



Past Tense Marking in SAAE and SWE Child Speakers

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RATIONALE

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of **telicity of the predicate**, **type of affix**, and **type of following phonetic context** on the past tense systems of children who speak one of two varieties of vernacular English, Southern African American English (SAAE) and Southern White English (SWE).

Both SAAE and SWE allow for variable marking of past tense, but variable marking is thought to be more prevalent in SAAE than SWE. Explanations for differences across these dialects relate to the influence of phonological constraints on final consonant cluster production in SAAE. Two of these constraints are type of affix and type of phonetic context following the affix.

The telicity of the predicate is not considered a factor in final consonant cluster production in either SAAE or SWE speakers' productions of past tense; however telicity plays an important role in young children's acquisition of this structure (Johnson & Morris, under review).

QUESTIONS

1. Are SAAE and SWE speakers' productions of past tense contexts affected by the variables of telicity and/or phonology?
2. Are SAAE and SWE speakers' rates of overt marking of past tense affected by the variables of telicity and/or phonology?

METHODS

Data were from 41 SAAE speakers, aged 3-6 years, and 38 SWE speakers, aged 4-6 years (for additional studies with these samples, see Oetting & Garrity, 2006; Oetting & McDonald, 2001; 2002; Ross, Oetting & Stapleton, 2005). The samples contained 15,648 utterances and 893 past tense contexts.

For **telicity**, state and activity VPs were coded as atelic and event VPs were coded as telic. Following Ogiela et al. (2005), categorization of activities vs. events was based on results of the entailment test, "if x is *verbing* but suddenly stopped while *verbing*, did x *verb*?"

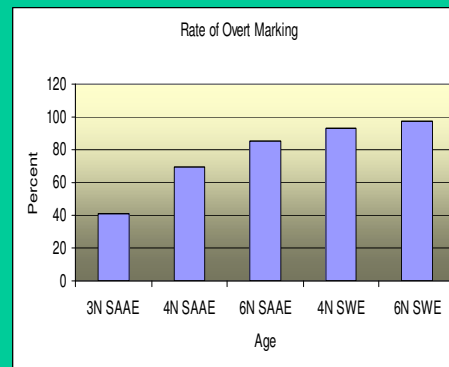
For **phonology**, the coda of the past tense verbs was phonetically transcribed noting whether the intended past tense marker ended in /-t/, /-d/, or /-Id/ (Rickford, 1999). Verbs were also coded for following phonetic context (consonant vs. vowel vs. pause).

RESULTS

SAAE and SWE children's productions of past tense contexts most often occurred within telic verb predicates. The opposite set of findings is found for present progressive contexts (see figures below). For both dialect groups, these results are similar to what has been reported for Standard American English-speaking children.



The children's rates of overt marking of past tense contexts differed as a function of their dialect (see figure below). SAAE children's rates of marking were variable (40% - 85%), but rates produced by the SWE children averaged 90% or more. Therefore, only the SAAE children's data were further examined for influences of telicity and phonology.



Goldvarb was used to further examine the effects of telicity and phonology on the SAAE children's overt marking of past tense. As shown in the table below, effects for telicity and phonology varied as a function of the children's ages. For three- and four-year-olds, type of affix contributed to the SAAE children's rates of past tense marking. For the six-year-olds, only telicity of the verb predicate contributed to their rates of marking.

SAAE Speakers	Telicity		Type of Affix			Following Context		
	Telic	Atelic	/-t/	/-d/	/-Id/	Consonant	Vowel	Pause
Three-year-olds & Four-year-olds	68%	67%	62%	84%	41%	67%	70%	67%
Goldvarb probabilistic weights			.42	.69	.24			
Six-year-olds	89%	76%	84%	87%	84%	81%	85%	97%
Goldvarb probabilistic weights	.58	.34						

Bold indicates factor was significant for the age level.

CONCLUSIONS

Like children who speak Standard American English, SAAE and SWE children's productions of past tense contexts were affected by the telicity of the verb predicate. Rate of overt marking, however, varied as a function of the children's dialect, with only the SAAE children showing effects for telicity and type of affix.

The findings demonstrate both dialect-universal and dialect-specific aspects of language acquisition. The findings also illustrate the importance of situating claims about SAAE and other vernacular dialects within the context of a child's age and/or language ability level.

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