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ABSTRACT

In view of the fact that the teaching of Standard English has high educational priority in American schools, and that its use as the medium of instruction makes it a vital skill for nonstandard speakers, the present paper reports on an investigation of the Standard English performance of young children from minority groups in which Standard English is not a primary language. The investigation technique described is that of elicited imitation, whereby the child is simply asked to repeat sentences containing grammatical features observed to show variation. Previous use of this technique and its advantages and disadvantages are discussed. The test itself appears in two forms, each one containing 15 sentences taken from recordings of natural speech. It is administered individually to children whose mean age is 5.5 years, by an adult tester, and recorded. Native speakers of English should perform better on the test, and the scores should improve with age, that is, further exposure to Standard English. The results confirm these predictions, thus demonstrating the validity of the test. Specific results are given for tests given to Mexican-American and Pima children, and to Hawaiian-Creole speaking children, the results from the latter being the most detailed. (CLK)

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A Standard English Performance Measure for Young Children. The Standard English Repetition Test (SERT)[1]

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Studies of Black Vernacular English, Chicano, and other "nonstandard" varieties of English have become the concern of linguists as well as practical educators who work in communities which instruct children in standard English (SE). The effort to eliminate variations of English which are believed to be nonstandard has now largely been replaced by efforts to supplement the speech repertoire of the nonstandard speakers. For educators, adaptation to linguistic differences has assumed a new urgency in the light of recent court decisions requiring school districts to provide special programming for nonSE speakers. The effort to teach SE in American public schools continues to be a high educational priority; and the use of SE by teachers as the vehicle for instruction makes the use of SE a vital skill for nonstandard speakers.

But what are the consequences to children who display different levels of SE usage? Are specific SE instructional programs desirable? Are they effective? Before these questions can be answered, and in order to plan educational programs intelligently, we must be able to calibrate the performance of individual speakers in standard English. Only then can the correlates of language performance be established. This paper reports on a simple, economical test instrument designed to measure the standard English performance of young children. Details of its construction and psychometric characteristics are given, and illustrations of its uses provided.

The Technique of Elicited Imitation. Theoretical Considerations

The SERT (Standard English Repetition Test) uses the technique of controlled, elicited imitation, that is, the child is instructed to repeat standard English sentences which the examiner says to him. This simple and economical method is based on the assumption that a child who understands a sentence, and/or who is familiar with its syntax, phonology, and vocabulary, will be more likely to repeat the sentence accurately than one who is not.[2]

Slobin and Welsh (1973) put forward a strong argument for this assumption. They hold that a child must comprehend the meaning of the sentence in order to produce an exact repetition. If he fails to understand the semantic message or if he does not understand the syntactic constructions used in the sentence, he will not repeat the sentence accurately.

Labov (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968) used repetition tests in work with speakers of Black Vernacular English in Harlem as a device to gain additional insights into the linguistic competence of his subjects. Labov claimed that "repetition tests have a place in a school

testing program, and that they will yield a great deal of data which has never been tapped before" (Labov et al. 1968: 310). However, he cautioned against the use of repetition tests without thorough knowledge of the subjects' primary speech code. Labov discovered that the areas in which his subjects had the greatest difficulty repeating SE sentences were those parts of SE grammar which were the most different from Black Vernacular English. Sentences which were much longer but contained fewer syntactic differences presented less difficulty. This led Labov to conclude that the "limited effect of length confirms the impression that we are dealing with problems of grammatical processing, not simple additive effects of memory" (Labov et al. 1968: 315).

Repetition techniques have been used to test linguistic competency by Baratz (1969) and by Ammon (Rohwer and Ammon 1971). Though we were unaware of Ammon's work until this report was in preparation, there is a clear similarity between our arguments for repetition techniques, and indeed between the instruments themselves. However, Ammon has not presented test-retest or form-form reliability data, nor validity measures. His report centers on the use of the techniques for the study of individual syntactic constructions; our own current focus is on the calibration of language ability.

Elicited imitation, as used in SERT, may either overestimate or underestimate performance in standard English, since a variety of variables in addition to comprehension are related to the probability of accurate repetition. For instance, the length of the sentence, the difficulty, meaningfulness and serial position of the words (as well as the short term memory capacity of the child) are all factors that influence which words and how many will be repeated accurately (Jung 1968).

Slobin and Welsh describe two factors that may underestimate a child's performance level. In their work with a two year old girl, they discovered that she was unable to repeat successfully sentences which she herself had spontaneously produced earlier. They claimed this had to do with the child's intention. The child intended to say something, and put that intention into linguistic form. Once the original intention is gone, "the task can strain the child's abilities, and reveal a more limited competence than may actually be present in spontaneous speech. Thus whatever we discover in systematic problems of imitation must be taken as a conservative estimate of the child's linguistic competence." (Slobin and Welsh 1973: 490).

Alternatively the child may comprehend the meaning of the sentence but not repeat it as exactly as given. He may fill in the underlying abstract semantic-syntactic frame with lexical terms which carry an exact or similar meaning. Slobin and Welsh observed this word-substitution yet meaning-preserving behavior, and noted it as an example of what they called assimilatory deformation or recoding in short-term memory (1973: 490).[3]

Another class of responses which is somewhat similar to the assimilatory deformation responses is possible when using elicited imitation with speakers of nonstandard varieties. Such subjects may comprehend the meaning of the sentence but will repeat it back in the nonstandard code. This substituting of the nonstandard for the standard was observed

by both Baratz (1969) and Labov (Labov et al. 1968) in a study of substitutions made by Afro-American children asked to repeat SE sentences. Important information about the relationship between the standard and the non-standard codes can be obtained from such substitutions.[4]

Alternatives to elicited imitation were considered in preliminary research planning. One dealt with obtaining samples of speech from the subjects in a wide variety of circumstances, thereby yielding a large amount of data indicative of each child's performance. There are many drawbacks to such an approach, the most obvious ones being that there is no way to control the language code (standard or nonstandard) used by the subjects, and it is extremely cumbersome to score and interpret such data. Other alternatives focused on using existing test instruments, such as the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities which requires a long, difficult individual administration generally used only to assess speech deficits in a clinical setting.

In sum, it was felt that elicited imitation held sufficient promise as a technique for calibrating language usage to warrant further investigation. It provides a test easy to administer and easy to score and interpret, and which is appropriate for speakers of nonstandard varieties. The actual validity of the test has been established empirically, as is reported below. Therefore, with the reservations expressed above, the SERT can be considered as a SE performance measure, limited in time and scope, whether or not it reflects "competence" is uncertain.

Method

Description of SERT Items

As a source for item formation, recordings of natural speech of children collected in a wide variety of circumstances were used.[5] From these various sources an initial pool of 75 sentences was developed. Each sentence included at least one grammatical feature which had been observed to show variation in the speech of children using a variety of nonstandard English, e.g. the copula (Day 1972, 1973, Labov 1969, Labov et al. 1968). An attempt was made to select sentences and features of varying difficulty for children in the five to six year age range. The number of items was reduced by discarding items on the basis of (1) low correlations with total score and (2) redundancy.

The SERT in its final version consists of two forms, A and B, each having 15 sentences. The two forms differ in vocabulary items but not in grammatical structure. Each sentence contains at least one grammatical feature characteristic of standard English. Table 1 displays the SERT sentences (Forms A and B). (For a detailed analysis of the difficulty of the items, see Table 7.) Each of the features underlined in the sentences in Table 1 may be viewed as a critical marker of SE speech.

Administration Procedures

The test is administered individually by an adult tester. The session is recorded on tape. The child is told, "We are going to talk on the tape recorder so we can listen to ourselves talk." In order to establish verbal response in the presence of the recorder before the test begins and to adapt the child to the test situation, he is first

(1) a. Michael didn't come to school last week.
b. Mary didn't come to school yesterday.
(2) a. I'm not sure where the teacher is.
b. I'm not sure where my uncle is.
(3) a. I think she's in the office.
b. I think he's with my father.
(4) a. The bird was eaten by the cat.
b. The boy was beaten by his sister.
(5) a. My uncle doesn't give us lickings.
b. Our teacher doesn't give us candy.
(6) a. My mother's cleaning the house and Mary is too.
b. My brother's reading a book and Rodney is too.
(7) a. Mommy, do you know where my clothes are?
b. Teacher, do you know where my books are?
(8) a. When the radio isn't on, I can't hear it.
b. When the TV isn't on, I can't watch it.
(9) a. David doesn't want to come with us because he's watching TV.
b. Edward doesn't want to come with us because he's eating lunch.
(10)a. I went and asked Ruby if her brother's a liar.
b. I went and asked Edward if his sister's a tattletale.
(11)a. Mommy, can you tell me what that is?
b. Mommy, can you tell me what this is?
(12)a. When my mommy's not home, my sister stays with us.
b. When my daddy's not home, my grandma stays with us.
(13)a. My mommy called up my aunty last night.
b. My daddy called up his friend yesterday.
(14)a. The cat's being chased up the tree by the dog.
b. The candy's being passed out over there by the sister.
(15)a. We didn't go to the carnival because my daddy never took us.
b. We didn't go to the movies because my daddy never came home.

Table 1. SERT sentences.

shown how to operate the recorder and allowed to manipulate it. The child is instructed to say, "Go!" or his name so he can watch the recording indicator flip back and forth.

Specific test instructions are as follows. "Now I am going to say something. I want you to watch me real close, and see if you can say the same thing I say, just like I say it. Say..." and a practice sentence would follow. Only when the child correctly completes this entire sequence, including one practice sentence, is the first test sentence administered.

Results

Reliability

The two separate versions of the test, Forms A and B, have been found to be equivalent, as demonstrated by a Pearson-r of .86 in a sample of part-Hawaiian kindergarten children (mean ages 5.5 years,

N=45) who speak a variety of nonstandard English. Three-day test-retest reliabilities have also been calculated on the same sample by the same method, yielding r=.89.

Validity

Face validity The items on the test are obviously related to the construct of performance in standard English. The grammatical features are tested directly--either they are repeated correctly or they are not.

Concurrent validity A study was undertaken to determine the relationship between the SERT and the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Ability (ITPA). The ITPA is a sophisticated well-known two year to ten year-three months age range which analyzes 12 separate components of linguistic ability. The sample for the study consisted of 27 first graders taken from a Hawaiian Creole English-speaking population. The two tests were given within six months of each other. A correlation of .726 was obtained between the total SE scores on the SERT and the total raw scores on the ITPA, indicating a rather high relationship between the two tests.

Criterion validity

(1) If this test calibrates previously-acquired SE features by young children, then native-speaking SE children should perform at a higher level than non-native SE speakers, on the average.

A criterion sample group, a single kindergarten class (N=30) of SE-speaking suburban children in the western United States, was tested in the beginning of the school year. None of these children had a second language. The mean score for the group is given in Table 2. This score is sharply higher than that for any other language group thus far studied (see Tables 4 and 5), indicating criterion validity of the SERT.

Grade	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
K	30	23.89	3.60

Table 2. Mean SERT scores for SE-speaking kindergarten children in the western United States

(2) Scores should improve with age, assuming a constant exposure to standard English. One group of children speaking a nonstandard variety of English was followed longitudinally for 12 months using alternate forms for retest. This group has proceeded through kindergarten into the first grade, their teachers speak standard English; activities involving the use of SE, such as watching Sesame Street on television, are included in the day's activities; the children also watch SE television at home. Their progressive SE scores are given in Table 3. The correlation between September and May scores is .91 indicating that the relative rank of the individual child did not change as a result of the increase in the group mean.

Date	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Fall 1972	28	9.18	5.61
Spring 1973	28	13.64	6.43
Fall 1973	28	14.23	6.63

Table 3. Mean SERT scores for kindergarten children speaking a nonstandard variety of English tested in the fall, the spring and the following fall.

The pattern of improvement with age can be seen in Table 5. This progressive improvement in SERT scores is consistent with expectations for improvement in general SE performance level, and is similar to results reported by Heber, Garber, Harrington, Hoffman and Falender who administered a repetition test at three month intervals to their experimental and control group of high risk children (Heber et al. 1972).

Test Results: Mexican-American and Pima Indian Children

The test was administered to one kindergarten classroom each of Mexican-American and Pima Indian children (see Table 4). These results cannot be taken as population descriptions, but only as demonstrations of the utility of the SERT across language groups.

The Mexican-American children were drawn from a classroom of a barrio-serving school in Tucson, Arizona. The low N is due to the large number of recent immigrant children who knew no English at that time and who were thus "untestable." All children who could understand the instructions and respond minimally were reported here.

The Pima Indian children were drawn from a reservation school classroom in Southern Arizona. It should be noted that the scores which these two groups achieved are significantly lower than the scores which the native SE-speaking subjects achieved (see Table 2).

Subjects	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Mexican-American	21	12.71	7.07
Pima Indian	30	18.63	4.08

Table 4. Mean SERT scores for two groups of kindergarten children who do not speak a variety of SE as a first language.

Test Results: Hawaiian Creole English-speaking Children

The most detailed work with the SERT has been with children who speak Hawaiian Creole English (HCE), and these results will now be reported. As an introduction, a brief description of HCE is in order.

In Hawaii there is a nonprestigious form of communication popularly called Pidgin. It is usually associated with members of cultural groups of middle to low socioeconomic status. However, the term Pidgin is linguistically incorrect, and much of local speech in Hawaii is better described as part of a creole speech continuum (Reinecke 1969, 1933; Reinecke and

Tokimasa 1934; Day 1973).[6] Such a continuum is characterized by decreolization in which creole, a native language system formed as a result of languages (including a pidgin) being in contact, is in the process of losing its unique identity as a separate language. A creole speech continuum is composed of number of linguistic varieties or systems which range in their distinctiveness from the socially dominant standard language. The standard language acts as the model for decreolization because of various social phenomena which are beyond the issues of this article.[7]

HCE began to decreolize under the influence of varieties of standard English from the United States mainland. The Hawaiian Creole English speech continuum is very roughly illustrated in Figure 1. For ease of reference the term Hawaiian Creole English is used when referring to this creole speech continuum, recognizing that it is only a cover term for a number of varieties of speech.

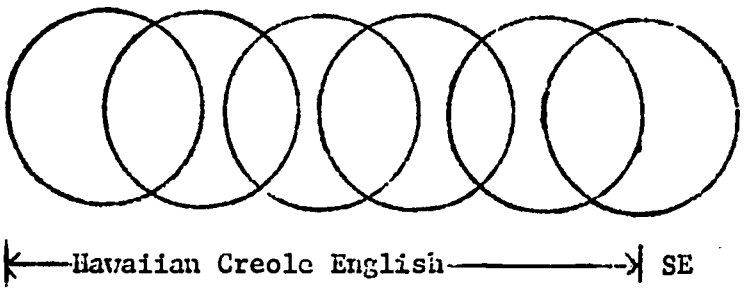

Figure 1. An idealization of the creole speech continuum in Hawaii. Each circle represents a different speech variety which is a closer approximation of SE than the one to its right.

Although HCE continues to be used by persons at many social levels, inability in SE is widely regarded as a principal factor in academic underachievement of Hawaiian-American (Polynesian descent) and other Island children.

The SERT has now been administered to a large number of HCE-speaking children. The results are given in Table 5. Each sample constitutes one separate classroom. Kindergarten and first grade children are reported separately; all tests were given during the first two months of the school year.

This large sample of HCE-speaking children (N=228) representing classrooms form a wide range in the State of Hawaii, allows assertions to be made about the population with some confidence. Most notable is the high degree of variability about the mean. Individual differences are large, giving rise to an interest in the correlates of SE performance.

Kindergarten

School number	Classification	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	suburban	20	10.75	4.54
2	suburban	25	9.30	5.07
3	rural	14	6.78	2.36
4	urban	17	7.62	4.63
5a	urban	26	9.18	5.61
5b	urban	24	10.75	5.96

First Grade

1	suburban	23	12.87	5.55
2	suburban	21	12.42	5.17
3	rural	11	11.27	4.18
4	urban	21	8.00	4.94
5a	urban	26	14.23	6.63

Table 5. SERT results from five schools in Hawaii.

Correlates of SERT Scores in NCE-speaking Children

The SERT allows calibration of SE performance and therefore inquiry into the correlates and/or determinants of SE performance. The following results are presented only as examples of the kinds of study which are now possible, not as definitive results. All of these correlations are based on a small sample of NCE-speaking children (N=26; school number 5a in Table 5) who are students in an experimental school. One-quarter of the students can be characterized as coming from middle class families, the remaining come from families which receive state financial aid. Many of the ethnic and racial groups found in Hawaii are represented, however, three-quarters of the children have some percentages of Hawaiian ancestry.

The results reported here are based on two administrations of the SERT to these kindergarten children. one in September, at the very beginning of the school year; the second in May, at the end. Thus correlations of change scores can also be examined, giving some ideas about the relationships among performance in standard English, intelligence, and family variables which influence responsiveness to school. These correlations are reported in Table 6.

The IQ scores in Table 6 are from the WPPSI,[8] also administered in September and May. It can be seen that IQ measures correlate highly with SERT scores in both administrations, and with change scores. While the various socioeconomic measures do predict to SE performance, they are less consistently correlated with change scores, except for the factors of parents working, mother working, and the degree to which the mother herself has primary responsibility for child care.

Comparison of Test Results: NCE-speaking Children with SE-speaking Children and Sentence Difficulty

It is informative to compare the SERT scores of kindergarten children

who speak SE with those kindergarten children who speak NCE. The sentences were ranked according to their difficulty for two groups. Table 7 shows that there is not only a difference between the mean performances with the SE-speaking children scoring higher, but that there is a rather large divergence in sentence difficulty between the two groups. This difference is important, for it demonstrates that the NCE-speaking subjects are influenced in their responses by their primary speech code, and are not merely lagging behind in their standard English language development. If NCE subjects employed a code which was simply "broken English" or "substandard English," then we would expect to find the same ranking which the SE-speaking subjects obtained but with less high percentages of correct responses. For example, sentence 13 tests the simple past tense, as shown in Table 1 above. This sentence ranked eighth in degree of difficulty for the SE-speaking children, while it ranked as the second hardest sentence for the NCE-speaking children. The sentence is not long, and tests only one feature. What makes it difficult for the NCE-speaker is the past tense morpheme /-ed/. In NCE, past tense is not formed by the addition of this morpheme to the simple form of the verb, but by preposing the past tense marker wen to the simple form of the verb. Thus the NCE-speaking child would say My mommy wen call up my aunty last night instead of the SE response My mommy called up my aunty last night.

	Sept. SERT	May SERT	SERT Change Score
Full Scale IQ-Sept.	.51	.64	.45
Verbal IQ-Sept.	.53	.63	.40
Performance IQ-Sept.	.44	.58	.45
Family Socio-Econ. Level	-.45	-.49	
Mother Employed		.41	
Parents' Working	.43	.53	.44
Parents' Occup. Level	.46	.53	
Father Employed	.42(25)	.44(25)	
Father Occup. Level	.49(23)	.41(23)	
Mother Occup. Level	.43	.54	
Father Educ.	.57(23)	.54(23)	
Mother Educ.		.38	.51
SERT - Sept.		.91	
SERT - May	.91		.44
Full Scale IQ - May	.56(27)	.70(27)	.48(27)
Verbal IQ-May	.63(27)	.76(27)	.48(27)
Performance IQ-May		.43(27)	
Full Scale IQ Change Rep Test Change		.44	
Mother's Responsibility vs. Sibling Responsibility for child care (ethno rating)			-.42(26)

Table 6. Significant correlates of SERT scores for NCE-speaking children. N=28 unless otherwise specified in parenthesis. Only significant product moment correlations are reported, all Ps are equal to or less than .05.

Summary

The present paper presents an instrument which can reliably assess the SE performance of young children from minority groups in which standard English is not the primary language. This allows calibration of language performance, and thus allows investigation of the correlates and causes of differential language abilities. We are now conducting such studies among Hawaiian Creole English-speaking children, but the psychometric qualities of the SERT appear sufficient to warrant its use with children from any other nonstandard English language system.

Sentence Number	SE SUBJECTS (n=30) % of Accurate Repetitions	Ranking	NCE SUBJECTS (n=24) % of Accurate Repetitions	Ranking
1	96.7	1	75	1
2	80	11	54.2	3
3	96.7	1	54.2	3
4	90	5	29.2	10
5	90	5	25	11
6	80	11	35.4	7
7	95	3	64.6	2
8	83.3	8	54.2	3
9	86.7	7	25	11
10	63.3	15	22.9	13
11	91.7	4	54.2	3
12	80	11	31.3	9
13	83.3	8	20.8	14
14	83.3	8	12.5	15
15	80	11	33.3	8
Means	23.89		10.75	
Standard Deviations	3.60		5.96	

Table 7. Comparison of SERT scores on individual sentences. SE- and NCE-speaking kindergarten children.

FOOTNOTES

[1]This research was supported by the Kamehameha Early Education Project. Computer resources were provided by the UCLA Mental Retardation Research Center.

Violet Mays is due our appreciation for her many contributions. Our appreciation is also extended to Carol Odo for her assistance.

[2]The role of imitation in the learning of language is a matter of dispute (cf. Zimmerman and Rosenthal 1974; Chomsky 1959). This issue is of no concern here since elicited imitation is used in the SERT as a measure of previously-acquired structures.

[3]Equivalent SE substitutions are scored as correct SE responses in the SERT, as is described in the scoring manual.

[4]Such responses are scored in the SERT as a separate category, assuming, of course, that the semantic message carried by the nonstandard sentence is equivalent to the standard. Otherwise, they would be incorrect.

[5]Most of the sentences were taken (or adapted) from recordings of naturally-occurring speech of bidialectal children. The tests are the result of several years of work within the speech community of our subjects (S. Boggs 1972; Day 1972, 1973 ; Gallimore, J. Boggs and Jordan 1974).

[6]DeCamp (1971) first formulated the concept of a creole speech continuum, but referred to it as a post-creole speech continuum, since he felt that the creole would no longer be in existence when decreolization began. Bickerton (1973) observes that the use of the term "post" can be misleading since that variety which is the greatest distance, linguistically, from the standard language may be no different from the original creole language.

[7]Standard is used here as a relative term. A linguistic system's status is, of course, determined by society.

[8]Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence, An individually administered test yielding IQ scores for Full Scale, Verbal, and Performance.

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