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Technical Report No. 121

ON THE DIALECT QUESTION AND READING

William S. Hall and Larry F. Guthrie
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

May 1979

Center for the Study of Reading

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On the Dialect Question and Reading

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Abstract

It is often suggested that certain aspects of Vernacular Black English interfere with the reading of Black dialect speakers. In this paper, representative studies on dialect interference are reviewed and discussed. These studies are considered according to the three levels of analysis on which they have been conducted: (1) phonological; (2) grammatical; and (3) lexical and content. The implications of these studies for reading performance are discussed, and reasons for the equivocal nature of their findings suggested. Finally, questions for further research are presented.

On the Dialect Question and Reading

Introduction

This paper has a twofold purpose. The first is to describe studies on dialect variation and to discuss the implications of these studies for reading performance. The second is to raise some relevant questions for research that are suggested by the current state of affairs in the area. The dialect variant to be described is Vernacular Black English (VBE). The levels of analysis to be considered are: (1) phonological; (2) grammatical; and (3) lexical and content. In the process of discussing the implications of these data for reading performance we will suggest reasons for the equivocal nature of many of the existing findings. Finally, we will suggest questions toward which further research might be directed.

Phonological Interference

A sizeable body of literature exists on phonology and grammar as they relate to reading interference among Black dialect speakers. Generally speaking, the distinction between grammatical and phonological features of Black dialect is not clear cut. Simons' (Note 1) categorization of VBE features illustrates the difficulty of making this distinction:

First, there are features that are wholly phonological such as consonant cluster simplification in monomorphemic words, e.g., "test" - "tess," "desk" - "dess." Second, there are features that

are phonological in origin but intersect with consonant cluster simplification in words with past tense morphemes, e.g., "liked" - "like," "passed" - "pass," etc. Third, there are features that are clearly grammatical such as the invariant "be." (p. 3)

In a study bearing on the question of phonological interference, Melmed (1971) investigated the major phonological features in which VBE differs from Standard English (SE)--"r-lessness," "l-lessness," consonant cluster simplification, weakening of final consonants, and vowel variations. He compared third grade Black children with third grade White children on their ability to discriminate these phonological features auditorily, to produce them, to comprehend them in oral reading, and to comprehend them in silent reading. He found that the Blacks differed from the Whites both in auditory discrimination and production of the selected features. The Blacks failed to discriminate the features more often than the Whites and they also produced them more often than the Whites. This difference was taken as a demonstration that the Blacks were dialect speakers and the Whites were not. If phonological interferences exist, the speakers who exhibited the most dialect features, in this study the Black subjects, should do less well on the reading measures than those who exhibited fewer dialect features, here the White subjects. If there is no phonological interference, then there should be no difference on the reading measures. The latter was found to be the case for Melmed's subjects. While the Black subjects differed on auditory discrimination and production of the selected phonological features, they did not differ on their ability to comprehend them in oral and silent reading.

Rystrom (1970) conducted another study bearing on the question of phonological interference. He compared the effect of training in the production of SE phonology on the reading achievement of VBE speakers. The experimental group received training in producing SE phonology; the control group received language arts training without particular emphasis on SE. Reading instruction for both groups was equally divided between basal reader and phonics approaches. He found that neither training in SE phonology nor type of reading instruction produced significant differences in reading achievement on four measures of reading achievement.

In another study, Rentel and Kennedy (1972) investigated the effects of pattern drill in SE on first grade Appalachian dialect speakers and its influence on reading achievement. They employed the same research strategy as Rystrom to test the hypothesis of phonological and grammatical interference. They compared the reading achievement of three experimental classes who received pattern drill on the phonological and grammatical features of SE that conflict with Appalachian dialect with three control classes who received no special training. Thus in the same way as Rystrom, they attempted to manipulate the amount of dialect to see if it affected reading achievement. If dialect interferes, the group that receives training in SE should experience less interference and do better in reading than a comparable group who have no training and experience more dialect interference. Employing a posttest design, Rentel and Kennedy found no difference in reading achievement between the experimental and control groups.

Further indirect evidence on the question of phonological interference is provided by Osterberg (1961), who studied reading acquisition in a dialect area of Sweden. He conducted an experiment in which a group of first grade children were taught for the first ten weeks of the school year with books especially written to conform to the phonological features of the dialect area in which they lived. A control group received instruction using standard texts that conformed to the standard Swedish speech. If phonological interference with learning to read exists, then teaching students to read with texts that conform to their phonological system should reduce this interference and thus increase reading achievement. Assuming this line of reasoning is correct, then the experimental group in the Osterberg study should have learned to read better than the control group, all other things being equal. Osterberg found that the experimental group was superior to the control group on various measures of reading achievement after ten weeks, and at the end of one year.

Taken as a whole, the evidence cited above is not convincing concerning the question of whether phonological interference in learning to read exists. It is not clear in several works (Melmed; Rentel & Kennedy; Rystrom) whether subjects were actually dialect speakers or whether children were assumed to be dialect speakers because they were from lower Socioeconomic Status (SES) groups. In the Melmed study, in particular, it is unlikely that the third grade children were pure dialect speakers. At the very least they should have been mixed dialect speakers. Quite frankly, it is unlikely

that a child could have experienced three grades of the standard American school curriculum without some modification in his language behavior. This, coupled with the fact that the task used was "school-like" as was the setting in which it was given makes it unlikely that the vernacular would be called forth by the child. This latter interpretation is corroborated by some recent work on situation and task in children's talk (cf. Cole, Dore, Hall, & Dowley, 1978), as well as an additional study on constraints of text and setting on measurement of mental ability (Orasanu, 1977).

Grammatical Interference

It has been suggested by Stewart (1969), Baratz (1969), and others (cf. DeStefano, 1977; Hall & Freedle, 1975) that the differences between the grammar of VBE speakers and the SE grammar of instructional materials in reading is a major cause of poor reading achievement among VBE speakers. Comprehension may be a more difficult undertaking for VBE speakers as a consequence of these grammatical differences.

One would predict that VBE syntax could interfere with reading comprehension in two major ways. First, interference could arise in cases where the SE sentence is interpreted as a non-equivalent VBE sentence. One example is presented by Stewart (1969), in which the SE sentence, "His eye's open," may be interpreted by the VBE speaker to mean both of his eyes are open because it resembles the VBE sentence "his eyes open" more than it does "His eye open." The latter is the VBE equivalent of "His eye's open." Another example, also pointed out by Stewart, is the

interpretation of "He will be busy" as implying habitual action, because "be" in VBE is used as a marker for habitual action: "He be busy." Finally, there are sentences like "He wanted to go home," which the VBE speaker might interpret as a present tense action because he may not have learned that the "ed" marks past tense.

The second type of potential interference that might arise as a result of the difference between VBE syntax and SE syntax is more indirect. Evidence suggests that the two dialects represent different coding schemes (Labov, 1970; Hall & Freedle, 1973, 1975; Baratz, 1969). A child who is most familiar with VBE, e.g., a lower-class Black, will tend to encode in his short-term semantic memory sentence information corresponding to that code. Likewise, a child who is most familiar with SE will tend to encode in his short-term semantic memory sentence information corresponding to the standard code. If the incoming stimulus for a Black subject is in his familiar dialect, he does not have to do any extra work in encoding the information since it already is in his preferred language. Thus, his short-term semantic memory is in a "non-standard" state. If he usually retrieves this information in the same form as it is coded in his memory, he will produce a large number of non-standard structures. If, on the other hand, the incoming stimulus is in SE, as in a printed text, encoding in VBE will place the burden of an extra processing step on the VBE speaker as he or she moves from the printed SE text to the meaning.

Whatever the precise process involved in reading, it is reasonable to assume that both SE and VBE speakers, at some point in the process, do a syntactic/semantic analysis of the written sentence. This analysis is by necessity based on SE syntax. However, the VBE speaker must perform an additional analysis of finding the VBE syntax that is the equivalent of the SE form. In other words, the VBE speaker must be able to perform a SE analysis, as does the SE speaker, but then find the equivalent VBE form as well. This extra step in reading, while not interfering with the comprehension of any individual sentence, may accumulate over large amounts of reading material to the point where comprehension is interfered with.

Indirect evidence on the question of grammatical interference is provided by Ruddell (1963) and Tatham (1970). They both found that SE speaking White elementary school children comprehended material written in grammatical sentence patterns more frequently used in their oral language better than material written in sentence patterns less frequently used in their oral language.

In a related study, Sims (1972), analyzed the reading errors of 10 VBE speaking second grade children when they read dialect and standard stories from the Baratz (Note 2) readers. An examination of her data showed that the standard stories were read with the same or fewer errors than were the dialect stories.

Johnson and Simons (1973) asked second and third grade Black children to read equivalent stories written in SE and VBE syntax. They found no

difference between the dialect and standard versions of the stories on comprehension and recall.

A note of caution must be sounded regarding the Sims (1972) and the Johnson and Simons (1973) studies. The sample used in these studies included children who had in all likelihood been instructed over a relatively long period in SE; therefore, one would not expect their performance in VBE to be superior.

A study by Labov (1970) attempted to determine directly the degree of interference produced by a particular grammatical feature, the past tense morpheme "ed." VBE speakers typically omit this morpheme in spoken language. The question is, do they understand that the "ed" signals past tense? If they do not, then their comprehension of this aspect of the sentence would suffer, and this would be a case of direct interference. In an ingenious experiment designed to answer this question, Labov asked junior high school VBE speakers to read aloud sentences like the following: "When I passed by, I read the posters. I looked for trouble when I read the news." Their pronunciation of the homograph "read" indicated whether or not they understood the "ed" to be a past tense marker. Labov found that his subjects were able to comprehend the past tense marker 35% to 55% of the time. This fact suggests that failure to understand the "ed" interfered with comprehension more than half the time. In a more detailed analysis, Labov compared subjects' sensitivity to the grammatical or the phonological constraints on consonant cluster simplification and its effects of reading the "ed" suffix.

He found that subjects who were more sensitive to grammatical constraints read the "ed" sentences correctly more often than subjects who were more sensitive to the phonological constraints or for whom the constraints were equal. Thus subjects who deleted the "ed" less often, regardless of whether the following word began with a consonant or a vowel, were the better readers of the test sentence.

Given the data, it appears that the hypotheses advanced concerning phonological and grammatical interference may have to be revised. It may be that VBE does not interfere with the acquisition of reading skills for all VBE speakers in all educational situations. Indeed, Piestrup (1973) has shown that the ways teachers communicate in the classroom are crucial to children's success in learning to read. Moreover, she states that

. . . efforts to find deficits in children or to focus on their language differences may only confound the problems of negative teacher expectations and evade the problem of functional conflict between teachers and children with different cultural backgrounds. Teachers can alienate children from learning by subtly rejecting their Black speech. They can discourage them by implying by tone, gesture and even by silence that the children lack potential. Children, in turn, can show their resilience by engaging in verbal play and ritual insult apart from the teacher, or they can withdraw into a moody silence. Neither strategy helps them to learn to read. (p. 170)

Lexical and Content Interference

The data in this category are the scantest of all. This is especially true when we think of vocabulary as content (see, for example, Cazden, 1972). Nevertheless, a few generalizations can be made. It appears that poor minority group children consistently show slower lexical development as measured by (1) vocabulary subtests of IQ tests like the WISC (see, for example, Shuey, 1966); (2) level of syntactic responding in Entwistle-type free association tests; and (3) recognition vocabulary tests like the Peabody.

Some research, though not without its methodological flaws, has been performed on vocabulary and the VBE question. Williams and Rivers (Note 3, Note 4) investigated score changes on the Boehm Readiness Test as a function of changes in the vocabulary of the test in the direction of VBE. They found that when the vocabulary on this test was changed so that it reflected their experiential network, poor Black children in the St. Louis public schools performed at a level comparable to the White middle class sample on which the test was standardized. Thus, it would appear that dialect has an effect on comprehension at the lexical level as studied by Williams and Rivers. However, these results are somewhat weakened by the fact that there was no control group. If Williams and Rivers had used White children as a control and still produced the same results for Black children, their data would be more convincing and their claim more justified.

Comprehension and the dialect question has also been investigated by Hall, Reder, and Cole (1975). This research avoids our major criticism

of Williams and Rivers' work. Hall et al. conducted an experiment which tested the effects of racial group membership and dialect on unstructured and probed recall for comprehension of simple stories. Thirty-two children, age 4 years 6 months, were the subjects for the experiment. Sixteen were Black and an equal number were White. Subgroups of four children within each racial group were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions such that order of exposure to experimenter (Black and White) and dialects (Standard English vs. Vernacular Black English) were counterbalanced. They found that Whites performed better than Blacks in SE; Blacks performed better than Whites in VBE; Blacks tested in VBE were equivalent to Whites tested in SE; and Whites performed better in SE than in VBE.

Discussion

What emerges from these studies, which vary in their degree of robustness, is a complex and unclear picture. Dialect can be interpreted either as a facilitator (cf. Williams & Rivers, Note 3; Hall, Reder, & Cole, 1975) or an interferer (cf. Hall & Freedle, 1973, 1975). The unclear nature of the findings from these studies suggests that some of our prevailing hypotheses about dialect and reading might need to be revised. But which direction should the revision take? Certainly, the payoff does not seem to reside in a wholesale emphasis on children's repetition or non-repetition of selected grammatical features in the context of sentences. Nor does it seem to lie

in an emphasis on children's ability to acquire the phonology of SE. The real payoff most likely resides in research on the ethnography of communication. This approach will capture subtle, but important, cultural and situational differences in language function and use which are obscured in experimental research. While we cannot specify the details of this approach here, we can cite two illustrative works. We refer the reader to Piestrup's research on the effects of teaching styles on Black first graders' reading achievement (1973), and Ward's study of an entire community and its communicative habits (1971).

In the pages that follow we would like to present some questions for research which should ultimately provide the information needed to make claims about dialect and reading. The needed information can best be stated in terms of questions having to do with cultural variation and language use. The list of questions is not exhaustive, but rather illustrative. Underlying each question is the assumption that there are group differences related to the context of experience. The questions are focused on two aspects of language: (1) differences in language structure and content; and (2) patterns of language use and function.

The specific questions which are posed draw upon two kinds of data in Behavioral Science; namely, sociolinguistics and developmental psychology. With respect to sociolinguistics, they build upon and extend the work of Labov (1972) on elaboration of structure; of Houston (1969) on specific registers and shifts in same; of Ward (1971), Horner (1968), and Cole, Dore,

Hall, and Dowley (1978) on the communication network as portrayed in the home and immediate surrounds; and on language use in a school activity (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Regarding developmental psychology, the questions build upon and extend the work of Hess (1969) on cognitive environments, and White and Watts (1973) on the environment of the child in general.

Structure and Content

(1) Are there differences in the way Black and White speakers structure portions of the lexicon? Hall (Note 5) has hypothesized that there might be certain differences in the way in which speakers of Black dialect and SE structure prepositions, for example. Some Black adults have been observed to say the following to children: "John, sit to the table." In this instance, a SE speaker would probably say: "John, sit at the table." The question is whether or not the rendering, "sit to the table" does not give the child a different relationship between himself and the object table than that interpretable from "John, sit at the table." Essentially, the first instance is more factive than locative.

On a broader scale, the reason for asking this question lies in its centrality of our experience as humans. Space and time, both of which can be readily revealed through prepositions, are basic coordinates of experience. Since only one object can be in a given place at a given time, spatial locatives provide an indispensable device for identification purposes. "Hand me the spoon on the table." identifies the spoon that the speaker is

referring to. The place adverbial, "on the table," indicates a search field, and the head noun, "spoon," provides the target description. As Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976) indicate, how a search is to be executed depends on the particular preposition relating the target to the landmark: on, in, at, by, under, etc. How children learn to delimit the search field and the cultural variations in same should be instructive in trying to ferret out factors relevant to dialect and reading comprehension.

(2) Are there differences between vocabulary used in the home and in the school situation? Answers to this question might be found first in raw counts and frequencies of lexical items. In addition, little is known about the social class differences in the way in which certain parts of the lexicon are structured in different situations. A useful guide in this analysis would be Miller and Johnson-Laird's (1976) theory which describes how certain parts of the lexicon (i.e., spatial relationships and verbs of motion) might be structured.

(3) Assuming that phonology is an important determinant of dialect difference, does phonology play a role in producing misunderstanding between teacher and student? This question can be seen to relate directly to the role of dialect (particularly VBE) in learning to read. Simons (Note 1), for example, has noted that one major behavioral consequence of the differences between the VBE and SE phonological systems for reading acquisition is that certain written words are pronounced differently by VBE than by SE speakers. The results of these differences are words that have a pronunciation unique

to VBE, e.g., "nest" - "ness," "rest" - "ress," "hand" - "han." Moreover, there are words whose VBE pronunciation results in a different word, e.g., "test" - "tess," "mend" - "men," "walked" - "walk," "cold" - "coal." "find" - "fine," etc. The latter result in an extra set of homophones for VBE speakers. These differences in pronunciation, for example, could interfere with the VBE speaker's acquisition of word recognition skills.

Patterns of Usage

(1) To what extent do children rely on non-verbal as opposed to verbal cues in obtaining information from the environment and communicating information about the environment to others? We should ask how do children acquire information from others (adults, older children, peers, etc.), and further, how does their information acquisition here differ, and/or how is it similar to that in the naturally occurring events of their everyday life. Cultural differences may also be significant in this area. For example, Byers and Byers (1972) found that cultural background influences non-verbal communication between children and teachers. White children were found to be more successful in communicating non-verbally with a White teacher than were Black children, even though the teacher paid as much attention to both.

(2) To what extent are there cultural differences in children's adoption of a hypothetical stance toward linguistic information? To study this question productively, the domain of study must be delimited. Analysis of the use of verbs and conjunctions in naturally occurring speech is one way this delimitation can be accomplished. The use of verbs, for example,

might be analyzed because they are necessary for prediction in English, which makes sentences something more than a string of word associations. Conjunctions are essential for the expression of logical connections and relations, and therefore also significant in the determination of meaning.

(3) How might the participant structures of different cultural groups contribute to miscommunication between students and teachers? Though not obvious to the casual observer, the ways in which interaction in the classroom is organized may significantly influence the success of a child. If the participant structures are in conflict with those of the students' culture, the students might not be able to learn or even show the abilities they possess. Philips (1972) provides an account of Native American children for whom such cultural conflict in the classroom causes difficulty.

By investigating these and other questions on structure and content and patterns of usage of language it should be possible to clarify the exact nature of how dialect may be used to facilitate or to hinder the reading process.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have described a group of studies on dialect variation. These studies represent attempts to locate the sources of difficulties for dialect speakers on three different levels: (1) phonological, (2) grammatical, and (3) lexical and content. Their findings, taken as a whole, do not adequately identify the sources of difficulties; they are both inconclusive and conflicting. They contain a number of methodological flaws which cast doubt

on their validity. More importantly, it is quite likely that the theoretical hypotheses which underlie these studies are in need of revision.

These hypotheses are based on at least two false assumptions. The first is that ethnic differences in language performance on one of the three levels of analysis provide evidence for dialect interference. That phonological differences exist is, of course, obvious; that they actually interfere to a great degree with a child's learning to read is another question altogether. The second assumption is that the test-like situations under which experiments are conducted can adequately measure the effects of dialect. Research from this perspective ignores the fact that teaching and learning do not occur in isolation, but are influenced by situation and context. In a repetition task, the phonology, grammar, and vocabulary of a child may vary from that in his everyday speech. Contrived, laboratory-type tasks also miss more subtle dialect differences, both verbal and non-verbal, which may result in miscommunication. In order to capture such differences, the function and significance of language within cultures must be included in any study of dialect interference.

We have suggested several illustrative research questions which might yield more adequate data in the area of dialect and reading. These questions have been divided into those concerned with (1) structure and content, and (2) patterns of language use and function. All of these questions have at least one thing in common: they take into consideration the influence of situation and context. Questions on structure, for example, are not asked

in isolation, but in relation to the effects on teacher-student or text-student communication. Questions on language use center on actual language experiences in the classroom and the home. In these ways, by making studies more in line with the ethnography of communication, aspects of dialect interference overlooked by previous studies can be examined.

The implications of this type of research for reading lie primarily in the area of reading instruction. If researchers can specify for educators actual sources of miscommunication in the educational experience of dialect speakers, several benefits will be realized. Because the differences specified will be ones which actually result in a lowering of school achievement, a clearer picture of dialect interference will emerge. Educators will thus be better equipped to handle problems of dialect that emerge. As they become more sensitive to the cultural differences that influence teaching and learning, teachers will be able to modify the ways in which they interact with dialect-speaking students to better accommodate them, not only in actual instructional methods, but in other ways as well. Changes might also be seen in the materials used for reading instruction. Unlike the suggestions of the sixties (e.g., dialect readers), however, they would be both theoretically motivated and based on empirical evidence.

Ultimately, we would hope that research from the perspective we have outlined would contribute to the elimination of inequities in American education.

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