

INNER CITY BLACK CHILDREN'S PRODUCTION
OF THE VOICELESS |TH| IN THE MEDIAL
AND FINAL PHONEMIC POSITIONS

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Chapter I

Introduction

For many years controversy has swirled around the subject of black dialect. Is it a type of disorder to be overcome, rather than a dialect to be studied and understood in its own right? The traditional view as stated by Labov (1970) is that the nonstandard or substandard form of speech used by black children is an imperfect copy of standard English, marred by a number of careless and ignorant errors. In an effort to make black dialects position clearer, linguists such as Labov (1970), Dillard (1972), Wood (1975), and Smitherman (1977) have extensively investigated the historical background of black dialect. The history of black dialect is a rich one full of empirical evidence that is substantiated by recent research. Such research studies have pointed out that black English is a linguistic system in its own right with its own set of linguistic rules (Baratz, 1969; Labov, 1970; Stewart, 1970; Fasold and Wolfram, 1972). These studies have shown some of the common characteristics of black dialect. These characteristics include distinct features at the phonemic, morphologic, syntactic, semantic, and

grammatical level. Ramer and Reese (1970) have shown that for the most part these features are predictable though not generalized to all English-speaking black Americans.

Labov (1970) has indicated that black children, when exposed to standard American English, tend to combine some dialectical and standard forms. Ramer and Reese (1973) conducted a similar study with black children in New York City and the results showed increased use of standard syntactical forms with advancing age and maturity. Bountress (1977) in a more recent study substantiated the results found in the two previous studies.

The purpose of the present study is to determine whether there is an increased use of correct articulation with advancing age as indicated by the earlier syntactical study. The precise question may be stated as: does the percentage of correct production of the |θ| in the medial and final position increase with the age of the black child?

Chapter II

Literature Review

The purpose of this review is to examine a number of studies concerning black dialect, its history and some of its characteristics. Before pursuing these themes however, it is necessary to define the term "dialect" as it should be used and understood by educated people. According to Farrison (1969), for a long time the popular notion has persisted that dialect is a more or less primitive, corrupted, or amusingly interesting group of speech habits which are quite inferior to what is assumed to be standard speech, and which, therefore, stand condemned by it.

Strickland (1972) carries this definition of the term "dialect" one step further by discussion it in conjunction with black English. She comments that non-standard dialect is the collective patterns of a sub-cultural group that does not have the prestige of the collective speech patterns of the dominant cultural group. She goes on to say that many linguists term the variety of English spoken by most disadvantaged black people as the nonstandard Negro dialect. Smitherman

(1977) defines black dialect as an Africanized form of English reflecting black America's linguistic - cultural African heritage. Black language is a Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture. Standard American English, on the other hand, has been defined by Fasold and Wolfram (1974) as that language which constitutes the language norms considered acceptable to the most prestigious social class in society.

However, in the scientific study of language the application of the term "dialect" to a group of speech habits does not necessarily mean that these habits are either corrupted, underdeveloped, strikingly peculiar, or inferior in comparison with some other group of closely related speech habits. The term is used to refer to a group of speech habits which possess a considerably higher degree of homogeneity than is possessed by the larger body of speech habits to which they belong (Farrison, 1969).

History of Black Dialect

The history of black dialect is in itself a very controversial subject. Dillard (1972) reports that without evidence, dialect geographers have in the past assumed that the Negro got his dialect from the southern

white. However, much evidence has been found to the contrary. Dialect geographers must rely on reconstructions of black speech based on indirect evidence. Such indirect evidence includes journals, letters, and diaries by whites that contained reproductions of slave speech. Another important source of evidence is based on analogies of black American speech characteristics with those of other English-based pidgin and creole found in the Caribbean and in parts of Africa. Language systems such as Jamaican Creole or Nigerian Pidgin English are still in active use today and provide a kind of linguistic mirror image of black American English in its early stages of development (Smitherman, 1977).

Smitherman (1977) and Dillard (1972), suggest that African slaves in America initially developed a pidgin dialect, a language of transaction, that was used in communication between themselves and whites. The pidginizing process began around the slave Baracoons of the West African coast. There, captured blacks from separate regions were forced to blend their distinctive languages as best they could while awaiting deportation to the New World (Wood, 1975). Although many of the slaves may not have had to relinquish their African languages immediately, they all found themselves in a situation in which they

had to learn an auxillary language in a hurry in order to establish communication in the heterogeneous groups into which they were thrown. This mixing of speakers of a large number of languages, with no one language predominant, was the perfect condition for the spread of a pidgin language, which is in a sense the ultimate in auxillary languages (Smitherman, 1977).

The term "pidgin" is not well understood. Wood (1975) says, "pidgin" is a term applied to any speech evolved from several speakers for whom it is not the primary tongue. It is known however, that a pidgin language has rules governing sentence construction like any other language. Linguists have shown that syntactic rules of a high order of regularity can be written for any pidgin language, and those rules will generate an infinite number of new sentences. As in other forms of language certain sequences would not be grammatical according to the rules of pidgin. For example, the phrase "he go not" is ungrammatical in some pidgin languages, as well as in standard English. In other words, pidgin terms are not formed by distortions of the syntactic patterns of the "standard" language (Dillard, 1972).

Over the years, the use of pidgin language gradually

became widespread among slaves and evolved into a creole. This language or dialect involved the substitution of English for West African words, but within the same basic structure and idiom that characterized West African language patterns. For example, West African languages allow for the construction of sentences without a form of the verb "to be". A sentence containing an example of this characteristic might be "he tell me he God", as used by a slave from the island of Barbados in the British West Indies and recorded in 1692 (Smitherman, 1977). The words are English, but the grammar or structure is West African. Such sentence patterns, without any form of the verb "be", can be heard in any modern-day black community.

Many linguists, such as Labov (1970), Dillard (1972), and Smitherman (1977), believe that it is only logical to assume that newly arrived Africans were, for a time at least, bilingual, having command of both their native African tongue and the English pidgin language as well. However, there was no opportunity to speak and reinforce their native language. As new generations of slaves were born in the New World, the native African speech was heard and used less and less, and the English pidgin and creole varieties were heard more and more. Unfortunately, there is little record of this change. However,

what records are available are providing examples of speech forms that are strikingly similar to modern-day black English vernacular. The following summary illustration considers just one aspect of black English structure, that of "zero copula", from the early days to the present (Smitherman, 1977).

He tell me he God. 1692
 Me bella well. (I am very well.) 1718
 Me massa name Cunney Tomsee. (My master's name is Colonel Thompson.) 1776
 Me den very grad. (I am then very glad.) 1784
 You da deble. (You are the devil.) 1821
 He worse than ebber now. (He is worse than ever now.) 1821
 What dis in heah? (What is this in here?) 1959
 But what the matter with Jasper? (But what is the matter with Jasper?) 1882
 Don't kire, he somethin' t' other wif dis here Draftin' Bo'd. (I don't care, he is something or other with this Draft Board.) 1926
 'E mean tid' dat. (He is mean to do that.) 1949
 They some rowdy kids. 1968
 This my mother. 1975

Incidence and Features of Black Dialect

Sociolinguistic research of the past 10 years, especially that of Labov (1970) and Fasold and Wolfram (1972), has supported the contention that black English is a consistent and valid linguistic system. According to Fasold and Wolfram (1972), before discussing the features of the system, it is necessary to clarify some facts about black dialect. First, it should be understood that not all blacks use black dialect. Smitherman

(1977) indicates that the black idiom is used by eighty to ninety percent of American blacks, at least some of the time. Second, black dialect shares many features with other kinds of English. It's distinctiveness however, lies in the fact that it has a number of pronunciations and grammatical features not shared by other dialects. Ramer and Reese (1973) indicate that the structure and variability of black English are still under study. They also suggest that the differences between black English and standard English are predictable but the data are insufficient to show whether these predictions may be generalized to include the complete black population who use American English.

Copious research has been done by Labov (1970), Ramer and Reese (1973), and Smitherman (1977) on the grammatical aspects of black dialect. Some of these features are technically pronunciation features, but are described as grammatical features because they are usually perceived as such. A study by Fasold and Wolfram (1975) goes into great detail describing the grammatical features of black dialect. According to this study, many of the most significant features of black dialect are to be found in its verb system. The differences in the verb structure of black dialect as compared to standard American English are mainly

found in the tense systems of the verb, "to be". For example, black dialect has a special use of the verb "be" which indicates extended or repeated action, and a special use of "been" (usually stressed) which indicates the completion of an action in the remote past. Thus, "dey be singin'" means they are doing it at that moment. Similarly, "I bought it" indicates it was bought at some unspecified time in the past, while "I been bought it" indicates it was bought long ago (Stewart, 1970).

In standard English, there is no way to make those grammatical distinctions. One can only say "they are singing" and "I bought it", no matter which of the precise meanings expressed by the dialect are intended (Stewart, 1970). As another example, in order to show possession in a noun - noun construction, standard English requires the addition of a special marker ("s"), as in "my uncle's car". The identical meaning can be conveyed in black dialect, equally clearly, without the special marker: "my uncle car."

Black dialect relies on either the context of the immediate sentence or the context of an entire conversation to signal conditions of time. There is no "-ed" in either past tense or past participle constructions, ("I look for him last night" and "This guy I know name

Junior..."). Using context to signal time, the same verb form serves for both present and past tense as: "the bus pass me up last week", but also: "the bus pass me up every day". The words "last week" and "every day" signal the time of these statements rather than a change in the verb form.

The following is a list of some other syntactic differences between standard and black dialectal English as compiled by Baratz (1969).

Variable

Linking Verb	He is going. (Standard English) He goin'. (Dialect)
Plural Marker	I have five cents. (SE) I got five cent. (D)
Subject Expression	John lives in New York. (SE) John he live in New York. (D)
Future Form	I will go home. (SE) I'ma go home. (D)
Negation	I don't have any. (SE) I don't got none. (D)
Indefinite Article	I want an apple. (SE) I want a apple. (D)
Pronoun Form	We have to do it. (SE) Us go to do it. (D) His Book. (SE) He book. (D)
Preposition	He is over at his friend's house. (SE) He over to his friend house. (D)

The aforementioned list is by no means complete but is a representative sampling of the syntactical characteristics of black dialect.

Many studies have also been done concerning the pronunciation features of black dialect (Harris, 1969; Burlings, 1970; Labov, 1970; Adler, 1971; Fasold and Wolfram, 1975; Bountress, 1977; Smitherman, 1977). These studies have shown that the pronunciation system of black English employs the same number of sounds as standard English, ranging from forty-five to forty-eight sounds counting stress and intonation patterns. These sounds however, exist in a few different patterns of distribution. Many times though, according to Smitheman (1977), black dialect sounds tend to be generally similar to those of white speakers of any given region of the country.

The results of the above mentioned studies also correlate with some of the common features being; a deletion of the middle and final |r| , deletion of middle and final |l| , and deletion of most final consonants.

There is another phonological feature that is also agreed upon by the aforementioned research and that is the pronunciation of the |th| phoneme. In standard English,

the letters |th| actually represent two different types of sound. First, they represent the voiced sound in words such as "the", "they", and "that" (a voiced interdental fricative). Second, they represent the voiceless sound as in words like "thought", "thin", and "think" (a voiceless interdental fricative). In black dialect, the regular pronunciation rules for the sounds represented by the |th| are mainly dependent on the context in which |th| occurs. That is, the sounds for the |th| are dependent on where |th| might occur in a word and/or what sounds occur next to it (Fasold and Wolfram, 1975).

For example, at the beginning of a word, the |th| in the voiced form is frequently pronounced as a |d| in black dialect. So that the word "the" would be pronounced "de". In the case of |th| in words such as "thought", "think", or "thin" (the voiceless interdental fricative), |th| is sometimes pronounced as |t| so that "thought" would be pronounced as "tought".

According to Fasold and Wolfram (1975) there are several sound productions for the |th| in the medial position in black dialect. For the voiceless sound as in "nothing" and "author", most frequently it is pronounced as |f|. Thus "nothing" becomes "nuf'n". For the voiced sound, as in "brother" and "rather", the

|th| is pronounced as |v| in some varieties of black dialect, so that these words are pronounced as "bruvah" and "ravah".

In addition to |f| and |v| for |th| in the medial position, several other pronunciations may occur. When |th| is followed by a nasal phoneme such as |m| or |n|, the |th| may be pronounced as |t|. The word "nothing" would be pronounced as "nut'n".

The |th| final position is frequently pronounced as |f|. For example, in words such as "Ruth" and "tooth", they would be pronounced as "Ruf" and "toof". The present study found this to be prevalent in the subjects tested. It is important to note here that the aforementioned phonemic substitutions for the voiced and unvoiced |th| in all positions in the context of words are not simply errors in pronunciation. In black dialect they are the result of a regular and patterned rule (Fasold and Wolfram, 1975).

The history of black dialect dates back centuries and has been the subject of a great deal of research. This research has shown that black dialect is indeed a logical, rule governed system of communication.

Developmental Norms for the |θ| Phoneme

Since this research is especially interested in the medial and final voiceless |th| (θ), it is necessary to discuss some developmental norms established for this phoneme. Research conducted by Templin (1957) indicates that by the age of seven the |θ| phoneme was produced correctly by seventy-five percent of the subjects tested by the researcher. In a later study reported by Medlin (1975) the results were much the same with seventy-five percent of the participating subjects accomplishing correct production of |θ| by seven and one half years of age. It is not known why the remaining twenty-five percent continued to misarticulate the |θ| phoneme. According to Travis (1971) many factors could be involved including physical and environmental variables. Other factors are also discussed in great detail but the list is too extensive to discuss here.

Assimilation of Standard English by Black Dialectal Speakers

Up to this point we have discussed black dialect with regard to its meaning, history, and features. This review has also discussed the developmental norms with regard to the |θ| phoneme. At this point it is necessary to review some of the current research with regards to the assimilation

of standard English forms by black dialectal speakers.

Research by Labov (1970) has established that exposure to standard American English effects the speakers usage of black English so that at various stages the speaker may combine some dialectical with some standard English forms. One such study was done by Ramer and Reese (1973) with preschool, fifth, and eighth grade children of low socioeconomic background in New York City. It indicated that for the morphemes examined, those of plurals, past tense, possessives, and third person singular, the children knew and used the rules of construction of both black English and standard American English. This study indicated that as children grow in age and maturity, they demonstrate an increased use of standard American English forms, but did not exclude all black English forms even with increasing age and maturity.

Other research conducted by Bountress (1977) indicated that when black children were given an imitative task there was a gradual decrease in black English characteristics. This decrease seemed to occur as a function of age and learning. The researcher tested such items as "is", "was", "has", "have", and the voiced and voiceless |th| in the initial position. However, even

though there was a decrease, it was observed that black English characteristics did not completely disappear from the surface structure of even the oldest subjects in the study.

Consequently, previous research points to the conclusion that there is a decrease in the use of black dialectical forms and an increase in the use of standard English forms as black children grow in age, maturity, and modeling. In this study the Photo Articulation Test (PAT) was used to determine whether this phenomena includes an increase in the use of standard articulatory features.

Chapter III

Methodology

This study was designed to determine whether inner city black children, in groups of increasing age, evidence an increase in the correct use of the |θ| phoneme in the medial and final phonemic positions.

The basic premise of this study was to support the following experimental hypothesis: there will be an increase of correct usage of |θ| phoneme in the medial and final position as the children's age increases.

Subject Selection and Characteristics

The subjects of this study were forty-two St. Louis inner city black children chosen from two elementary schools in the same school district. The schools were located within one-half mile of one another. The children were randomly chosen from a list of children screened at the beginning of the school year with the Photo Articulation Test (PAT). The PAT was chosen because it was the articulation test used by the participating school district. Also, it was chosen because the target phoneme was represented by three easily recognizable pictures: thumb, toothbrush, and teeth. Six children,

three boys and three girls, were chosen from each grade level, kindergarden through sixth grade. The age range represented age five through twelve. In each group of six children, the children were matched in age with the largest age difference in each group being that of ten months. The children were also matched in race and socioeconomic background. The latter was determined by whether or not the child was enrolled in the free lunch program. None of the children had been previously enrolled in speech therapy for the |θ| sound. (See Table 1.)

Results for this study were obtained by using the screening results of the PAT administered at the beginning of the school year.

Analysis of Data

The data from this study was analyzed descriptively. Descriptive analysis was used because the small number of subjects included in the study made standard analysis difficult.

Table 1

Subject Data

Group	Age Range	Grade
1	5-1 to 5-7	K
2	6-0 to 6-9	1
3	7-0 to 6-9	2
4	8-0 to 8-10	3
5	9-0 to 9-9	4
6	10-0 to 10-9	5
7	11-4 to 12-0	6

Chapter IV

Results and Discussion

Recent studies indicate that a feature of black dialect concerns the pronunciation of the medial and final |θ| phonemes (Harris, 1969; Burlings, 1970; Labov, 1970; Adler, 1971; Fasold and Wolfram, 1975; Smitherman, 1977). According to Fasold and Wolfram (1975) the regular pronunciation rules for the sounds represented for the |θ| are mainly context governed. Labov (1970) states that two such rules call for the deletion of the |θ| phoneme in the medial position and substitution of the |f| phoneme for the |θ| phoneme in the final position.

Research conducted by Bountress (1977) indicated an increase in the correct use of the |θ| in the initial position as a function of age. The purpose of the present study was to determine whether correct production of the medial and final |θ| phoneme increased as black children's age increased.

Results of this study show that there was not a significant increase in the correct production of the target phonemes. Data presented in the present study

shows that all forty-two children produced the phoneme in the medial and final phonemic positions incorrectly. (See Table 2.) A possible reason for this phenomena may involve environmental factors which were not investigated in this study.

Limitations of Present Study

The data in this study was obtained from only forty-two subjects taken from two elementary schools in the city of St. Louis. Due to the nature of the regulations governing the population to be screened at the beginning of the school year more children were screened at the kindergarden level than in the other grades. All of these factors restrict the generalizability of the results.

The subjects were tested using the PAT which contained the target phoneme in three words: thumb, toothbrush, and teeth. A conversational sample was not taken into consideration in this study to see whether the incorrect production occurred in only the target words.

This study also did not take into consideration the perpetuating factors in the continued misarticulation of the target phonemes. These factors could be

Table 2

Photo Articulation Test Results

Group Number	Number of Subjects	Number of Correct Responses	
		Medial θ	Final θ
1	3 female	0	0
1	3 male	0	0
2	3 female	0	0
2	3 male	0	0
3	3 female	0	0
3	3 male	0	0
4	3 female	0	0
4	3 male	0	0
5	3 female	0	0
5	3 male	0	0
6	3 female	0	0
6	3 male	0	0
7	3 female	0	0
7	3 male	0	0

of great importance when attempting clinical intervention.

Further Research Considerations

The results of this study indicate a need for further research to investigate the causative factors and to determine whether this study can be generalized to other black populations. Further research should include such considerations as larger populations. These populations could include screening entire classrooms in all grades as well as children living in other urban and rural areas.

Research should also be done to pinpoint contributing factors and to determine to what extent they affect the acquiring of standard English features.

Experimental therapy could also be done to see whether clinical intervention would increase the correct production of the |θ| phoneme at the single word and conversational level.

Clinical Implications

The results of this study, in the opinion of the author, does indicate a need for early clinical inter-

vention by the speech clinician. Self correction of the phoneme in question did not seem to readily occur in the black population included in this study. Hence, there seems to be a need for clinical intervention. Although this study lacked a large population, this type of research is important because it suggest the importance and possible need for clinical intervention. It also stimulates further research considerations.

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