Syntactic and Semantic Patterns in Child African American English[1]

Lisa Green
University of Texas, Austin

Thorough descriptions of some areas of adolescent and adult African American English (AAE) have been presented in the literature over the past 40 years; however, the use of AAE by young children has received limited attention. In general, child AAE has been analyzed in the context of communication disorders in efforts to compare normally developing child AAE to impaired uses of the variety. Such studies have been designed to determine the extent to which child AAE speakers use specific isolated features of adolescent and adult AAE that were published in early feature lists characterizing the variety. Research in communication disorders has been targeted toward developing intervention strategies that are useful for treating children with speech and language impairments, so it has not always been concerned with the entire system of AAE that children acquire. In presenting findings from an ongoing study of the use of AAE by 3-, 4- and 5-year olds, I explain the syntactic and semantic patterns that child AAE speakers use and show the ways in which they develop a complete linguistic system, not just a list of features. In addition, I discuss data that provide insight into the way child AAE speakers use remote past BIN to mark the distant past and the way they use preterite had to mark events in narratives. The data description presented here sets the course for research on the early stages of acquisition of AAE.

1. Introduction

The focus of this presentation is on syntactic and semantic patterns in the speech of 3-, 4- and 5-year olds in an African American English (AAE)-speaking community in Southwest Louisiana. The first part of this presentation explains why a patterns-based approach has advantages over a features-based approach to the description of child AAE, and it also summarizes some controversial views about AAE. The second part of the paper reviews research on child AAE and introduces types of structures that children use in developing adult AAE patterns. For instance, it considers topics such as subject-auxiliary inversion in yes-no questions and the interpretation of tense-aspect markers *be* and *BIN*. In discussing tense-aspect markers, I review the type of task that will be used to elicit information about children's production and interpretation of *BIN* constructions.

2. Definitions of AAE and General Background

Four types of definitions have been used to characterize AAE: 1) dual components, 2) speakers-based, 3) features-based and 4) patterns-based. Under the dual components account, AAE consists of two components: General English (GE) and African American (AA). The GE component is a complete set of structures, but the AA component is not. Instead, it is an incomplete grammar or a set of features that can only be used in combination with a complete grammar such as general English (Labov, 1998). An illustrative model is given below:

(1)   Dual components

$\Rightarrow$

General English (GE): Complete set of structures	African American (AA): Incomplete grammar or set of features	African American English
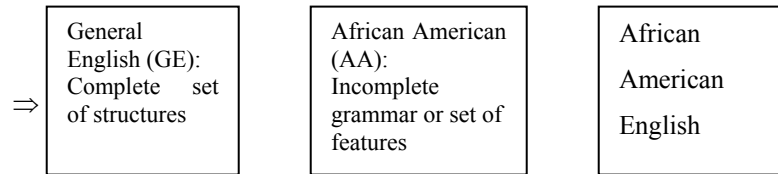
The speakers-based approach places considerable emphasis on the group of speakers who use AAE, describing the variety as a social dialect spoken by African Americans who are members of the working class. In contrast, under the features-based approach, AAE is defined as a linguistic variety in which a select group of features is used. This definition is often accompanied by feature lists that include statements such as the following: the copula and auxiliary *be* can be left out of sentences, third person singular –*s* is often omitted, multiple negative elements may be used in sentences to indicate negative eventualities, tense and aspect markers occur. Some of these features are argued to occur consistently in other dialects of English and others are not. Two major shortcomings of feature lists are that they do not reveal in what way AAE is a system, and they do not reflect what speakers know when they know the rules of the variety.

The view of AAE that I will take in this paper is along the lines of a patterns-based approach in which AAE is treated as a variety that is used by some African Americans and that has set syntactic, semantic, phonological, and lexical patterns that are intertwined with general English. This view differs from the dual components approach in that it does not try to divide AAE into separate parts. Instead of isolating a list of features, the view considers systematic uses of constructions and linguistic patterns; AAE is viewed here as a whole and not as a list of features. Also, under this approach, AAE is viewed along a continuum:

(2)   AAE on a continuum
            Idealized general English   Idealized AAE

            A   B   C   D
                              S
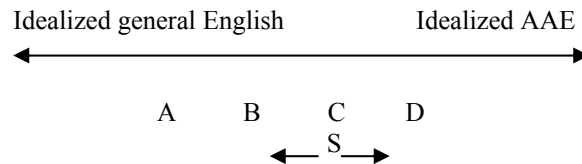
Speakers of AAE can be on different points of the continuum depending on their level of use of AAE, which may be determined by a number of different factors. In addition, a single speaker (S) may be at different points on the continuum at different times, depending on environment and other factors.

While the types of definitions of AAE that have been discussed in the linguistics community are quite standard, it is well known that AAE is a hotly debated topic in the sociopolitical arena. Among the controversial topics are the slang/hip hop view, separate language and Ebonics debates, recent innovations argument, and the 'sounding black' hypothesis. The major contention of the slang/hip hop view is that AAE is virtually slang, especially as it is used by participants in the hip hop culture. The separate language and Ebonics controversies are somewhat related. Proponents of the separate language view stress the African elements of AAE, further noting that its origin is not that of European languages. Along these same lines, one of the claims setting off the Ebonics debates was that African American language was a descendant of African languages and should be recognized as being distinct from English. The recent innovations argument is often discussed in conjunction with the view that early AAE is indeed a descendant of English and shares many and major similarities with varieties of early English, especially nonstandard varieties. The recent innovations hypothesis is used to explain the apparent differences between current AAE and other varieties of English. Under this view, AAE originated as a form almost identical to other varieties of English; however, it is different today due to developments resulting from factors that affected the social structure such as the Great Migration or movement of Blacks from the southern United States to other areas. This change in social structure is argued to have had an effect on language (Bailey & Maynor, 1987). Finally, the claim that African Americans can be identified on the basis of how they talk can be labeled the sounding black hypothesis. The types of features that are used as clues to identify speakers are rarely discussed; nevertheless, the issue of identification of ethnicity on the basis of 'sounding black' is a sociopolitical one that is also addressed from a language and discrimination point of view.

(3)   AAE and controversial topics
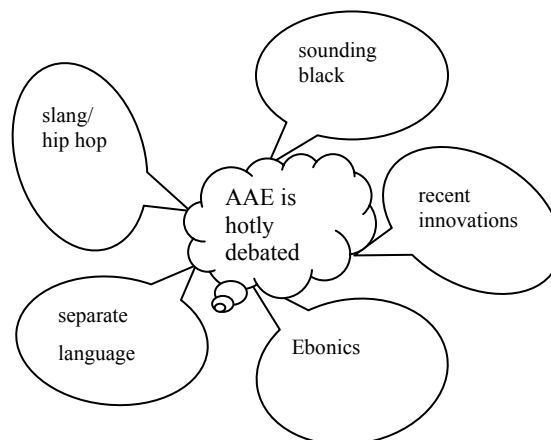
In general, AAE is treated as a linguistic phenomenon associated with adolescents and adults, so little attention has been paid to the development of AAE in young children, especially in the linguistics literature.

3. Development of AAE: Research Background

The bulk of research on the development of AAE and its use by children is concentrated mainly in the communication disorders literature. The research in this area started in the 1970's, relatively late compared to the developmental focus on other groups

of children. Two of the goals of work in this area have been 1) to compare normally developing child AAE to impaired uses of the variety and 2) to develop appropriate instruments for assessing language use by children acquiring AAE. The research can be divided into four broad categories: 1) studies on morphological form, 2) meaning and use of lexical items and sequences, 3) comprehension development, and 4) language behaviors and norm-referenced language tests. Researchers in the first category have studied the extent to which child speakers use adult morphological patterns such as Ø 3rd person singular marking and Ø copula and auxiliary *be* forms (e.g., Wyatt, 1991; Oetting & McDonald, 2001). In work such as Stockman and Vaughn-Cooke (1992), categories of meaning in child utterances have been analyzed to determine how developing AAE speakers expressed concepts such as action and existence. Research under the label of comprehension development has been concerned with children's understanding and interpretation of forms. For instance, in Jackson (1998) and Jackson and Green (to appear), experiments were used to determine how children interpreted aspectual *be* sequences, that is, whether they interpreted aspectual *be* as an aspect marker indicating habitual occurrence or as tensed auxiliary *be*. Finally, more current research has focused on specific features that could be used in norm-referenced, non-biased tests (e.g., research by Harry Seymour and the University of Massachusetts group).

One reason that research in communication disorders has focused on specific morphological features is that they are often used in language diagnostic tests, so they play a role in the evaluation of children's speech. For instance, the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF) test, which evaluates different aspects of language such as expressive and receptive skills, includes items that are used to take an inventory of a child's morphosyntactic patterns. The test is being revised to allow alternate responses that might be given by AAE-speaking children who may not use all mainstream English morphological patterns. For example, on one item of the test, children are shown pictures of boys and girls playing and sliding and are then given the following prompt: She is sliding now. Soon, he (point to pictures) ____ ____. The mainstream English responses are *will slide* and *will be sliding*, but the revised CELF evaluation procedure accepts responses such as *gon slide*, *gonna slide*, *a slide* and *a be sliding*, which are likely to be given by AAE speakers. Given that alternate responses are accepted, AAE-speaking children will not be penalized for using reduced forms of the auxiliary *will* (*will→a* [ə]) and forms of *going to*. On another test item, children are shown pictures reflecting happy and sad girls and are given the following prompt: "This girl is sad. Tell me about this girl." Some of the mainstream English responses are *She is happy/glad*; *She's happy/glad*; *The girl's happy*. However, the alternate response *She happy* is also accepted because it has been shown that AAE-speaking children often omit the copula and auxiliary *be* in certain well-defined environments. Research in communication disorders on the use of AAE by child speakers has been useful in providing information for developing some (although the number is still way too small) language evaluation tests that are more accurate in assessing children's language use and that do not penalize the child for using a systematic variety other than mainstream English.

4. Child AAE: Some Syntactic and Semantic Patterns

In this section, I take a patterns-based approach in the discussion of linguistic structures in the speech of 12 3-, 4- and 5-year olds who are developing adult AAE and participate in a school program in Southwest Louisiana. This is a three-year study that will include data from 75 children. The data presented here were produced by children while they were interacting with each other and the researcher (LG). Each session included two

children (often a boy and girl) and the researcher. The major stimuli during the sessions were toy prompts and books. For the most part, the language was spontaneous; however, the researcher did engage the children in informal elicitation tasks. A chart summarizing selected features that children used is given below:

(4)   Selected features used by children in an AAE-speaking community

subject	age	Q inv	wh-q	mul neg	Ø cop	Ø aux	Ø 3sg	Ø pos	Ø past	BE	*I'ma*	exist	*BIN*	asp *be*	pret *had*
J003	3	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
L004	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓			
D007	3		✓	✓	✓					✓		✓	✓		
J011	3		✓		✓	✓							✓	✓	
G012	3		✓	✓		✓									
T005	4		✓		✓	✓							✓		
J008	4	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
R013	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓			
J015	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
J019	4					✓							✓		
M020	4		✓	✓		✓									
B014	5		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓			

While this chart summarizes the features that occurred in the speech of the 3-, 4- and 5- year olds, it does not give information about the systematic uses of these features. In this way, the chart alone cannot really tell us the extent to which these child speakers have developed the adult AAE grammar. It can only tell us that children in the 3 to 5 age range do use some of the same features that occur in adult AAE. For instance, consider the column labeled *BIN*, which is used to represent the stressed remote past marker that indicates that some part of an eventuality is in the remote past. Six of the subjects, 3- and 4- year olds, produced the marker in natural speech. As the third column shows, wh-questions (wh-q) are identified in the speech of all except two of the children. Finally, the last two columns show that only one speaker used aspectual *be* and one used preterite *had*. Extending this features list to a patterns-based approach, I will focus on the extent to which these child speakers use the features highlighted in the chart in ways that they are used in adult AAE. In order to address this issue, I consider linguistic environments in which the features occur in selected examples from the child data.

4.1. Forms of the Copula and Auxiliary Be

This section deals with four categories on the chart: null copula (Ø cop), null auxiliary (Ø aux), overt forms of *be* (BE), and *I'ma* ('I am going to'). As shown in the examples in (5), the children use Ø copula and Ø auxiliary *be* in ways that adult AAE speakers use it:

(5)   a.   B014: Your phone Ø ringing.
                R013: That's not my phone. That's my beeper.
                B014: Oh.
                R013: This Ø my phone.
        b.   B014: Made it go on the table. How Ø you gon make that thing go by itself?
        c.   LG: An Escalade must be small. It's one of those small cars. The Escalade must be a tiny car.
                B014: Naw, they Ø big.

In (5a, b), B014 uses Ø auxiliary *be* in the environment preceding *ringing* and *gon* (before question inversion), and he also uses Ø copula preceding the adjective *big* in (c). R013

also uses Ø copula preceding a noun phrase in (5a). If we only considered examples such as the ones highlighted here, then we might be tempted to conclude that the speakers are in the developmental stage during which they omit *be* forms. However, once we consider R013's first line in (5a) and responses in (6), then it is clear that more that developmental general English is involved here.

> (6)   a.   LG: Where do you like to eat in J__?
>   B014: I like Mr. Gatti's.
>   R013: No, my birthday IS to Mr. Gatti's. My birthday Ø gon be to Mr. Gatti's.
>   B014: I'ma have my next birthday to Mr. Gatti's.
>   b.   LG: So do you have brothers and sisters, D__?
>   D016: Four brothers and one sister.[2]
>   LG: Four brothers and one sister. Are you the baby?
>   D016: No.
>   J015: Yes, she a baby.
>   D016: No, I'm not. I got my own baby brother.
>   J015: Yes she is.
>   c.   D007: Umm, I found a snake in the grass and I put it on my mama head and it was bout to bite my mama whole skin off.

As illustrated in (6), the children use *be* in obligatory contexts, which is what is found in adult AAE. In (6a), note that the *be* form occurs on the surface when it is stressed (*IS*) in R013's line, and it also occurs obligatorily with first person singular (*I'ma*) in B014's line. In adult AAE, stressed *be* always occurs in its full form, and *be* always occurs on the surface with first person singular. Note also the occurrence of *is* sentence finally in (6b), another obligatory environment for *be* in adult AAE. In (6c) *be* is used in the past (*was*). Here, as in adult AAE, *be* occurs obligatorily when it is marked for past tense. Finally, note also the contracted form of *be* in *that's* in R013's line in (5a). In adult AAE, the *be* form, whether it is the copula or auxiliary, almost always occurs as a clitic with *what*, *it,* and *that*; it is usually never in its Ø form. Examples of *what's* and *it's* are also in the corpus but are not presented here. So far, we have seen that child AAE speakers use the copula and auxiliary *be* in ways that are identical to adult uses, but there are still some instances of developmental Ø *be* uses that are different from Ø *be* in adult AAE. For instance, L004 says during one session, "I not gon take it off." In adult AAE, the *be* form is obligatory with first person singular; however, L004 does not use the *be* form in that instance. It seems reasonable to say that L004 will incorporate *be* with first person as she continues to develop AAE.

Before moving to the next section, I would like to point out D007's Ø possessive (Ø pos) –*s* occurrence on *mama* in *my mama head* and *my mama whole skin* in (6c). This pattern of non-overt morphosyntactic possessive marking is not addressed here but occurs in other places in the data. Also note that one instance of possession is marked in those phrases overtly with the possessive pronoun *my*.

---

[2]   D016 is not a member of the AAE-speaking community. Her linguistic patterns will not be analyzed here; however, they are interesting in comparison with data produced by children from the AAE-speaking community.

4.2. Question Inversion

The production of yes-no questions and wh-questions is included in the discussion under this category (Q inv). One of the properties of both types of questions as they are used in the child data is that they are formed without auxiliaries, and, in instances in which auxiliaries occur, they are usually not inverted with the subject. In the general acquisition literature, it is explained that in the early stages of development of mainstream English, children do not use inversion in question formation. The question that arises in the data from children developing AAE is whether their non-inverted questions indicate that they are in the general stage in which children do not invert the subject and auxiliary in forming questions or whether their questions reflect the adult AAE pattern of non-inversion. Three- and 4-year olds consistently produced non-inverted questions:

(7)   a.   J003: You a pour me some more?
                LG: Hmm?
                J003: You gon pour me some more?
        b.   L004: This a police man.
                LG: It's a what, L__?
                L004: This a police man.
                LG: Ummhmmm.
                L004: You wanna go in?
                LG: No.
                L004: Why? You scared?
                LG: A little bit. A little bit.
        c.   LG: Wait, I want you to ask J__ something.
                J015: What?
                LG: Ask him if he has a fishing pole.
                J015: He don't got none.[3]
                LG: Ask him.
                J015: J__, you got a fishing pole? He said naw.

In (7a) J003 uses a non-inverted subject (*you*) and reduced form of the auxiliary *will* (represented as *a* and pronounced as [ə]) in asking LG the question about pouring her some more of the make-believe beverage. The second time she asks the question, she does not use an auxiliary at all. The speaker does not use the auxiliary *be* here, and it should be noted that in adult AAE, the environment preceding *gonna*/*gon* ranks high in the list of environments in which *be* forms are absent. There are no auxiliaries in J003's and L004's questions in (7a, b). In (7b) L004 asks LG with a non-inverted question if she wants to go inside of the police car. Similarly she follows up LG's negative response with the Ø auxiliary version of 'Are you scared?' This is also the case for J015's question in (7c). In answering the question about whether the children's data are simply manifestations of early stages of acquisition of questions, it is also necessary to determine whether the intonation that the children use to signal that they are asking yes-no questions is similar to the final level and falling contours used by adult AAE speakers. Of course, this question cannot be answered satisfactorily without conducting studies used to determine the structure of intonational contours. Nevertheless, if it is shown that the child and adult intonational patterns in yes-no questions are similar, then we will have more evidence to

---

[3]   Also note multiple negative (mul neg) elements *don't* and *none*, which are used to indicate negation. This pattern is not discussed in this presentation.

support the claim that the children are producing adult-like structures and are not just going through a general acquisition stage.

The children use similar patterns in wh-questions. Consider data from D007 (8a) and R013 (8b):

(8)   a.   D007: How much you want?
             LG: Hmm?
             D007: How much money you want?
             LG: About twenty-five.
       b.   R013: What they said on my phone?
             LG: Hunh?
             R013: I don't know what they said.

In both (8a, b), D007 and R013, respectively, ask wh-questions without auxiliaries. The question in (8a) without *do*-support might very well be found in other non-standard varieties of English, but R013's question may not be common in other varieties. Past tense is marked on the main verb (*said*), so there is no reason for *do* insertion, as in *What did they say?*. The pattern of wh-questions without auxiliaries and with tense marked on the main verb is common in adult AAE, and it is produced here by a child in the AAE-speaking community.

While non-inverted questions may be used more often, some children did produce wh-questions in which the subject and auxiliary are inverted. Note M020's non-inverted yes-no questions and inversion in his wh-questions in (9):

(9)   LG: You come here M__. I want you to ask Wal-Mart if they have any
       playstations.
       M020: Dey have some playstations?
       LG: Yeah, ask.
       M020: Dey have some playstations?
       LG: What she say?
       M020: She say yeah.
       LG: Oh good. Well ask her where they, where they, where they are in the
       store.
       M020: Where are they in the store?
       LG: What are they located by?
       M020: Dey by the games.

M020 used the direct wh-question in response to LG's prompting to get him to ask a question during a make-believe telephone conversation (on a play cell phone) with a Wal-Mart clerk. M020's wh-question is similar to LG's indirect question; the only difference is that M020's question is a direct question in which subject-auxiliary inversion is used. It is not clear whether M020 would have produced the inverted wh-question without a prompt that included an auxiliary or not; however, what is clear is that he can produce inverted questions although he does produce non-inverted questions, as is obvious from his yes-no questions (second and forth lines), which mean 'Are there some playstations in the store?'.

4.3. Existential Constructions

As indicated in the chart, only three speakers used existential constructions (exist). In these instances, existential *it* and *they/dey* are used with the auxiliary *have* or the verb *got*.

(10)   a.   D007: Now what is this? I can't barely do this.
LG: You can't barely do it?
J008: You want me to do it for you?
D007: I got it.
J008: Let me try.
D007: What they have up in there?
J008: Hmm?
D007: They have umm police, up in there.

   b.   B014: Hey, I don't want this page.
LG: You don't want this page? Oh, he wants another page. He likes this page.
B014: Yeah.
LG: What's the other one you want? You want two? Oh, you like that kind.
R013: They got another one too. That's for him.

In (10a, b) existential *they/dey have/got* is used to indicate that something exists, not to express ownership. D007 uses existential *they/dey* in a wh-question and a declarative. In the wh-question (10a), D007 is asking about the contents in a toy car, that is, what is in there. She answers her question in the statement, which means there is a policeman in the car. R013 makes a statement about there being another specific kind of sticker in the booklet; that is, there is another one. The only instance of an *it have* existential is in the speech of B014, a five-year old:

   c.   R013: This cute. This cute. This cute.
B014: Hey, it have a umm bowling ball on there too.

B014's comment is about a bowling ball sticker. He observes that there is a bowling ball sticker on the page, too, and uses an *it have* existential to make the point. It should be determined whether *it* existentials are developed later or whether in a larger corpus they would also be found in 3- and 4-year old speech samples. Before moving to the markers *be* and *BIN*, I should note the wh-questions in the exchanges. D007 uses auxiliary inversion in her first line. We expect *is* to occur with *what*, but inversion is not obligatory (cf. the grammatical *What this is?*). In her second wh-question (10a), she uses Ø auxiliary and no inversion.

5. Tense-Aspect Markers: *Be* and *BIN*

Tense-aspect markers in AAE have been studied for as long as the variety has been discussed in the literature, especially because significant differences between it and other varieties of English can be found in the systematic use of these markers. Aspectual *be*, which is distinguished from the copula and auxiliary *be*, and *BIN* are addressed in this section as they occur in the child data.

5.1. Aspectual Be

The marker aspectual *be* (asp *be*) has been a major feature in the description of AAE. It indicates that an eventuality recurs; the eventuality expressed by the predicate must be well-established by having occurred on particular occasions (Green, 2000). For instance, the sentence *That car be going 160 mph.* cannot be used to mean that the car is built to go 160 mph, so it is capable of going that speed although no one has driven it at 160 mph. The sentence has to be used to express the point that the car actually goes 160 mph on certain occasions; that is, it has been driven at that speed a number of times. Aspectual *be* occurs with all predicate types, including those that indicate states, so it is possible to use aspectual *be* preceding a verb as in the above example and preceding a preposition as in *Sam's wholesale stores be on the outskirts of town.*[4] This sentence cannot mean that the stores move around, so at one point in time they are in one area on the outskirts of town and then at another they are in a different area. The sentence means that it is usually the case that Sam's wholesale stores are located on the outskirts of town.

While the use of aspectual *be* in adult and adolescent speech has been well-defined, its use in child AAE has only recently been addressed. Jackson (1998) discusses proficiency with aspectual *be*, noting that by age 4, children distinguish auxiliary *be* and aspectual *be*. In addition, she notes that children begin to negate aspectual *be* with *don't* at 5 years of age and proficiency in applying *do* support in appropriate contexts increases with age. For instance, according to Jackson's results, children negated sentences such as *This girl be jumping.* appropriately as *This girl don't be jumping.* at age 5. Of course, this study should be completed with a larger number of children in order to determine whether the findings can be generalized to other groups of child AAE speakers.

There are only two occurrences of aspectual *be* in the naturalistic data, and they are in the speech of a 3-year old female (J011). J011 used the marker in response to LG's question, which included the marker. The exchange between LG and J011 is given below. J011's first line, a Ø auxiliary wh-question, is a response to J__Jr., whom she is pretending to talk to on a toy cell telephone.

(11)   J011: What you want?
          LG: What does J__Jr. want?
          J011: That boy is crazy like a fool.
          LG: What does he be doing?
          J011: He be bad and foolin' with me.
          LG: What else?
          J011: I don't know what he be doing, but he bad though.

J011 did not use aspectual *be* without prompting; however, there is strong indication that she knows the meaning of the marker and can use it in appropriate syntactic and semantic contexts. In response to LG's question about what J__Jr. usually does to exhibit his 'crazy' behavior (i.e., be doing), J011 says, "He be bad and foolin' with me," that is, he usually exhibits bad behavior and fools with me (or he usually exhibits bad behavior by "foolin" with me). Her response is appropriate with respect to meaning because it answers the question about J__Jr.'s usual behavior, and it is syntactically well formed because *be* is used preceding an adjective (*bad*) and then preceding a verb ending in *–ing* (*doing*). It is interesting to note that she says, "…but he bad though" and not "but he be bad though."

_____

[4] This example is taken from Green (2000).

Both are acceptable. Her sentence indicates that J__Jr. is a bad boy, which is what we would expect if "He be bad and foolin' with me," or usually behaves badly, as J011 claims.

The second phase of this project includes aspectual *be* elicitation tasks, so it will be possible to collect more data on children's production and interpretation of the marker.

5.2. Remote Past BIN

Remote past *BIN*, which is stressed, situates an eventuality or some part thereof in the remote past (Green, 1998). Remote past is relative, so an eventuality that happened 15 minutes or 15 years ago may be described as being in the far past. The sentence *They BIN putting those glasses on the table* can have two meanings:

- 'They started putting those glasses on the table a long time ago and they are still in the process of putting them there'
- 'They have had the habit of putting those glasses on the table for a long time'

Of course, the first reading cannot be in reference to a single pair of eyeglasses because putting a pair of eyeglasses on a table involves one movement that takes a short time (cf. putting drinking glasses or numerous pairs of eyeglasses on a table).

To my knowledge, there are no formal studies on the use of *BIN* in child AAE although there are a number of studies on the marker in adolescent and adult AAE (Labov, 1972; Rickford, 1975; Green, 1998). In order to use *BIN* appropriately, children have to know certain phonetic, semantic and syntactic information. They have to understand that the marker is stressed in relation to other words in the sentence. In addition, they have to understand that the marker refers to the distant past, so they must have some idea about what it means to be in the remote past. Also, it is necessary for them to understand the syntactic environments in which *BIN* occurs and that, depending on the environment, it can be interpreted as 'a long time ago' or 'for a long time.' They have to understand that it precedes all predicates: BIN V-*ing* (*BIN running*), BIN V-*ed* (*BIN left*), BIN Adj (*BIN brown*), BIN Adv (*BIN there*), BIN PP (*BIN on the porch*), BIN NP (*BIN a teacher*).

In the data reported here, the children who use *BIN* are 4 years old, and in all cases, they use it with *have+-ing*.

(12)   a.   LG: Ooh, I like that jogging suit. Is that a new jogging suit? Hmm, or an old one?
             J015: A new jacket.
             LG: A new jacket? You just got it? You just got it? Hmm?
             J015: I BIN having it.
        b.   LG: Ooh J, I love those pants. Ooh they're so nice. Did ya just get em or ya BIN having em?
             J008: I BIN having em.
             LG: Ooh, well when did you get em?
             J008: My mama bought em.
             LG: When?
             J008: Umm.
             LG: A long time ago or yesterday?
             J008: A long time, a long time ago.

LG: Alright.

c.   LG: Ok alright. I want to call back to Wal-Mart and this time I want J__ to ask her something. J__ ask them, ask them if they just got their bikes in.

J019: Y'all just got y'all bikes in?

LG: What did she say? No or what?

J019: She said yes.

LG: Just got em in. Ummhmm. What about basketballs? They got em in or they BIN having em in?

J019: They BIN having em in.

LG: Okay. Ask em.

J019: Y'all BIN having them basketballs in? And they said yes.

In (12a) J015 uses *BIN* to indicate that he did not just get the jacket; he has had it for a long time. I have no idea about the specific amount of time he has had the jacket. It is clear that he understands the phonetic, semantic and syntactic properties associated with the marker. He uses *BIN having* instead of *BIN had*. While both forms are used by adult speakers, it has been shown that the former is preferred in areas in southern Louisiana (Green, 1998). Also, Janna Oetting reports that *BIN having* is used by pre-school African American children in southeastern Louisiana.

J008 produces *BIN* in response to LG's question (which includes *BIN having*) about her pants (12b). From her response *I BIN having em* ('I've had them for a long time') alone, it might not be clear that she understands the meaning of the marker because it could be that she is just picking up on LG's words and repeating them. However, when she clarifies that they were bought for her a long time ago, she indicates that she does understand the marker. In the exchange in (12c), J019 uses *BIN* in a make believe phone conversation with a Wal-Mart clerk. His non-inverted question means 'Have you had those basketballs in for a long time?'. He, too, picks up on the marker in repeating the information given by LG in a question. This data alone does not confirm that J019 actually understands the meaning and use of *BIN*, but it does show that he understands that a special stress pattern is associated with the marker, and he also knows how to use it in a question.

In the final exchange (12d), R013 does not produce *BIN*, but her response suggests that she understands it.

d.   LG: Do you have a bike?

B014: Hey, I do.

R013: Uh. Uh.

B014: I have a snake bike.

R013: My umm, my bike always falling. I said my daddy gon buy it again.

LG: Oh, that bike…

B014: Buy another one.

LG: But that bike that's falling, you just got that bike that's falling?

 …

LG: I thought you BIN having that one.

??: Hello. Get the phone.

LG: I thought you BIN having that one.

R013: My mama just bought it.
LG: Oh, she just bought it.

After B014 and R013 establish that they both own bikes and state some property about them, LG asks about the time period that R013 has had the bike. R013 clarifies that she has not had the bike for a long time by saying that her mother just bought it. In effect, she contrasts having just bought it with having had it for a long time. Without including *BIN* in the statement, R013 shows that she knows something about *BIN* by giving a contrasting time period, 'just' as opposed to 'a long time ago.'

In the second phase of this project, elicitation tasks will be administered as a means of determining the extent to which children understand the meaning and use of *BIN*. These tasks will require children to identify eventualities according to the period during which they happened, so the tasks will be used to determine how children interpret eventualities and states that started in the past. A sample *BIN* scenario is given in (13). Children will be shown four pictures that correspond to the following scenario:

(13)   Destiny saw Jenny in the gym. Destiny told Jenny that she was going home because she did not feel like playing basketball anymore because her friends had left her. Jenny said, "Please play with me. I got this new ball for my birthday yesterday, and I really want to play. I couldn't wait to get to the gym to find someone to play with." Destiny said, "Ok." They changed into their new suits. Now they're ready to play.

Who BIN wanting to play basketball?

The response to the question is "Jenny." Although Destiny finally decided to play, Jenny is the one who has wanted to play for a long time.

The final section of the paper, which is closely related to the topic discussed in this section, focuses on the way children mark past tense.

6. System of Past Marking

Auxiliary *had* + verb in AAE is the past perfect (as in other varieties of English), but it can also refer to an event in the simple past in narrative contexts, so the sentence *He had drunk the milk.* can have two meanings. The past perfect reading indicates that the drinking milk event happened farther in the past than some more recent event. The other reading is one in which the drinking milk event is in the simple past and not evaluated with respect to any other event in the past. The latter use of *had* is referred to as preterite *had*. Rickford and Théberge-Rafal (1996) discuss the marker in the speech of African American preadolescents. Since that time, the marker has been shown to occur productively in the speech of adults and very young children in AAE-speaking communities. As indicated in the chart, preterite *had* (pret *had*) occurs in three-year old J008's speech. She uses this *had* several times in the narrative context in the course of retelling a dream about dogs.

(14)   D007: What is this?
LG: That's a napkin.
J008: He hold me.
LG: And then what?

> D007: Where's the microwave?
> LG: We don't have one.
> J008: Then, then he din never reach me when my pa pa hold me. I had a bad dream. They was trying to git in my mama house, then they they <u>had tried</u> to pull my leg. Then they was trying to bite my, my bones. And they had to and they was bite my brother too. Then I pull my brother, he take…
> …
> The dog <u>had take pull</u> my brother. He take him he put em in my doggie cage. He locked em up. And I had the key in my hand, then then umm I unlocked the do' then I had saved my brother. I <u>had unlocked</u> it then I <u>had save</u> him. He came out the cage.

J008 begins a segment of the narrative by talking about the dogs' trying to get into her mother's house. She continues with "then," which indicates that she will tell what happened after the dogs had tried to get into the house. If we consider the narrative from a mainstream English point of view, we find a conflict between "then" and "had tried to pull," which would mean that the trying to pull my leg is farther in the past than the trying to get in the house. But this is the preterite *had*, which marks the simple past, so the interpretation would be: They were trying to get into the house and then they tried to pull my leg. Along these same lines, the "had take pull my brother" event is interpreted as took/pulled my brother. Note that "had unlocked" can be interpreted as past perfect or preterite; however, "had save" can only be interpreted as preterite; the saving him event cannot be farther in the past than the unlocking the door event. J008 uses a number of strategies for marking the past, and they are in line with adult AAE. She uses simple tense constructions such as *was* in "was trying." The past *be* form must always occur on the surface, as it does here. In addition, she uses Ø past on *pull* and *save* in "then I pull my brother" and "had save him" (cf. then I pulled… and had saved…).

In adolescent and adult AAE, there are at least six ways of marking the past: simple past, preterite *had*, remote past, past perfect, remote past perfect and resultant state *dən*. The remote past perfect indicates that an event is farther in the remote past than some other event as in *He had BIN drunk the milk.*, which means that he had drunk the milk in the far past before some subsequent event. An event in its resultant state is over, so *He dən drunk the milk.* indicates that the drinking milk event is over. So far in the child data that have been collected and analyzed, the first three types of past are clearly represented.

7. Summary

The approach taken in this paper is one that is useful in showing that child speakers are developing a system of use of AAE patterns along the lines of that of adult AAE speakers, not just a set of features. The goal of the patterns-based approach is to identify patterns of use of constructions and to identify the development of systems such as tense and aspect and strategies for marking past time. The features-based approach is useful in determining the extent to which developing child AAE speakers use selected adult AAE features and for highlighting features that are significant for developing norm-referenced language tests; however, it does not go very far in helping to show that what children are developing is a complete system. A patterns-based approach is useful in supplementing the features-based approach.

References

Bailey, G., & Maynor, N. (1987). Decreolization? *Language in Society*, *16*(4), 449-473.

Green, L. (1998). Remote past and states in African American English. *American Speech 73*(2), 115-183.

Green, L. (2000). Aspectual *be*-type constructions and coercion in African American English. *Natural Language Semantics 8*(1), 1-25.

Jackson, J. (1998). Linguistic aspect in African American English speaking children: An investigation of aspectual *be*. PhD Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Jackson, J. E., & Green, L. (forthcoming). *Tense and aspectual be in child African American English*. Proceedings from the Utrecht Conference on Perspectives on Aspect, Utrecht, The Netherlands. December 2001.

Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Labov, W. (1998). Coexistent systems in African-American vernacular English. In S. S. Mufwene, J. R. Rickford, G. Bailey & J. Baugh (Eds.), *African-American English: Structure, history and use*. (pp. 110-153). New York: Routledge.

Oetting, J. B., & McDonald, J. (2001). Nonmainstream dialect use and specific language impairment. *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, 44, 207-223.

Rickford, J. R. (1975). Carrying the new wave into syntax: The case of Black English *BIN*. In R. Fasold & R. Shuy (Eds.), *Analyzing variation in English*. (pp. 162-83). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Rickford, J., & Théberge-Rafal, C. (1996). Preterite *had* in the narratives of African American preadolescents. *American Speech*, *71*(3), 227-254.

Stockman, I. J., & Vaughn-Cooke, F. (1992). Lexical exploration in children's locative action expression. *Child Development*, *63*, 1104-1125.

Wyatt, T. (1991). Linguistic constraints on copula production in Black English child speech. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1985).

Department of Linguistics
The University of Texas at Austin
1 University Station B5100
Austin, TX 78712-0198
lgreen@mail.utexas.edu