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Evaluating the Grammars of Children Who Speak Nonmainstream Dialects of English

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Abstract

In this article, we review three responses to the study and evaluation of grammar in children who speak nonmainstream dialects of English. Then we introduce a fourth, system-based response that views nonmainstream dialects of English, such as African American English (AAE) and Southern White English (SWE) as made up of *dialect-specific* and *dialect-universal* features. To illustrate the usefulness of a system-based approach and to distinguish our two terms from others in the dialect literature, we present AAE and SWE relative clause data from two previously published studies. Following this, we present new findings from AAE- and SWE-speaking children's use of past tense and past participles to further demonstrate the value of examining larger units (i.e., systems) of a grammar to identify a child's language strengths and weaknesses. We conclude by arguing that a system-based approach moves clinicians, educators, and researchers beyond a preoccupation with the nonmainstream aspects of children's dialects while also moving us beyond Brown's 14 morphemes. Although the focus of the article is on assessment, the content is relevant to the treatment of grammar because effective promotion of any child's grammar (including the grammars of those who speak nonmainstream dialects of English) will occur only when clinicians, educators, and researchers begin to view the child's grammar as a system rather than as a sum of its parts.

Keywords

AAE; childhood language impairment; grammar; language assessment; nonmainstream dialects of English; SWE

Ask a group of speech–language pathologists or other child language experts to describe their evaluations of mainstream American English-speaking children's development of grammar and one is likely to hear about age-related benchmarks for mean length of

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utterance (MLU) and Brown's (1973) 14 morphemes. For those who work with school-aged children, one may also hear about age-related benchmarks for children's use of conjoining, embedding, and other structures of complex syntax. The same is not the case if you ask these same experts to describe their evaluations of nonmainstream English-speaking children's development of grammar. Instead, responses will be varied, tentative, and perhaps even unrelated to grammar development. Some may refer to the position statement on social dialects that was published by the American Speech-Language-and Hearing Association (ASHA, 1983). Others may cite work by Stockman (1996, 2000), Wyatt (2012), and others to explain test biases, both historical and present, that limit one's ability to evaluate and ultimately serve nonmainstream English-speaking children. Still others may cite work by Seymour et al. to describe nonmainstream English-speaking children's use of contrastive and noncontrastive grammar structures and to argue for the former to be excluded from assessment (Pearson & Ciolli, 2004; Seymour, 2004; Seymour, Bland-Stewart, & Green, 1998).

In this article, we review the literature that supports the aforementioned responses for nonmainstream English-speaking children, because we consider this work relevant and important for anyone who provides language services to children. Following this review, we present findings from children who speak one of two nonmainstream dialects of English, African American English (AAE) and Southern White English (SWE), to highlight the need for and feasibility of studies moving beyond the current dialect literature. As part of this section, we introduce a system-based approach and the terms "dialect-specific" and "dialect-universal" to describe children's development of grammar. Although our article focuses on assessment and not treatment, its content should lead readers to a better understanding of grammar, and this should facilitate our collective ability to promote nonmainstream English-speaking children's development of grammar. This is because one cannot effectively treat or promote what one does not understand.

ASHA'S POSITION STATEMENT ON SOCIAL DIALECTS

Although published 30 years ago, ASHA's position statement continues to be relevant to clinicians and educators who serve children. The position statement makes clear that nonmainstream dialects of English do not reflect a communication disorder because they are as complex and rule governed as other dialects of English. The position statement also urges clinicians to be extremely cautious when assessing the language skills of nonmainstream English-speaking children. This caution relates to concerns about overdiagnosis and underdiagnosis of childhood language impairments. Errors of overdiagnosis involve misclassifying children as language impaired when they present a dialect difference, and errors of underdiagnosis involve misclassifying children as presenting a dialect difference when they present with language impairment. Finally, the position statement calls for clinicians to treat language features that are not dialectal in nature. Quotes from the position statement that best articulate these views include the following:

It is the position of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) that no dialectal variety of English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech or

language. Each social dialect is adequate as a functional and effective variety of English. (ASHA, 1983, para 7)

The speech-language pathologist must have certain competencies to distinguish between dialectal differences and communicative disorders. These competencies include knowledge of the particular dialect as a rule-governed linguistic system, knowledge of the phonological and grammatical features of the dialect, and knowledge of nondiscriminatory testing procedures. Once the difference/disorder distinctions have been made, it is the role of the speech-language pathologist to treat only those features or characteristics that are true errors and not attributable to the dialect. (ASHA, 1983, para 9)

TEST BIASES

Accurate interpretation of assessment data depends on valid measures that are void of bias. A test can be considered biased if it does not yield equitable outcomes for children who differ from each other in their cultural and/or linguistic background (Stockman, 2000). An unbiased test should not show a preference or advantage for any cultural or linguistic group over another. Historically, researchers identified biases within a test by comparing the central tendencies (i.e., mean, median, and mode as well as shape and skew) of scores earned by a group of children with the central tendencies of the test's normative sample; however, over the years, analyses to detect biases have become more advanced. Now test biases are also examined by comparing the diagnostic accuracy of a test and the relative difficulty of items within a test across different groups of children.

Washington (1996) provided an early and comprehensive review of test biases when assessing children who speak a dialect that differs from mainstream American English. At the time of Washington's review, few non-biased tools existed and attempts to renorm or adjust existing tools were deemed inadequate for nonmainstream English-speaking children. Unfortunately, although many assessment tools within the field have been revised or recently developed to better address the needs of nonmainstream English-speaking children, test biases continue to be identified (e.g., Gutierrez-Clellen & Simon-Cerijido, 2007; Hammer, Pennock-Roman, Rzasa, & Tomblin, 2002; Qi, Kaiser, Milan, & Hancock, 2006; Restrepo et al., 2006; Thomas-Tate, Washington, & Edwards, 2004; Woods, Pena, & Martin, 2004; Wyatt, 2012).

The *Test of Language Development—Primary: 2* (TOLD-P: 2; Newcomer & Hammill, 1991) and its later editions serve as an example for demonstrating the difficulties that exist when examining and revising tests to reduce biases. This well-known language test is designed to assess, among other skills, children's grammar abilities. In an early study, Hammer et al. (2002) examined the TOLD-P: 2 for possible biases related to a child's race. Their data came from 245 African American and 1,481 White kindergarteners. Results revealed statistically lower mean scores for the African American children than for the White children on all five subtests of the TOLD-P: 2.

Given that differences in mean scores are not sufficient to confirm test biases, Hammer et al. (2002) then examined items from the TOLD-P: 2 using differential item functioning, a

method that includes both inferential and descriptive analyses. Results from these analyses indicated that 16% (or 24 items) of the 150 items on the test showed a 5% or more scoring difference between the two races of children; and for 75% (18 items) of these items, scores were lower for the African American children than for the White children. As part of the evaluation, Hammer et al. (2002) also discussed the importance of seeking explanations to confirm a test bias if one is suggested by a set of scores. Explanations they considered for the TOLD-P: 2 were related to vocabulary differences and testing format differences between the two groups of children. For vocabulary differences, they further reasoned that some of the problematic test items (e.g., *stump*, *crow*) may have been more familiar to children living in rural areas, and place of residence was not controlled in their sample (percentage of children in the sample who lived in a rural area: White = 30% vs. African American = 4.5%).

Since Hammer et al. (2002) published their study regarding the TOLD-P: 2, third and fourth editions of the test have been developed. As noted by Hammer et al. (2002), the third edition likely remained biased because only three of the removed items were among the problematic items identified on the TOLD-P: 2. However, the development of the fourth edition by Newcomer and Hammill (2008) included new items whose selection was based on the test developers' analysis of differential item difficulty by the children's gender (male vs. female), race (African American vs. non-African American), and ethnicity (Hispanic American vs. Non-Hispanic). Results from the item analysis showed negligible differences as a function of the child grouping variables (i.e., gender, race, and ethnicity) for all but seven items, with no more than three showing differences for any one of the grouping variables. Although these results are encouraging, independent evaluations by researchers other than the test developers are needed to corroborate these findings with other groups of children. Likewise, similar types of studies are needed to evaluate the many other tests that have been recently revised or developed.

CONTRASTIVE VERSUS NONCONTRASTIVE GRAMMAR STRUCTURES

Nonmainstream dialects of English often are described as presenting contrastive and noncontrastive grammar structures (e.g., Leonard & Weiss, 1983; McGregor, Williams, Hearst, & Johnson, 1997; Seymour et al., 1998). Contrastive structures vary across dialects and noncontrastive structures do not. The contrastive structures are typically viewed as being extremely difficult to assess because they show not only variation across dialects but also variation between children who are developing language typically and children who present with specific language impairment. In other words, contrastive structures can present ambiguity within the decision-making process because upon hearing an utterance with a contrastive structure, one does not know whether the source of the structure relates to the child's dialect or to a language impairment.

To illustrate, consider the auxiliary "be" form, *are*. This grammar structure is considered contrastive because it is always overtly marked (e.g., *They are walking*) in mainstream dialects of American English but it can be overtly marked (e.g., *They are walking*) and zero marked (e.g., *They Ø walking*) in many nonmainstream dialects of English including AAE and SWE. Extended use of optional marking of auxiliary *are* (i.e., which allows both overt

marking and omission of marking) also is characteristic of children with specific language impairment. The diagnostic ambiguity of auxiliary *are* arises, therefore, because utterances such as *They Ø walking* can be interpreted as either a sociolinguistically appropriate dialect variant or a clinical marker of childhood language impairment.

Seymour et al. (1998) examined the diagnostic usefulness of six contrastive grammar structures (i.e., third person—s or verbal—s, auxiliary and copular “be,” regular past tense, plurals, possessives) and 11 noncontrastive grammar structures (e.g., articles, demonstratives, locatives *here* and *there*, negation, prepositions, pronouns). Their data came from language samples that had been collected from 14 AAE-speaking children, aged 5–8 years; half were classified as language impaired and half were classified as typically developing controls. The results showed that the two groups of children differed on three of the noncontrastive structures. In comparison, no group differences were observed for the contrastive grammar structures, except for regular past tense.

Based on their 1998 findings, Seymour et al. created the *Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation* (DELV) test series to facilitate clinicians’ use of noncontrastive structures within assessment. The series includes a screener, a criterion-referenced test, and a norm-referenced test (Seymour, Roeper, & de Villiers, 2003a, 2003b, 2005). Although the DELV criterion-referenced test was criticized by Spaulding, Plant, and Farinella (2006) as lacking adequate levels of diagnostic accuracy, the norm-referenced version boasts diagnostic sensitivity and specificity levels above .90 when $-1\ SD$ is used as the cut score.

The DELV screener includes 17 noncontrastive items to evaluate a child’s risk for language impairment, and 11 of these items target a child’s use of grammar (e.g., use of *was*, possessive pronouns such as *hers* and *their*, and complex verb phrases following a *Wh* question). Support for the screener includes a .70 correlation between the risk items on the screener and the syntax subtest of the criterion-referenced version of the test (Seymour et al., 2003b). This was a finding we recently replicated with the screener and the norm-referenced version of the test using a sample of 114 AAE- and SWE-speaking children ($r = .60, p < .001$; Oetting, Porter, Seidel, McDonald, & Hegarty, 2011).

As evidenced by this review, the existing literature on and about services for nonmainstream English-speaking children reflects seminal lines of work that remain relevant and important for speech-language pathologists and others who provide language services to children. Yet, these lines of work should not be viewed as more than the first steps of a field’s evolution of a study topic. Certainly, the authors of these previous works did not consider their research finished but instead hoped that their efforts would inspire others to rigorously test and expand upon their findings. In the spirit of advancing science and clinical practice, we respectively note that much of the existing literature has been heavily focused on what clinicians *should not do* (i.e., they should not classify a dialect as a disorder, use a biased test, or measure contrastive grammar structures within assessment) rather than on what they *should do*. We also posit that an unintended outcome of this focus has been to lead clinicians away from rigorous language assessments, especially rigorous measures of grammar, when working with children who do not speak mainstream American English.

DIALECT-SPECIFIC AND DIALECT-UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF CHILDREN'S GRAMMARS

In the 1990s, we began studying the grammars of children who speak AAE and SWE, two nonmainstream dialects of English that are spoken in rural Louisiana. These child dialects are also spoken in urban areas but our interest was in rural dialects because of the education and health disparities repeatedly documented for children who live in the rural deep south (Goldhagen et al., 2005). Initially, we avoided tests known to be biased and we tried to exclude the contrastive grammar structures from our analyses. However, we soon realized that our methods, although well-intended, required us to ignore many structures of language that are not only critical for communication and academic achievement but also actively pursued as clinical markers of specific language impairment in mainstream American dialects of English and in languages other than English.

We eventually abandoned our methods and began studying the contrastive and noncontrastive structures in child AAE and SWE (among others, see Oetting, 2005; Oetting & Garrity, 2006; Oetting & McDonald, 2001; Oetting & Pruitt, 2005; Ross, Oetting, & Stapleton, 2004). While studying the contrastive structures, we came to understand and appreciate the ways in which individual grammar structures present both *dialect-specific* and *dialect-universal* aspects. Dialect-specific aspects are those in which the structure or unit of language is differentially represented, used, or acquired within and across dialects. Dialect-universal aspects are those in which the structure or unit of language is similarly represented, used, or acquired within and across dialects. Whereas the classification system of Seymour et al. (1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2005) and others categorizes individual grammatical structures as either contrastive or noncontrastive, our approach allows individual grammar structures to include both dialect-specific and dialect-universal characteristics.

As an example, relative clause markers are contrastive across adult dialects of English because (a) when the relative marker functions as the subject of the relative clause, it can be optionally produced in AAE and SWE but it must be invariantly produced in mainstream American English, and (b) when the relative marker functions as the object of the relative clause, AAE and SWE allow six different forms (i.e., *that*, *who*, *which*, *where*, $\emptyset$, and *what*) to serve as the relative marker whereas only five (i.e., *that*, *who*, *which*, *where*, and $\emptyset$, but not *what*) are felicitous in mainstream American English. Thus, the dialect-specific aspects of relative clause markers in AAE, SWE, and mainstream American English involve the marking options “+/- zero marking” when the relative marker serves as a subject (e.g., *I fed the baby $\emptyset$ was hungry*) and the marking options “+/- use of *what*” when the relative marker serves as an object (e.g., *I ain't got a sister what I can fight much*). Nevertheless, relative clauses and relative clause markers also present a number of dialect-universal aspects across AAE, SWE, and mainstream American English. These universal aspects include the rate at which, and the types of contexts in which relative clauses and different types of relative clause markers are produced.

In two studies, Oetting and Newkirk (2008, 2011) showed that AAE- and SWE-speaking children also produce relative clauses with dialect-specific and dialect-universal aspects. The data for the first study included language samples from 140 children (87 who spoke AAE

and 53 who spoke SWE; forty-one 6-year-olds with specific language impairment and 99 typically developing 4- and 6-year-old controls), and the data for the second included the same samples from the 99 children who presented typical language development. Results from these studies revealed dialect-specific aspects of the children's relative clause markers, including zero-marked subject relative clauses (e.g., *Maybe there's a crawfish in there Ø pinched him on the tail*) and the use of *what* in object relative clauses (e.g., *I ain't got a sister what I can fight much*). In addition, the typically developing AAE- and SWE-speaking children's rate of overtly marked subject relatives averaged 86%, which is lower than the 100% produced by children who speak mainstream American English but consistent with the rates produced by adult speakers of AAE and SWE.

The typically developing children's relative clause markers also showed dialect-universal aspects because the children's use of the markers varied by the syntactic function of the marker and the humanness of the antecedent in ways that have been established in other dialects of English, including mainstream American English. Specifically, the children produced more of their Ø markers in object relatives (78%) than in subject relatives (22%). Also, the children produced *who* only when the marker served as a subject and the antecedent was human and *where* only when the marker served as a locative and the antecedent was nonhuman. These findings, which have also been attested in other dialects of English, demonstrate the dialect-universal aspects of the children's relative clause systems. Figure 1 illustrates the dialect-specific and dialect-universal aspects of the relative clause system in child AAE and SWE, with average percentage data or group proportional data reported when appropriate.¹ As can be seen, there are far fewer dialect-specific aspects of the children's relative clause systems than there are dialect-universal aspects, and both pieces of information are needed to fully understand the children's relative clause systems.

Finally and perhaps most interesting, Oetting and Newkirk (2008) found that relative clause markers, although contrastive, could be used to distinguish children with and without specific language impairment within AAE and SWE. The focus of that study was on subject relative clauses, because age-inappropriate omissions of these types of relative markers (e.g., *I fed the baby Ø was hungry*) have been identified as a clinical marker of specific language impairment in mainstream American English (Schuele & Nicholls, 2000; Schuele & Tolbert, 2001). Consistent with the mainstream American English literature, the AAE- and SWE-speaking children with specific language impairment omitted subject relative markers at a significantly higher rate than the typically developing controls (those with specific language impairment = 41% vs. those without = 14%). This finding supported our hypothesis that at least some contrastive grammar structures can be used to help identify childhood language impairment in AAE and SWE. This finding also bolstered our belief that contrastive grammar structures should not be ignored within assessment.

¹Rates of use reported in Figure 1 were calculated from data presented by Oetting and Newkirk (2008, 2011). For example, frequency data from Table 3 of Oetting and Newkirk (2011) were used to calculate the 22% and 78% that appear in the text figure (and text). The 22% reflects the proportion of Ø markers that were produced when the relative marker served as a subject (6/27 = 22%) and the 78% reflects the proportion of Ø markers that were produced when the relative marker served as an object (21/27 = 78%). The 100% rate of *where* to serve as a locative and 100% rate of *who* with human agents were calculated from Tables 3 and 4 of Oetting and Newkirk (2011). The 86% average rate of overtly marked subject relative clauses can be found in Table 5 of Oetting and Newkirk (2008).

The value of a system-based approach can be further demonstrated by considering AAE- and SWE-speaking children's productions of past tense and past participle structures. Past tense is a contrastive grammar structure that is difficult for mainstream American English-speaking children with specific language impairment (Oetting & Hadley, 2009). Past participles are also contrastive but they do not appear to cause children with specific language impairment as much difficulty as past tense (Leonard et al., 2003; Redmond, 2003; Smith-Lock, 1992). Furthermore, typically developing AAE-speaking children reared in poverty overtly mark past participles at lower rates than past tense structures, a finding that suggests a different language learning profile for these children than for children with specific language impairment (Pruitt & Oetting, 2009; Pruitt, Oetting, & Hegarty, 2011).

The language samples for the current set of analyses were elicited from 73 children who resided in a different rural parish from those of our previous AAE and SWE studies. This parish was selected for participant recruitment because of its rural status and sociodemographics. In 2008 when the study was initiated, the racial makeup of the parish included African American (33%) and White residents (66%), and the percentage of residents living in poverty was 19%, which was higher than the national average of 13%. Between 2000 and 2006, the parish also showed less than 1% population change that was important given dramatic, hurricane-related population changes in other areas of Louisiana.

The 73 children who produced the samples averaged 66.11 ($SD = 3.99$) months of age, and their maternal education level averaged 13.44 ($SD = 2.51$) years, with 12 reflecting completion of high school. They were enrolled in public kindergartens and not receiving services from a speech-language pathologist. Thirty-three were classified as speakers of AAE and 40 were classified as speakers of SWE. The dialect status of the children was determined by blind listener judgments of audio excerpts from the children following Oetting and McDonald (2002), language sample analysis, and the children's scores on the dialect section of the DELV screener (Seymour et al., 2003b). The children's language status as typically developing was confirmed through the administration of three standardized tests, the *Primary Test of Nonverbal Intelligence* (Ehrler & McGhee, 2008), $M = 104.40$, $SD = 14.95$; the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test*—4th edition (Dunn & Dunn, 2007), $M = 103.55$, $SD = 10.58$; and the Syntax subtest of the DELV norm-reference test (Seymour et al., 2005), $M = 9.78$, $SD = 1.80$. The samples were elicited from the children during examiner-child play at the children's schools; they averaged 211.16 ($SD = 61.85$) complete and intelligible utterances that yielded 15,462 analyzable utterances.

The children's various past tense and past participle productions from the samples are presented in Figure 2.² The children's dialect-specific uses of the structures are listed on the left and their dialect-universal uses are listed on the right. For each structure, we list the

²Numbers presented in Figure 2 are frequency counts from the children's language samples. Proportions reported in text were calculated from the numbers reported in Figure 2. For example, from the figure, the total number of past tense structures produced by the children was calculated as 4,129, which was the sum of the children's mainstream overt past tense markers, nonmainstream overt past tense markers, and Ø past tense markers ($3566 + 228 + 335 = 4,129$). The total number of participle structures produced by the children was calculated as 283, which was the sum of the children's mainstream overt participle markers, nonmainstream overt participle markers, and zero participle markers ($192 + 51 + 40$).

various marking options produced by the children, their frequencies in the samples, and example utterances.

As can be seen, the children collectively produced a number of different types of past tense and past participle structures within their samples. The dialect-specific aspects involved additional marking options (i.e., zero-marked forms and nonmainstream overtly marked forms) that are available in AAE and SWE relative to the marking options that are available in mainstream American English. The dialect-universal aspects related to the children's use of past tense and participle markers to express six different tenses and the relative frequency at which they produced each of these tenses. For example and as found in mainstream dialects of American English, the AAE- and SWE-speaking children studied here produced past tense structures more frequently than past participle structures (past tense = 4,129 structures vs. past participles = 283, showing past tense to make up 94% of their structures produced and past participles to make up 6%) in their samples, and they used their past participle structures most often to express passive voice (54% of the time or 154 times out of 283 participle structures produced). As was found for relative clause markers, the AAE- and SWE-speaking children's past tense and past participle systems also included far more dialect-universal aspects than dialect-specific aspects. Indeed, 85% (3,758 mainstream markers out of 4,412 dialect-appropriate markers produced) of the children's past tense and past participle expressions reflected dialect-universal markings.

A final dialect-universal aspect of the children's past tense and past participle systems involved the children's low numbers of dialect-inappropriate errors. Dialect-inappropriate grammar errors are frequently discussed in the child language literature as errors of commission, and low rates (less than 3%) of these errors have been repeatedly documented in children learning mainstream American English (Rice, 2004). In the current data set, only 39 dialect-inappropriate errors of commission were produced by the children. Examples of these types of errors included: *He wanted the ambulance to came*; *We don't went to there*; and *Why you didn't brung the boy*? With only 39 errors out of 4,451 (4,412 dialect appropriate + 39 errors) tokens of past tense and past participles produced by the children, the children's rate of these errors is 1%, which is low and consistent with rates produced by children learning other dialects of English (for additional data on dialect-inappropriate errors, see Pruitt & Oetting, 2009).

In summary, we hope through our presentation of AAE- and SWE-speaking children's use of relative clause, past tense, and past participle structures that we have demonstrated the value and feasibility of considering contrastive grammar structures within assessment. Had we excluded these structures from our assessments, we would know far less about typically developing AAE- and SWE-speaking children's use of grammar to effectively communicate with others. Exclusion of relative clauses, in particular, also would have left us unaware of clinical differences between children with and without language impairment in AAE and SWE.

We are currently examining the clinical utility of other grammar structures within AAE and SWE, and we anticipate finding group differences for at least some of the other contrastive structures. Recall that earlier, we highlighted Seymour et al.'s (1998) results for past tense in

child AAE. Of the six contrastive structures and 11 noncontrastive structures evaluated by Seymour et al., the largest difference between the children with and without language impairment was found for past tense (language impaired = 50% vs. controls = 91%); see also Garrity and Oetting (2010) for data showing auxiliary “be” to be both contrastive and sensitive to specific language impairment in child AAE.

In addition, we hope our presentation of relative clause, past tense, and past participle structures in child AAE and SWE has demonstrated the usefulness of viewing individual grammar structures (and larger units of language) as presenting dialect-specific and dialect-universal aspects. We envision our approach as having broader applications as the unit of grammar under study is expanded. For example, we expect children’s growth in global language measures such as MLU also to present dialect-specific and dialect-universal aspects. For MLU, the dialect-specific aspects will most likely involve the types of morphemes available to children within any given dialect, and the dialect-universal aspects will most likely involve the timing and developmental trajectory of children’s MLU levels. Studies of non-mainstream English-speaking children’s MLU levels, as well as studies of the order in which morphemes emerge, become productive, and reach dialect-appropriate adult levels of mastery, are needed to test this hypothesis (for a recent study, see Newkirk, 2010; for additional discussion of system-based research, see Green, 2011; Stockman, 2010; Stockman, Guillory, Seibert, & Boulton, 2012).

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

A system-based approach to the assessment (and treatment) of children’s grammar abilities carries several practical implications for speech–language pathologists and others who provide language services to children. Most obvious is the promotion of evaluation methods that consider all aspects of a child’s grammatical system, including both contrastive and noncontrastive structures and those beyond Brown’s 14 morphemes. As shown in the studies presented in this article, important information can be missed if only a subset of structures is examined.

Language sampling provides a useful mechanism by which to evaluate all aspects of a child’s grammar system, and samples can be examined with grammatical coding systems such as the Index of Productive Syntax (Scarborough, 1990). This scoring system was designed for mainstream American English speakers, but it has also been shown to be appropriate for nonmainstream English speakers (Oetting, 2005; Oetting et al., 2010). In addition, we recommend that clinicians seek assessment tools that target a wide range of grammar items with multiple tokens of each item and within different types of linguistic contexts. Multiple (and lexically diverse) tokens of grammatical structures across a variety of contexts are particularly important when assessing and treating children who speak nonmainstream dialects of English because of these dialects’ expanded inventories of marking options and varied use of these marking options as a function of linguistic context. With a number of different contexts sampled, clinicians and researchers can then begin to consider rate-based differences that exist between children with and without language impairments.

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Figure 1.
Relative clauses in child African American English and Southern White English.

Past Tense and Past Participle Markers in Child AAE and SWE

Figure 2.

Past tense and past participle markers in child African American English and Southern White English.