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ABSTRACT

As part of the development of a test battery to determine proficiency in black standard and nonstandard speech, a test was devised consisting of a repetition task. Fifteen sentences in black standard and 15 in black nonstandard English were to be repeated. A black experimenter administered the test individually to 35 black kindergartners. The experimenter stopped the tape after each sentence containing a test item and asked the child to repeat the sentence. The response was scored as correct if the child repeated the test item exactly as modeled on the tape. Mean scores were 10.9 on the nonstandard and 11.3 on the standard section of the test. The reliability of Section A (non-standard) of the test was 0.49; for Section B (standard) it was 0.43. Scores of the same students on the Standard Achievement Test and its subsection on letters and sounds correlated positively and significantly with the standard section of the test. Any imbalance in favor of nonstandard had a significant negative correlation with the Stanford Achievement Test. (Author/CR)

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Research and Development Memorandum No. 101

A TEST OF PROFICIENCY IN BLACK STANDARD AND NONSTANDARD SPEECH

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Introductory Statement

The Center's mission is to improve teaching in American schools. Too many teachers still employ a didactic style aimed at filling passive students with facts. The teacher's environment often prevents him from changing his style, and may indeed drive him out of the profession. And the children of the poor typically suffer from the worst teaching.

The Center uses the resources of the behavioral sciences in pursuing its objectives. Drawing primarily upon psychology and sociology, but also upon other behavioral science disciplines, the Center has formulated programs of research, development, demonstration, and dissemination in three areas. Program 1, Teaching Effectiveness, is now developing a Model Teacher Training System that can be used to train both beginning and experienced teachers in effective teaching skills. Program 2, The Environment for Teaching, is developing models of school organization and ways of evaluating teachers that will encourage teachers to become more professional and more committed. Program 3, Teaching Students from Low-Income Areas, is developing materials and procedures for motivating both students and teachers in low-income schools.

The research reported here is part of a study in Program 3 dealing with the development of a test of standard and nonstandard Black English and its effects upon students' and teachers' attitudes toward Black English speech.

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Abstract

As part of the development of a test battery to determine proficiency in Black standard and nonstandard speech, a test was devised consisting of a repetition task. Fifteen sentences in Black standard and fifteen sentences in Black nonstandard English were to be repeated. The sentences were contained within two similar stories recorded on tape by a bidialectal speaker. A Black experimenter administered the test to 35 Black kindergarten children (18 male, 17 female) in the Spring of 1972. Tests were administered individually. The experimenter stopped the tape after each sentence containing a test item and asked the child to repeat the sentence. The response was scored as correct if the child repeated the test item exactly as modeled on the tape. Mean scores were 10.9 on the nonstandard and 11.3 on the standard section of the test, indicating a general balance between standard and nonstandard. The reliability of Section A (nonstandard) of the test was 0.49 (Cronbach α); for Section B (standard) it was 0.43. Subjects were also assigned a balance score (Section A minus Section B), which measured the dominance of nonstandard over standard. Scores of the same students on the Stanford Achievement Test and its subsection on letters and sounds correlated positively and significantly with the standard section of the test. Where there was an imbalance in favor of nonstandard there was a significant negative correlation with the Stanford Achievement Test and its subsection on letters and sounds.

A TEST OF PROFICIENCY IN BLACK STANDARD AND NONSTANDARD SPEECH

Robert L. Politzer, Mary Rhodes Hoover, and Dwight Brown

This paper reports on the experimental development of a test to measure the language proficiency of children who are speakers of Black English. The test is designed to measure the ability to speak both nonstandard and standard English. Black standard English has been defined as English that follows most of the grammatical rules of standard English but is "marked" or recognized as Black by features of pronunciation (Taylor, 1971). The test is to be used with children from kindergarten through primary grades. Eventually, this test will be combined with others already developed (Politzer & Hoover, 1972) or yet to be developed at the Center in order to form a test battery furnishing diagnostic information on the language proficiency of children who are---to varying degrees---bidialectal in Black nonstandard and standard English. Previous studies (e.g., Politzer & Hoover, 1972) have shown a significant correlation between reading ability and the awareness of the difference between standard and nonstandard patterns. This study had the purpose of determining to what extent productive ability in standard or nonstandard Black English was related to reading ability scores.

The Instrument

The test is designed to test ability in both standard and nonstandard Black English as well as the balance between the two. The task to be performed in the nonstandard section of the test is the repetition of sentences that contain specific features of nonstandard Black English. The standard part of the test requires the repetition of standard English sentences closely paralleling those found in the nonstandard section.

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Children who are speakers of Black nonstandard English will often transform standard to nonstandard in a repetition task (e.g., Labov & Cohen, 1967). This observation was confirmed by Baratz (1969), who found in addition that white middle-class children who were speakers of standard English tended to turn nonstandard features of Black English into their standard English counterparts when asked to repeat sentences given in Black nonstandard dialect. A diagnostic test assessing the language ability of Black children based on a repetition task was constructed by a team of scholars at Northwestern University. The Northwestern Syntax Screening Test, however, deals only with the ability to produce standard English and scores only the intrusion of nonstandard into standard. The construction of a test that would measure the productive ability of Black children in standard as well as in nonstandard English and the degree of balance between the two seemed the next logical step.

In order to make the format of the test appealing and interesting, it was presented in the form of two parallel stories: one an adaptation of a Black folk tale in Black nonstandard dialect and the other, also grounded in Black folklore but more widely known, in Black standard English. Both stories were recorded on tape by the same bidialectal speaker. Black standard English was marked as Black by intonation patterns and fairly minimal inclusion of Black phonological features (e.g., some "r" deletions in "start," "hammer," etc.; "l" deletions in "himself," "miles," etc.).

The stories used for the nonstandard (Section A) and standard (Section B) versions of the test are produced below. The numbers are used for comparing features of speech in the two stories.

Section A: Nonstandard

1
This here be a story.

This story 'bout High John the Conqueror.
2 3
High John might could be call a hero.
4
High John he could go to all the farms.
5
He could go where the Black people was.

This was because he was a preacher and a doctor.
6
Couldn't none of the other Black folk do that.

High John was really smart.
7
High John master wanted him to fight a Black man.

High John didn't really want to be fighting another slave like hisself.
8 9
So High John he say to hisself:
10
Master crazy.
11
Why he want me to do that?
12
I bet he be hoping we kill each other.
13
So High John he use his head to get out of fighting.

He wait til the day of the fight.

Peoples was coming from miles around.

Black folk and white folk was there.
14
Everybody get seated in they place.
15
High John he walkeded [wɔektəd] up to the master daughter.

Then he slap her.

This take so much nerve that the other slave run away and refuse to fight.

He refuse to fight anybody bad and nervy as High John.

Section B: Standard

This is a story about John Henry.

You have probably heard this story in school.
John Henry could be called a hero.

He was a worker on the railroad.
John Henry was a leader.
So he was always where the other workers were.
None of the other workers knew as many people.
John Henry's boss wanted John Henry to race a machine.

At first John Henry didn't want to do it himself.
John Henry says to himself:
The boss is crazy.
Why does he want me to do this?
I'll bet he hopes I kill myself.
But he used his hammer anyway.

He practiced til the day of the race.

People were coming from miles around.

Working folks and other folks were there.
Everybody gets settled in his seat.

John Henry picks up his hammer.
Then he walks up to his boss and tells him he's ready to start.

John Henry has so much strength that he hammers long hours til he beats the machine.

He dies at the end, though.

The grammatical features of Black nonstandard English found in Section A of the test were based on summaries of nonstandard features provided by various researchers (Bartley & Politzer, 1972; Fasold & Wolfram, 1970). Specifically, the features are the following:

1. A: This here be. Two grammatical features are combined in this item: (a) the use of invariant be to indicate continued action and emphasis and (b) the dialectal emphatic combination of this with here.

   B: This is.

2. A: might could. This feature illustrates the use of the double modals i.e., the use of two modal auxiliary verbs to modify the same verb.

   B: could.

3. A: call. deletion of final consonant (kɔl for kɔld).

   B: called.

4. A: High John he. Use of pronoun subject in addition to noun subject.

   B: John Henry.

5. A: people was. Use of singular with people.

   B: workers were.

6. A: Couldn't none. Inversion of negative.

   B: None.

7. A: High John master. Absence of possessive case.

   B: John Henry's boss.

8. A: say. Absence of marking of third person singular.

   B: says.

9. A: hisself. Analogical extension of myself, yourself to third person (hisself, theirselves).

   B: himself

10. A: Master crazy. Copula deletion.

    B: boss is crazy.

11. A: Why he? Formation of question without use of auxiliary.

    B: Why does he?

12. A: he be hoping Use of invariant be + ing form to indicate a customary action.

    B: he hopes.

13. A: use. Lack of past tense marker.

    B: used.

14. A: they. Absence of possessive case (possibly phonological deletion of final r).

    B: their.

15. A: walkeded. Hypercorrected form in which ed (əd) is added to past tense (walked).

    B: walks.

Administration of the Test

The stories were recorded on tape by a Black bidialectal speaker. A Black experimenter administered the test individually to 35 Black kindergarten children (18 males and 17 females). The experimenter played the tape of the story to each child, stopped the tape after each sentence containing a test item, and asked the child to repeat the sentence. A test item was scored as correct if the child repeated the test item (not necessarily the entire sentence containing it) as it was on the tape. Repetitions not corresponding to the tape were noted by the experimenter on the answer sheet. In order to avoid the possibility of one part of the test influencing the other, there was at least a one-week interval between the administration of the two sections of the test.

Scoring and Results

The two sections of the test (A and B) were scored separately. The maximum score for each section was 15. Means for each section of the test are as follows:

	All subjects, N=35		Male, N=18		Female, N=17	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
A (nonstandard)	10.94	2.19	11.17	2.50	10.75	1.79
B (standard)	11.31	1.90	11.67	2.09	11.00	1.84

Differences in scores between males and females were not significant. The range of scores was 15 to 6 for Section A and 15 to 7 for Section B.

In addition, a balance score (in favor of nonstandard, Section A) was computed by subtracting the standard score from the nonstandard score (A minus B). The range of these balance scores was from +4 to -4. In order to avoid negative scores the balance score was scaled on a thirty-interval range from 1 to 31 with 16 representing 0 (a neutral score) and any score higher than 16 representing imbalance in favor of nonstandard. Means for the balance score were as follows:

	All subjects, N=35		Male, N=18		Female, N=17	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Balance score	15.63	1.97	15.50	1.76	15.77	2.25

Differences between male and female scores were not significant. The reliability of each section of the test (A and B) was computed separately. Reliability for Section A of the test, measured by Coefficient Cronbach α, was .49; for Section B it was .43.

The percentage of correct responses for each test item in Sections A and B is summarized below:

	A (Nonstandard)	B (Standard)
Item 1	57%	97%
2	60	71
3	63	91
4	80	100
5	94	60
6	80	89
7	60	71
8	80	89
9	94	37
10	97	100
11	89	40
12	49	51
13	83	94
14	65	85
15	42	54

Two items of the standard test (4 and 10) were repeated correctly by all children: (4) John Henry was (no intrusion of the nonstandard pronoun + noun construction) and (10) The boss is crazy (no intrusion of the nonstandard copula deletion). The latter phenomenon---little or no intrusion of nonstandard in the case of the copula retention---has been noted by other researchers (Labov & Cohen, 1967, p. 79) and has been explained by the possibility that the copula deletion is a relatively "surface" phenomenon. Presumably in the case of such phenomena one dialect does not intrude easily upon the other, while other phenomena that lie "deeper" in the grammatical structure, especially negatives or indefinites, are more subject to change during the repetition task.

The most difficult items in the standard repetition task turned out to be No. 9 (himself repeated as hisself), No. 11 (Why does he want me to rendered Why he want me), No. 12 (he hopes became he hope) and No. 15 (he walks became he walk).

Item 15 [wɔektəd] turned out to be also the most difficult in the nonstandard section---evidently because the past walk (with deletion of ed) rather than the "hypercorrection" walkeded was the nonstandard form used regularly by most subjects. Next in order of difficulty was Item 12 (he be hoping) where typically he be hoping was replaced by he hope or he hoping. Again we must wonder whether he be hoping actually repre the correct nonstandard form. The be + ing construction is normally derived from a deletion of would or will in would or will be or is used as indication of "an event distributed intermittently in time" (Fasold & Wolfram, 1970). None of these meanings fit particularly well in the context in which Item 12 was used. Evidently the he hope or he hoping used by the children represents the correct or at least the more expected nonstandard form. In Item 1 (This here be), which was missed by 57 percent of the subjects, the "error" was in most cases not a correction to This is but rather an omission of here (This be) or an interpolation of will (This here will be, This will be). In the next most difficult item (No. 2, might could) the usual error was the expected intrusion of the standard: reduction of the double modal to a single: could be call (ed), might be call (ed). Unlike the standard section of the test, the nonstandard part contains no item answered correctly by all subjects. However, Items 10, 9, and 5 came close to getting perfect scores: Master crazy (the corresponding Item 10 on the standard section, boss is crazy, got a perfect score); hisself (here the corresponding Item 9 on the standard test, himself, was the most difficult); people was (the corresponding Item 5 on the standard test, workers were, turned out to be moderately difficult).

Correlation Between Tests and Correlations Between Tests and Reading Scores

All of the subjects to whom the experimental tests were administered had previously taken the kindergarten-level version of the Stanford Achievement Test, including the Stanford Achievement Test in Letters and Sounds. Correlations between the experimental tests and the raw scores on the Stanford Achievement Test and the Stanford Achievement Test in Letters and Sounds are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Correlation Matrix: Experimental Tests and Stanford Achievement Tests

		1	2	3	4	5
1	NSBE (Test A)	X				
2	SBE (Test B)	0.54***	X			
3	Balance Score	0.55***	-0.40**	X		
4	Stanford Achievement	0.07	0.39*	-0.36*	X	
5	Stanford Achievement in Letters and Sounds	0.02	0.42**	-0.45**	0.89***	X

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

The correlation matrix indicates that Tests A and B correlate significantly with each other. This result is not unsuspected because abilities other than proficiency in the dialects (general test-taking ability, memory, etc.) are undoubtedly reflected in the test scores. The significant positive correlation of the Stanford Achievement Test with the Stanford Achievement Test in Letters and Sounds is of course simply due to the fact that one of the tests is part of the other. In a similar way the positive relation of the balance score to Test A (nonstandard) and negative relation to Test B (standard) is the result of the way in which the balance score was established (Balance = A - B).

The important relations are, of course, represented by the correlation of the experimental tests with the Stanford Achievement Test:

1. Scores on the Nonstandard Black English (NSBE) Test do not correlate with the Stanford tests.
2. Scores on the Standard Black English (SBE) Test correlate positively with the Stanford tests.
3. Imbalance in favor of nonstandard English correlates negatively with the Stanford tests.

The results of the experimental test confirms for the kindergarten level some of the results of an experiment recently completed at the Education Study Center in Washington, D. C., with first and second grade children (Joan Baratz, personal communication, July 3, 1972). That experiment showed that predominantly standard or bidialectal speakers achieved better in a standard reading test (Lyons and Carnahan Developmental Test) than predominantly nonstandard speakers. Our experiment, however, shows no significant negative correlation of proficiency in nonstandard as such with scores on reading tests. Rather, it is the imbalance in favor of nonstandard which correlates negatively with reading achievement. This, in turn, suggests that learning of standard (rather than "unlearning" of nonstandard) is one of the possible approaches to the reading problems of those Black children who are predominantly nonstandard speakers.

* * *

One of our previous studies has shown that the ability to discriminate between standard and nonstandard correlates significantly with reading achievement (Politzer & Hoover, 1972). This study shows that ability in standard English relates positively to reading achievement, while imbalance in favor of nonstandard correlates negatively with reading ability. Both studies confirm what many scholars and educators have been stating for quite some time, namely that lack of facility in speaking standard English is a handicap in learning to read in standard English. This suggests that the learning of standard English by speakers who are dominant in nonstandard would facilitate their learning to read. It has also been suggested by some scholars (chiefly Stewart, 1969) that for these dominantly nonstandard speakers, initial reading instruction should take place in the nonstandard dialect. This suggestion, however, has been questioned for a variety of reasons (e.g., see Bailey, 1970).

The test in this experiment seems to be a useful diagnostic instrument for assessing an ability connected with reading achievement and for assigning children to a type of reading instruction that takes into account dominance in Black nonstandard English. Further refinement of the test, however, including elimination of nondiscriminatory items as well as replacement of items that may not adequately reflect Black nonstandard speech, appears to be indicated.

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