkins. The tapes were recorded in collaboration with the teachers of the Language Development Center at the Monte Vista Elementary School in Santa Ana, California. The children were in grades one to three, but most of the children recorded were 9 to 12 years old. After the seminar ended, Fiege-Kollmann continued with the analysis of the tapes and Smith, doctoral candidate at the University of California at Irvine, who is conversant in Black English, corrected the transcriptions and interpreted the difficult passages.

[2] See also Houston's observations, (1969), pp. 601-602.

[3] The figures given in parenthesis refer to the transcriptions made of the tapes. The Roman Numeral refers to the tape and the page number to the typescript.

[4] jug - See Oxford English Dictionary, where references date from 1377 and 1393, as used in the tilt or tournament, to prick or to spur (horse). See also F.G. Cassidy and R.B. LePage, Dictionary of Jamaican English, Cambridge University Press, 1967: juk - to prick, pierce,.... stab - usually done suddenly.

[5] See Labov, et al. 1968, Vol II, pp. 36, 44-45, 60, 131; Major, pp. 13-14; Abrahams, p. 262.

[6] Cf. fast speech SE (Standard English) forms: gonna<going to, and wanna<want to. However, BE lends itself more to such syllable reduction to accomodate the rhythm pattern.

[7] The English of Nigerian speakers is also described as syllable-timed, in John Spencer, The English language in West Africa, London: Longman, 1971, pp. 42 and 109.

[8] Spencer, p. 158.

[9] Spencer, p. 132, And see Riley Smith for discussion of the double subject.

[10] Steward, pp. 365-366, in Language and Poverty. Some time ago I recorded a pre-school child from Tangier Island, off the coast of Virginia, who showed the same characteristics.

[11] The first picture in Harris' tales of Uncle Remus shows a little white child in the hut of the old Negro storyteller.

[12] Hunt, p. 9.

[13] Labov says,(1969), pp. 730-731, fn. 15, "The criteria for determining the shift to casual style are contrastive changes in 'channel cues'--- pitch, volume, tempo, and rate of breathing (which includes laughter). See also Kernan with regard to paralinguistic and kinesic features which signal a change in meaning and/or otherwise communicate, pp. 70, 126, 132, 137-143.

[14] In a description of the Hausa language ofWest Africa, Abraham notes that in a narrative, there is often a long sequence of "then" clauses: "they asked

us and then we said we agreed: so they replied that...then they..." This was also a style common on Old English texts, for example, "and after two months fought Athered King and Alfred his brother against the army at Merton, and they were in two bands, and they both were put to flight, and far on in the day..." Robert A. Peters, A linguistic history of English, 1968, pp. 236-237. For other examples from African languages, see Taylor.

[15] Rosenberg, pp. 16, 252. He gives other examples from oral epics, pp. 112 ff. I remember recording a similar type of repetitive, adding style in a South American Indian language from a well-known storyteller.

[16] The terms "everyday talk" and "school talk" are used in the curriculum, Psycholinguistics Oral Language Program: A Bi-dialectal Approach: Experimental Edition, and Teacher's Manual, with 8 accompanying readers, Chicago Public Schools, 1968-1969.

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