

Past Tense Marking by AAE-speaking Children as a Function of SES

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Rationale

Within African American English (AAE), overt marking of past tense is often described as optional, and there is some evidence to suggest that rates of zero-marked forms (like rates of other vernacular patterns within AAE) increase as a speaker's socioeconomic status (SES) decreases. Low rates of past tense marking are also associated with the clinical condition of Specific Language Impairment (SLI) in Standard American English (SAE) speakers. Missing from the literature, however, are data to allow a direct comparison of the past tense systems of child AAE and SAE speakers and a comparative analysis of SES and SLI as variables that can affect children's marking of this structure.

Using only speakers of African American English (AAE), this study examined past tense marking by children from low- and middle-income backgrounds to determine whether poverty as a variable leads to a language profile that is similar to that of children with SLI.

Research Questions

1. Are there group differences between the children's rates of overtly marked regular and irregular past tense forms during spontaneous language samples and experimental probes?
2. Are there group differences in the children's past tense marking of homophonous pairs of denominal and deverbal verbs?
3. Are the children's rates of past tense marking related to their scores on other tests of cognition and language and to their level of maternal education?

Participants

Participants were three groups of AAE speakers: 15 six-year-olds from low-income backgrounds (LSES), 15 six-year-olds from middle-income backgrounds (MSES-A), and 15 five-year-olds from middle-income backgrounds who were matched to the LSES children on raw PPVT-III score (MSES-V). Dialect status was determined by blind listener judgments (Oetting & McDonald, 2002).

Group	Age	Maternal Ed	PPVT-III Raw	PPVT-III Standard	Artic Screener	Listener Judgment	Leiter-R	TOLD Syntax	MLU
LSES (N=15)	73.47 (4.02)	10 (1.41)	57.13 (8.94)	80.27 (6.60)	9.93 (2.6)	5.58 (1.03)	9.47 (1.55)	81.13 (15.27)	6.58 (1.42)
MSES-A (N=15)	71.80 (2.21)	15.60 (.63)	83.93 (9.90)	102.87 (7.12)	10.00 (-)	4.24 (1.26)	10.73 (1.82)	100.27 (7.58)	6.70 (1.07)
MSES-V (N=15)	59.00 (5.26)	15.60 (.74)	63.23 (11.42)	99.73 (7.29)	9.73 (.46)	4.20 (1.17)	11.47 (2.00)	100.27 (12.04)	5.82 (1.07)

Methods

Regular and irregular past tense marking was examined from 20 minute language samples and two probes. The samples reflected examiner-child conversational speech that was facilitated by toys. The elicitation probe contained 14 regular (half with high probability phonology in AAE and the others with low probability) and 7 irregular items. The productivity probe included 9 homophonous denominal/deverbal verb pairs (meat vs. meet). Probes were adopted from Oetting and Horohov (1997), and phonological probability was based on Rickford (1999).

For both regular and irregular AAE contexts of past tense, responses were coded as standard marked (e.g., *washed, built*), non-standard marked (e.g., *had washed, had built or builded*), or zero marked (e.g., *wash, build*). The percent of overtly marked forms was calculated using the following formula: standard + nonstandard / (standard + nonstandard + zero marked).

Results

Language Samples

	LSES	MSES-A	MSES-V
Regular	85% (13.96)	88% (12.09)	66% (30.84)
Irregular	87% (7.83)	93% (7.89)	88% (10.79)

Overt marking of regular past tense was high for the LSES and MSES-A groups, with the MSES-V group demonstrating less accuracy. All three groups marked irregular past tense at similarly high rates.

Elicitation Probe

	LSES	MSES-A	MSES-V
Phonological Probability			
Higher Probability	89% (19.62)	97% (8.01)	90% (23.29)
Lower Probability	82% (13.70)	88% (25.82)	79% (22.74)
Past Tense Marking			
Regular	85% (14.06)	94% (9.16)	85% (17.06)
Irregular	69% (17.69)	69% (17.69)	85% (19.92)

Phonology: All groups marked the high probability verbs at higher rates than low verbs, however, a reliable interaction was not found between the probability status and the grouping variable of interest (SES).

Past Tense Marking: For the past tense elicitation probe, all three groups marked regular past tense at high rates, but unlike the language sample data, rates of marking were lower for irregular past tense.

Denominal vs. Deverbal

Group		Spontaneous	Prompted
LSES	Denominal	93% (10.40)	84% (15.27)
	Verb root	79% (19.38)	67% (18.48)
MSES-A	Denominal	92% (12.00)	80% (16.48)
	Verb root	64% (31.11)	52% (27.42)
MSES-V	Denominal	92% (17.28)	75% (16.67)
	Verb root	71% (23.42)	57% (19.97)

All three groups showed differential marking of the two verb types, but across the groups, both verb roots received a high percentage of regular marking.

Relationship between past tense and other aspects of language, cognition, and maternal ed

	Regular past tense	Irregular past tense	Listener judgments	PPVT-III	TOLD:P-3	MLU	Leiter-R	Maternal education
Regular past tense	-	.37**	-.20	.13	.15	.29	-.18	-.09
Irregular past tense		-	.03	.13	.30**	.37	.16	-.01
Listener judgments			-	-.46**	.33*	-.01	-.03	-.43**
PPVT-III				-	.73**	-.04	.37*	.75**
TOLD:P-3					-	.19	-.03	-.20
MLU						-	-.03	-.20
Leiter-R							-	.37*

* p < .01, ** p < .05

The children's marking of regular past tense forms was positively related to their marking of irregular past tense forms but not to other measures of language, cognition, or maternal education. Results were similar for irregular past tense marking, except the children's marking of this form was correlated, albeit at a low level, to the children's scores on the TOLD: P-3.

Conclusions

Across groups and tasks, results revealed high rates of overt marking for regular forms and inconsistent rates of overt marking for irregular forms, with differential marking of denominal and deverbal verbs. For some analyses, marking was affected by the phonological characteristics of the items and the children's ages, but none of the analyses revealed effects for the children's socioeconomic level. Within AAE, poverty status as a variable does not affect past tense marking in the same way as a clinical diagnosis of SLI.

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