LINGUISTICS AND EDUCATION 7, 107–128 (1995)

Dialect Readers Revisited

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Recent linguistics research on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) shows little of the concern with educational issues that was evident 20 or 30 years ago, but the educational problems to which we thought we could contribute then remain very real. For instance, the scores of low income African American youth on standardized tests of reading are extremely low, and this raises the question of whether dialect readers—first proposed by linguists in the 1960's—might be worth reconsidering today as one strategy for improving the reading performance of AAVE speakers.

We first review the existing literature on dialect readers, noting the theoretical arguments which were articulated in their favor, the experimental evidence of their effectiveness in increasing reading comprehension, and the negative attitudes which led to their disfavoring and disuse. We then present the results of three new mini-studies of dialect readers in Northern California elementary and junior high schools, reporting that the AAVE versions were preferred by many of the students (particularly boys) and that it enhanced reading comprehension in one of the two cases in which this was tested. We conclude that dialect readers represent a viable alternative for teaching AAVE speakers to read, and that linguists should, with renewed vigor, resume research on this and other methods of teaching reading. However, we identify several lessons—for instance, the importance of community involvement—which should be learned from prior research on this subject.

Linguistics research on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) began in a serious way in the mid 1960s with the publication of edited collections exploring the relation between social dialects and language learning (Shuy, 1964) and between nonstandard speech and the teaching of English (Stewart, 1964).[1] As the foci of these volumes indicate, the first decade of linguistics research on AAVE (1964–1974) was strongly oriented to educational concerns, and the first large-scale quantitative sociolinguistic surveys of AAVE (Labov, 1972; Labov, Cohen, Robins, & Lewis, 1968; Wolfram, 1969) were in fact funded by grants from the U.S. Office of Education. The educational orientation of early research on AAVE was particularly evident in Baratz and Shuy (1969) and Fasold and Shuy (1970), volumes which dealt explicitly with the ways in which the systematic nature of AAVE could be taken into account in improved methods of teaching reading and the language arts to African American children in the inner cities.

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Labov's (1970) review of nonstandard English became "a standard textbook in a number of institutions concerned with teacher training,"[2] and Burling's (1973) text on AAVE began with a chapter on the problem of African American inner-city children not learning to read as well as their White suburban peers, and ended with two chapters which explored possible solutions to this problem.

Although there are exceptions (Brooks, 1985; Farr & Daniels, 1986; H.U. Taylor, 1989; Wolfram & Christian, 1989), linguistics research on AAVE over the past decade (1984–1994) shows little of this educational orientation. To a large extent, the recent literature has been preoccupied instead with diachronic issues, involving either the nature of AAVE in earlier periods (Bailey, Maynor, & Cukor-Avila, 1991) or the question of whether AAVE is currently diverging from vernacular White English (see Butters, 1989; Fasold et al., 1987). In the intervening decade (1974–1984), only two educational issues attracted any significant attention from linguists working on AAVE: the 1979 Black English trial in Arbor (Chambers, 1983; Smitherman, 1981), and the question of whether African American children used a loosely structured topic associating style instead of the topic centered style favored by schools (Michaels, 1981; Michaels & Collins, 1984).

As a result of the relative neglect of educational concerns over the past 2 decades, and the fact that linguists have rarely been directly involved in schools and classrooms, the contributions which linguistics has made to understanding and solving the educational challenges of African American inner-city youth have been limited. We have said and shown that AAVE and other nonstandard dialects are systematic, and we have provided some description of their features and their social and stylistic correlates; we have attempted to rebut (Baugh, 1988; Labov, 1969; Stewart, 1969) the simplifying "deprivation" assumptions about AAVE and its speakers held by some social psychologists and nonlinguists; we have urged that teachers learn enough about AAVE to recognize when students are making mistakes in reading, rather than reproducing correctly read Standard English (SE) in the patterns of their own vernaculars (Labov, 1967); we have identified problems with existing IQ tests (Smitherman, 1977; Wolfram, 1991); we have made some suggestions about the use of dialect readers, oral exercises, and other methods of teaching African American children to read (Feigenbaum, 1970; Simpkins & Simpkins, 1981; Starks, 1983; Stewart, 1969); we have recommended that African American rhetorical and expressive styles be more fully incorporated into the classroom (Ball, 1992; Foster, 1989; Hoover, 1991). These are useful achievements, to be sure, but they fall short of the enormous promise of theoretical insight and practical solution which linguistics seemed to offer for the educational challenges of lower and working class African Americans 3 decades ago.

One respect in which linguistic research has been particularly wanting is in its almost exclusive focus on the language production of AAVE speakers rather than their language comprehension (the critical goal of reading). In an attempt to

redress this imbalance, we present some preliminary research that we and our students did on narrative comprehension and response among African American school children and their teachers, as affected by the linguistic variety employed (AAVE vs. SE). But we first describe the setting in which this research took place and summarize the literature on the question of dialect readers.

THE SETTING

Our research was conducted primarily in East Palo Alto, California, a low-income, multiethnic city located east of Stanford University and Palo Alto. According to the 1990 census, the city's population included 23,451 people, of whom about 42% were Black, 36% Hispanic (primarily of Mexican descent), 12% White, 6% Pacific Islander (primarily Tongan and Samoan), 3% Asian (primarily Filipino, Japanese, and Asian Indian) and 1% American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut.[3] In 1992, the community had the dubious distinction of being dubbed the murder capital of the United States because it had a higher per capita rate of homicides—mostly in connection with the cocaine drug trade—than any other American city. That rate has since been reduced, and the city no longer leads the nation in this regard.

In the 1989–1990 school year, the Ravenswood School District (which includes schools in East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park) recorded some of the lowest achievement scores in the state on the California Assessment Program. At the third-grade level, reading scores were at the 16th percentile statewide, and at the sixth-grade level they were at the 3rd percentile; corresponding third-grade writing scores were at the 21st percentile, but by the sixth grade they had also slipped to the 3rd percentile, recalling Steele's (1992) observation that the test scores of African American students get progressively worse the longer they stay in school.[4] On the new state achievement test, the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS), the 1993–1994 scores for the Ravenswood School District seem better—58% of the fourth graders scored 3 or higher in reading and 78% scored at the same level in writing ("How Your Schools Stack Up", 1994). These results suggest that the valiant efforts of administrators and teachers in the district to turn things around are having some success, despite the limited resources at their disposal and the myriad challenges which face them. But a score of 3 on the six-point CLAS evaluation scale is not a very demanding measure of achievement,[5] and the Ravenswood scores were lower than those of other districts on the Peninsula (Palo Alto's corresponding scores were 95% and 96%, respectively), and lower than those statewide (76% and 84%, respectively).[6]

During the 1993–1994 school year, we volunteered on a regular basis in a sixth-grade classroom in one of the lowest achieving schools in the district.[7] We assisted the teacher with language arts classes, helping individuals and groups of students with assigned work, and occasionally leading the class in reading and discussion of selected stories and poems. In the winter quarter of 1994, one of

the authors of this article, Angela Rickford, began working with a pull-out group of nine students with whom she did the storytelling and recall exercises that we later report on. In the same period, four students in a Stanford course on AAVE taught by the other author of this article, John Rickford, tested the comprehension of students in a seventh-grade class in another school in the Ravenswood School District, using stories and questions from the *Bridge* series, written alternatively in AAVE and SE (Simpkins, Holt, & Simpkins, 1977). We also elicited attitudes of teachers in the school to these two varieties. In the spring of 1993, Angela had done a similar project with teachers and students at another school on the San Francisco Peninsula (this one in San Mateo), asking students and teachers to respond to narratives differing in their use of AAVE and SE and in other respects. In the spring of 1994, we replicated the *Bridge* experiment in the sixth-grade East Palo Alto classroom in which we worked. We report on the results of these preliminary experimental projects later.

THE LITERATURE ON DIALECT READERS

The case for teaching African American children to read via "dialect readers"—materials which are written in a variety of AAVE—was first set out in detail by Stewart (1969), who began by noting that

> in many parts of the world . . . learning to read (even with substantial amounts of formal instruction) may be rendered infinitely more difficult by a tradition of writing primarily or exclusively in some language other than the one (or ones) which the population normally learns to speak. In the West African countries, for example, practically all writing . . . is done in English or French, in spite of the fact that scarcely any Western African learns English or French as his first language. . . . For multilingual situations of the West African type, one of the most promising innovations in the direction of a viable literacy program is the pedagogical separation of beginning reading from the encumberment of concurrent foreign language teaching. This separation is accomplished by the simple strategy of teaching individuals to read first in their own native language, and then transferring the reading skills thus acquired to the task of reading in whatever foreign language is the goal of the literacy program. (pp. 157–158)

After observing that AAVE was systematic and structurally more different from SE than other American dialects, Stewart went on to argue that the language learning problems of an AAVE speaker trying to acquire SE "are, in many ways more like those of, say, a Spanish speaker who is trying to acquire English than they are like those of a middle-class, English speaking child," and that they may benefit from "techniques . . . developed in foreign language teaching to deal with structural conflicts between different language systems" (p. 168).[8] One such technique was the native-to-foreign literacy innovations being adopted for multilingual situations of the West African type, for "might not learning to read in an unfamiliar dialect have associated with it some of the problems which have been found to characterize learning to read in an unfamiliar language?" (p. 170).

Stewart's (1969) contention that cross-language literacy techniques may be relevant to the cross-dialect situation faced by speakers of AAVE learning SE was supported by two sets of experimental evidence. The first was the finding of Österberg (1961):

> In a Swedish-dialect context, Tore Österberg found that the teaching of basic reading skills in the non-standard dialect of the school children in a particular district (Piteå) increased proficiency, not only in beginning reading in the nonstandard dialect, but also in later reading of the standard language. (p. 170)

The second was Stewart's "fortuitous experience" (1969, p. 170) with a dialect version of "The Night Before Christmas" which he had prepared for use in a Christmas greeting card.[9] The opening lines of the dialect version went as follows:

> It's the night before Christmas, and here in our house,
> It ain't nothing moving, not even no mouse.
> There go we–all stockings, hanging high up off the floor,
> So Santa Claus can full them up, if he walk in through our door.

According to Stewart, in 1965 a 12-year-old AAVE speaker named Lenora who was normally a problem reader happened to see the dialect version in his typewriter, and when she began to read it, "her voice was steady, her word reading accurate, and her sentence intonation . . . natural." However, when he asked her to read the original SE version for comparison, "all the 'problem reader' behaviors returned" (p. 172).[10] Stewart argued that "this unplanned 'experiment' [later duplicated with other inner-city children] suggested an entirely different dimension of possible reading problems" (p. 172–173) for inner-city African American children than those focused on by such methods as the initial teaching alphabet and phonics—that of structural interference between their native AAVE and the SE which they are invariably given to read. He asked rhetorically

> if it has been considered pedagogically useful to adapt beginning reading materials to the word pronunciations of middle-class white children (as has been done in i.t.a. and phonics), then might it not also be useful to adapt beginning reading materials to the sentence patterns of lower-class [African American] children? (p. 173)

Although Stewart's (1969) fortuitous experience with the AAVE version of "The Night Before Christmas" was striking and became quite influential, it has obvious limitations as a scientific experiment. For one thing, there was no formal evaluation of Lenora's reading performance on the AAVE and SE versions of the text—no comprehension test which other researchers could use to assess the reliability and validity of Stewart's findings, and no documentation of the specific decoding errors (or lack thereof) which Lenora produced in reading each version.[11] Moreover, the sample size was limited to one or (if Stewart's subse-

quent duplications with an unspecified number of other students are taken into account) a few students. Of course, Stewart never claimed that his fortuitous experience represented formal experimental evidence, and—as his rhetorical questions indicate—he was pleading for consideration of and experimentation with dialect readers rather than presenting incontrovertible evidence of their effectiveness. Nevertheless, it is striking how rarely the issue of experimental evidence has been raised in the linguistics literature on dialect readers, both in the early work and in more recent discussions and by those in favor of and against them. There is some experimental evidence on this score that we summarize later, but it is almost never cited, almost as if it were a paradigm limitation of our field or aversion to the methods of educational psychologists like John (1963), Bereiter and Engelmann (1966), and Farrell (1983) who were charged with misunderstanding the integrity of AAVE and misinterpreting the test performance of its speakers.[12]

For their part, the linguists who wrote about dialect readers in the groundbreaking collection (*Teaching Black Children to Read*) in which Stewart's programmatic article was published—Baratz (1969), Fasold (1969), Goodman (1969), Shuy (1969), Wolfram and Fasold (1969), and Goodman (1969)—endorsed them on theoretical grounds similar to Stewart's,[13] and went on to discuss implementation issues, like the kinds of orthography which they should use, how the transition from AAVE to SE should be handled, and the kinds of objections which parents and educators may raise to the use of dialect materials in school. Everyone seemed to agree that regular SE orthography should be used, and the focus then and in the next decade was on developing reading materials in the dialect.

Wolfram and Fasold (1969) offered three "linguistically appropriate" samples, including an AAVE translation of the revised standard version of the Bible (John 3:1–17), an excerpt from which is reprinted here following its SE original:[14]

(1a) Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him."

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (p. 149)

(1b) It was a man named Nicodemus. He was a leader of the Jews. This man, he come to Jesus in the night and say, "Rabbi, we know you a teacher that come from God, cause can't nobody do the things you be doing 'cept he got God with him."

Jesus, he tell him say, "This ain't no jive, if a man ain't born over again, ain' no way he gonna get to know God." (p. 150)

According to Dillard (1972), Stewart's Educational Study Center in Washington, DC "produced three textbooks (*Ollie, Friends,* and *Old Tales*) in parallel Black English and Standard English versions" (p. 283).

The most extensive and ambitious set of reading materials produced in AAVE

was the *Bridge* reading program developed by Simpkins et al. (1977). According to Simpkins and Simpkins (1981),

> the *Bridge* reading program attempts to start where the students are and take them to where their teachers would like them to be by using the language and culture the children bring to school as a foundation upon which to build. . . . Materials are sequenced according to Associative Bridging; reading in the mainstream dialect is taught as an extension of reading in the students' familiar dialect. Black non-mainstream English serves as a springboard from which to move to the presentation of standard mainstream English. Accordingly, materials are written in three dialect versions: Black English, Transition and standard English. (p. 231)

Examples of narratives from Booklet 3 of the *Bridge* series—one in AAVE, the other in SE—are presented in the Appendix. The narratives were accompanied by skills exercises, including the comprehension exercises reprinted in the Appendix. The booklets were accompanied by cassette recordings of the stories and the program as a whole was introduced by a cassette recording of a young man addressing the kids in the vernacular.

> What's happening', brothers and sisters? I want to tell you about this here program called Bridge, a cross cultural reading program. Now I know what you thinkin'. This is just another one of them jive reading programs, and that I won't be need no readin' program. But dig it. This here reading program is really kinda different. It was done by a brother and two sisters, soul folk, you know.

Simpkins and Simpkins (1981) reported that the *Bridge* program was experimentally field-tested over a period of 4 months with 540 students drawn from the 7th and 12th grades in 27 classes across the United States.[15] The 417 students who were taught with the *Bridge* materials showed "significantly larger gains" on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in Reading Comprehension than the control group of 123 students who were taught with their "regularly scheduled remedial reading instructional activities" (p. 237). More specifically,

> for grades 7–12, the average gain in grade equivalent scores for the group using *Bridge* was *6.2 months for four months of instruction* compared to only an average of 1.6 months of instruction for students in their regular scheduled classroom reading activities. The group using *Bridge* exceeded the normative level (four months gain for four months of instruction), many of them for the first time in their academic careers. (p. 238)

Despite this experimental evidence in support of its effectiveness, the program did not last long. According to Labov (1994), "the publishers received enough objections from parents and teachers to the use of AAVE in the classroom that they ceased promoting it, and further development was shelved."

If we ask how linguists writing from the late 1970s to the present have reacted to the *Bridge* series, and to dialect readers in general, the answer is that they are much

less sanguine then were their predecessors of 1969, the enthusiasm of the latter tempered by the lessons of practical experience. Smitherman (1977)—before the *Bridge* series was withdrawn—called it "the most exciting and creative approach I have seen" (p. 224) and "a solution to the reading-Black Dialect controversy that basal reading specialists could well adopt" (p. 228). Labov (1994) praised the strengths of *Bridge*—its Deweyian aim of starting where the child is, its combined linguistic and cultural approach, its knowledge of the vernacular, and its adaptation to the school environment. But he also suggested that it had weaknesses, including the fact that some of its vocabulary and idiom (e.g., "hip you to that") became dated, and the fact that "the program has not yet been presented in a way that counters the objection that it imposes and teaches a form of bad English that is not generally used by children." This latter weakness of course cannot fairly be attributed to *Bridge* alone; the negative reactions that dialect readers often elicit from parents and educators were anticipated by those who advocated them in 1969 (see Stewart, 1969, pp. 183–190; Wolfram & Fasold, 1969, pp. 142–144). They are the primary reason why linguists discussing the issue more recently have tended to reject them as a solution to the reading problems of vernacular-speaking African American youth, as the following excerpts demonstrate.[16]

> Most parents that I have interviewed feel that their children's education would be excessively retarded if they were taught with dialect readers. All of the Black adults that I have interviewed over the past nine years concur with this opinion. As a group, they have expressed the categorical feeling that Black children should be serious about getting an education, and in America that is a traditional education in Standard English. (Baugh, 1981, p. 125)

> Given children's socialization into mainstream attitudes and values about dialects at an early age, there is . . . little reason to assume that the sociopsychological benefits of using a vernacular dialect would outweigh the disadvantages. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case, as children reject nonstandard forms in reading and parents and community leaders rail against their use in dialect readers. . . . Due to the continuing controversy surrounding the use of dialect primers, this alternative now has been largely abandoned. (Wolfram, 1991, pp. 255–256)

> The attempt to use transitional reading materials written in Black English proved a complete failure. . . . Blacks themselves led the opposition to such a move, and teachers, parents, and black activists united to oppose it. . . . Their motives were various: some felt that such readers would disadvantage black children; others denied the validity of the variety of language itself; still others resisted the notion that there should be any differences at all made in teaching white and black children; and still others insisted that the problem, if there was one, was ascribable to attitudes, i.e., was a problem of racism, and not a linguistic problem at all. (Wardhaugh, 1992, p. 340)

Despite these reactions, the dialect reader alternative should not be abandoned. On the contrary, experimental research on their effectiveness should be increased and be more widely disseminated, and attitudinal research on their

acceptance in the community should be more assiduously and proactively pursued. With respect to the former point, we are struck by the fact that the existing experimental evidence in relation to dialect readers, although limited, is all positive. In addition to the report of Simpkins and Simpkins (1981), there is the report of Leaverton (1973) on the use of an everyday (AAVE) and school talk (=SE) version of four stories with 37 students in an elementary school in Chicago.[17] As measured by word recognition, phrase recognition, oral review, and oral retention tests, learning to read was more significantly facilitated for students in the experimental group (who were exposed to both the everyday talk and school talk versions) than it was for students in the control group (who were exposed only to the school talk version).[18] Leaverton cautioned that the findings needed to be replicated with a larger group, and he mentioned that a study was in progress "whereby forty classrooms of children who started with the experimental materials in September, 1969 will be compared with children in several other special reading programs for inner city children in Chicago" (p. 124). However, as far as we know, the results of this latter study have not been published; they are certainly never referred to in the linguistics literature.

With respect to the question of attitudes, we have yet to see a detailed elaboration of the reactions to the *Bridge* reading program, in particular whether it was pupils, parents, teachers, or other public figures who railed against it, in what numbers, and on precisely what terms. It would also be interesting to know who presented the program to each of these sets of respondents, in what way, and whether opportunities for them to respond to the criticisms were provided and exploited. One way in which a dialect reader program may be more effectively implemented is if were attempted initially on a very small scale, perhaps in one classroom, with the linguist or the teacher implementing it working to first establish good relations, commitment, and trust with the students, parents, and surrounding community, and explaining that he or she shared with them the goal of helping their children achieve literacy in SE and enhanced success across the curriculum. This may sound idealistic, but the current approach, in which experts come into communities from the outside and prescribe solutions with little attempt to teach the kids directly or reach out to their parents, is virtually guaranteed to meet with the negative response which we have feared and experienced thus far, and alternative approaches need to be tried. Moreover, there is evidence (e.g., Hoover, 1978; Taylor, 1973) that parental and teacher attitudes to AAVE were never entirely negative, and there is certainly recent evidence (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 186; Luster, 1992, pp. 148–153; Rickford, 1991, p. 191) that the attitudes of some teenagers and young adults are aggressively positive in relation to AAVE and aggressively negative in relation to SE,[19] so we should be wary of continuing to act on the basis of old stereotypes and assumptions. We do not share Baratz's (1973) view that these negative attitudes of African American parents, teachers, and spokesmen to dialect readers are "a manifestation of ignorance or misunderstanding" (p. 110) and that these community members should be confronted by those of us (linguists) who know better.

These parties have real and legitimate concerns and a cooperative process of learning and teaching—from community to linguist and educator and vice versa—would be more successful in changing attitudes and would allow us to continue experimental work on the effectiveness of dialect readers and other reading improvement approaches. We do share Baratz's conviction, however, that "the possibility that dialect readers might be useful in the process of learning to read must be dealt with as an empirical question" (p. 109) and that it cannot be rejected out of hand on the basis of negative feedback. Serious attempts to understand and modify the negative attitudes and capitalize on the positive attitudes must be made, but the empirical research must also continue.

NEW WORK ON THE RESPONSES OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS TO DIALECT MATERIALS

In the interest of reopening the empirical issue, we report on recent attempts to test the response to dialect readers in three cities on the San Francisco Peninsula, California (San Mateo, East Menlo Park, and East Palo Alto) with small groups of elementary-school teachers and students. Given their modest scale, we refer to these as ministudies.

In the first ministudy, conducted in the spring of 1993, Angela asked seven third- to fifth-grade students in a San Mateo elementary school—all African American and all from low-income backgrounds—to read and respond to excerpts from two stories in the *Bridge* series, one in AAVE and the other in SE. The boys were given SE and AAVE versions of "A Friend in Need," which features a male protagonist, whereas the girls were given corresponding versions of "Dreamy Mae," which features a female protagonist. Among the questions she asked the children was which of the two story versions they preferred and what they thought about using AAVE in school readers. There was an interesting gender split among the responses, with all three girls preferring the SE version, whereas two of the four boys preferred the AAVE version. The girls generally felt that the SE version used language like they did, and were opposed to using AAVE in school readers, on the grounds that SE was "clearer," or that their teachers would disapprove of or not understand them.

> [I prefer the SE one] 'cause in the other one [AAVE] they talked kind of funny. . . . they [teachers] won't want us to write something that has weird talking and stuff; they'd want us to write it normal [i.e., in SE] . . . ("AM," 10, girl, Grade 5)

> [I prefer] the first [SE version, because it talks more clearer. [About using AAVE in school readers:] It's strange. I'd like to speak clearer. ("Z," 9, girl, Grade 4)

Although the boys were also conscious of the potential disapproval of teachers and parents, they were more ready to identify themselves as speaking like the AAVE versions, and in favor of using AAVE in school readers:

> Yes [about using AAVE in school readers]. I like that. 'Cause I like street language, but I don't talk it 'round my mom, 'cause I get in big trouble, 'cause she thinks that's gang language. ("DA," 10, boy, Grade 5)

> [I prefer] the "dude" [AAVE] one, 'cause that's the way I like to talk. ("NF," 9, boy, Grade 3)

The eight teachers (one a teacher's aide) received a more complicated stimulus, consisting of four stories in SE and four in AAVE.[20] They were asked to rate each story with respect to several statements, using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 5 (*I strongly agree*). Table 1 shows their mean ratings of the SE and AAVE stories in relation to two statements: "This story is well written" and "Building a lesson or unit around language use in this passage will help children become better readers." There were four African American teachers and four White teachers, identified by race and gender in Table 1 as AAM1 (African American Male 1), WF2 (White Female 2), and so on.

It is clear from the quantitative data in Table 1 that the teachers, regardless of race, were more positive about their evaluations of the SE stories than they were about the AAVE stories, both in terms of how well-written they were and how useful they would be for helping the children become better readers if incorporated into lesson plans.[21] This normative response is also reflected in their qualitative comments:

> I think it's OK for them to use dialect if they need to, but it is also important to expose them to Standard English as often as possible. That's why they're here. (White male teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience)

TABLE 1
Mean Teacher Ratings of AAVE and SE Stories With Repect to Statements 1 and 2

Teachers	Statement 1: AAVE Stories	Statement 1: SE Stories	Statement 2: AAVE Stories	Statement 2: SE Stories
AAM1	1.75	3.25	2.25	2.75
AAM2	3.5	3.75	3.5	3.5
AAF1	2.25	4.25	2.0	3.75
AAF2	2.75	4.25	2.5	4.25
AA*M*s	2.56	3.88	2.56	3.56
WM1	2.25	4.5	2.5	3.75
WM2	2.5	3.5	2.75	4.5
WM3	3.0	3.5	2.5	3.75
WM4	2.25	3.5	3.25	3.25
W*M*s	2.5	3.75	2.75	3.81
M, all teachers	2.53	3.81	2.66	3.69

Note. Statement 1: "This story is well written"; Statement 2: "Building a lesson or unit around language use in this passage will help children become better readers," which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). AAM = African American male; AAF = African American female; WM = White male; *M* = Mean rating.

> Every Black kid knows that there is language for the playground, and then there is language for the classroom, and if you want anyone to take you seriously, you'd better not mix the two. . . . The dialect is antiquated. I'm not saying it's worthless, but I just don't think it's the right approach for teaching Black kids English. . . . *Preacher and Deacon* had a good theme, amusing and well-written; a lot can be done with that kind of narration, but it needs to be in Standard English. (Black male teacher with 1 year of teaching experience)

The second ministudy we report on was done by four students (Maroney, Thomas, Lawrence, & Salcedo, 1994) as part of a group research report in John's "African American Vernacular English" course at Stanford in the winter of 1994. The setting was a junior high school (sixth through eighth grade) in the Ravenswood School District which includes East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park. Maroney et al. asked two teachers about their attitudes toward AAVE and SE, and got two quite different responses. One teacher said, "I believe that there is a distinct Black English Vernacular . . . and you must take into validity every person's language. Any language is communication as long as people understand each other" (p. 8). The other teacher, however, felt that every child should know "better" by the time they reach the seventh and eighth grades, and that she does not tolerate the use of "sloppy Black English" in her classroom (p. 8).

When Maroney et al. (1994) talked to the students themselves—20 seventh graders, including 14 African Americans, 3 Pacific Islanders, 2 Mexican Americans, and 1 White—they found that their attitudes toward AAVE were generally positive and their attitudes toward SE either neutral or negative. One female African American student said that she did not understand much of what was being taught in her literature class because she did not identify with the wording. Moreover, classroom observation revealed that

> the students in a classroom where natural dialect was permitted seemed more engaged and less intimidated. This setting allowed them to learn without being stigmatized. In another classroom, where students were constantly being corrected for their "incorrect" language, the atmosphere was static. No active participation was apparent, and there was no indication that the students were actually learning what was being taught. (p. 10)

In order to test for the effect of language form on comprehension, Maroney et al. (1994) presented each student with an AAVE and SE story from the *Bridge* series, followed by the corresponding 8- or 10-item multiple-choice comprehension test included in the *Bridge* booklet. The two stories used were "A Friend in Need" and "Dreamy Mae." (See the Appendix for AAVE and SE versions of "Dreamy Mae" and their corresponding comprehension tests.) They explained their methodology as follows:

> If a particular student was tested on the AAVE version of "A Friend in Need", then s/he was tested on the SE version of "Dreamy Mae", and vice versa. This helped to

> avoid the problem of a student answering the second set of questions based on what s/he remembered reading from the first test. (p. 8)

The authors found that the students preferred the AAVE stories and did considerably better on stories written in the dialect.

> Although the students were able to understand concepts from both stories, there was a higher frequency of correct answers for the AAVE versions of the stories: "Dreamy Mae"—95.8% correct in AAVE, versus 79.2% in SE; "A Friend in Need"—93.8% correct in AAVE, versus 71.9% in SE. [See Figure 1] (p. 10)

In the face of Maroney et al's (1994) dramatic results, we replicated their methods in the spring of 1994 with 16 sixth-grade students in an East Palo Alto elementary school—including 11 African Americans, 2 Mexican Americans, 2 East Indians (children of immigrants from Fiji), and 1 Pacific Islander. Like them, we used SE and AAVE versions of the *Bridge* stories, "A Friend in Need" and "Dreamy Mae." However, unlike them, we found that comprehension was higher on the SE stories than on the AAVE ones: slightly so for "Dreamy Mae," 70% (42 out of 60 responses) correct in AAVE versus 76% (76 out of 100) in SE, but overwhelmingly so for "A Friend in Need," 46.3% (37 out of 80) correct in

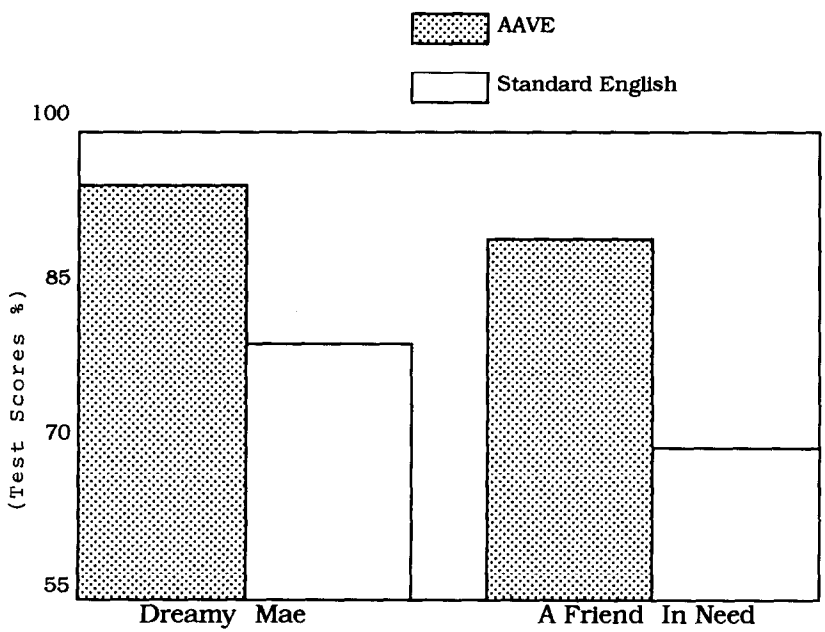

Figure 1. Percentage correct responses on comprehension tests, according to variety used—AAVE versus SE. (from Maroney et al., 1994, p. 21).

AAVE versus 90% (45 out of 50) in SE. There are some possible explanations for the differences between our results and those of Maroney et al. First, the *Bridge* stories and tests were originally designed for use with students in seventh grade and above (Simpkins & Simpkins, 1981, p. 237), and our participants were sixth graders (including several reading 2 or more years behind grade level). Second, in our design, the AAVE stories always came after the SE ones, and students may have felt more tired and spent less time on the AAVE story and test than they did on the SE one. Third, it appears that, by chance, some of the best readers in the class got the SE version of "A Friend in Need," whereas some of the poorest readers in the class got the AAVE version of the same story. This suggests that in the future we should randomly vary the order of story presentation for each student, and match the students doing AAVE and SE versions of the same story by reading or language arts achievement level.

One other aspect of the final ministudy worth reporting is the proportion of boys and girls who preferred the AAVE over the SE version and the proportion that felt the stories used language like they did. With respect to the first issue, only two of the six male respondents (33%) preferred the SE stories, and neither was African American. (One was East Indian and the other was Mexican American). By contrast, four of the eight female respondents (50%) preferred the SE stories, and they were all African Americans. With respect to the second issue, four of the five male respondents (80%)—including three who were not African American—felt that the AAVE passages used language like they did, whereas five of the eight female respondents (71%)—all African Americans—felt that the AAVE passage used language like they did. Given our informal observations that the strongest readers in the classroom are all girls and the weakest all boys, the importance of attending to gender differences in future research on dialect readers (measuring both attitude and comprehension) should be clear.

Overall, the evidence on the attractiveness and effectiveness of AAVE versus SE narratives that emerges from these three California ministudies is mixed, with AAVE versions being favored by seventh graders over younger students, and by boys over girls. There remains a significant need to replicate these tests with larger numbers of students from similar low-income schools with substantial African American populations.

CONCLUSION

Twenty years ago, Baratz (1973), citing Carrington (1971) for similar sentiments, expressed the view that

> when the educational situation becomes desperate enough and the consumer–public frantic enough about the literacy problem, dialect readers may be an idea whose time has come. (p. 110)

The persistence and exacerbation of the reading problem in schools populated by speakers of AAVE may indeed signal the second coming of dialect readers, for the experimental evidence of their effectiveness, although limited and underpublicized, is quite positive. The fact that attitudes toward AAVE are stronger now among working-class adolescents and young adults than they seemed to be 2 or 3 decades ago (see Endnote 19) may also provide a favorable climate for their reconsideration. Noting the excitement and enthusiasm with which some of her students discovered that one of our test passages was written in the vernacular, the teacher in whose sixth-grade classroom we have been working commented: "Gosh, look how excited they are! That's great! . . . Whatever turns them on, let's use it!" It's clear from the ministudies referred to that not all teachers, students, or parents will share this opinion, but to the extent that dialect readers can be shown to increase interest and comprehension in reading—and to the extent that they can be used long enough so that the transition to reading in SE can be successfully made—opposition to their use may well decline.

If and when linguists return to the issue of dialect readers, however, there are several lessons we must learn from prior research—both the experimental work with dialect readers done in various U.S. cities in the 1960s and 1970s (Leaverton, 1973; Simpkins & Simpkins, 1981) and the ministudies done in California in 1993 and 1994. One is that we need new, updated dialect readers,[22] and we need to have corresponding SE texts which are carefully matched to the dialect texts in terms of readability and grade level (see Fry, 1977; Rouch & Birr, 1984), and in terms of the difficulty of the comprehension and other exercises which accompany such tests. A second is that we need to ensure that participants who receive the AAVE and SE versions of the same narrative are comparable in terms of reading ability and that they are evenly divided along gender lines, with ample opportunities for their attitudes toward the exercise to be expressed. A third is that we need a combination of short-term comprehension and reaction tests, of the type done in our California ministudies, and long-term studies of reading improvement with experimental and controlled groups, like the 4-month study done by Simpkins and Simpkins (1981), perhaps extended to a year, and with elementary as well as junior high-school students. A fourth lesson is that the linguists recommending or overseeing the study need to be more involved in the community itself, displaying their commitment in positive ways and working harder to understand, influence, and be influenced by the attitudes of parents, students, and teachers. A fifth lesson is that we should start small—perhaps in one of the new Afrocentric private schools which might be more open than the public schools to experimentation with an African American twist—and experiment with dialect readers on a larger scale only if and when we can demonstrate their success on a more modest scale. A sixth and final lesson is that we should simultaneously proceed with research and experimentation on other means of teaching reading to working class speakers of AAVE, and to others who need help with this essential skill. The idea is not to resurrect the issue of dialect

readers as a cult or religion, but to consider them as one of several possibilities to which linguists may be willing to contribute research time and effort as we become involved once more with educational issues.

Endnotes

1. Compare Dillard (1972, p. 35, Footnote 1), "Stewart's writings . . . may be said to have opened the field of serious study of Black English in this country."

2. The quotation is from A. Hood Roberts's foreword to Labov (1970), page iii.

3. The ethnic labels are those used in the Census Report. (See *1990 Census of Population, General Population Characteristics, California*, Section 1 of 3, p. 54; published by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census.)

4. Here is what Steele (1992) said of this issue: "Despite their socioeconomic disadvantages as a group blacks begin school with test scores that are fairly close to the test scores of whites; the further they stay in school, however, the more they fall behind" (p. 68). Others have voiced similar concerns.

5. The grading criteria for a CLAS score of 3 on reading include the following: "Makes superficial connections. . . . Unwilling to take risks, with little toleration for difficulties in a text." For writing they include the following: "The writing may contain some insights but also demonstrated confused, superficial or illogical thing. . . . Noticeable errors" (*San Jose Mercury News*, 1994, p. 13A).

6. The reliability of the 1994 CLAS scores have since been called into question by reports that the scores of some districts were based on the tests of a relatively small proportion of students in those districts, but it remains a valid generalization to say that achievement levels in the Ravenswood School District are among the lowest in the state.

7. In the interest of preserving the anonymity of the school, we cannot name its principal and deputy principal or name the teacher in whose classroom we worked, but we wish to thank them for their cooperation, encouragement, and trust, without which our research would have been impossible.

8. Stewart (1964) in fact argued that AAVE was more of a "quasiforeign language situation" insofar as "the subtlety of the structural differences" (p. 168) between AAVE and SE make it almost impossible for the AAVE speaker to tell which patterns were nonstandard and which were not.

9. The formal name of the original poem is "A Visit from St. Nicholas," by Clement Clarke Moore.

10. Stewart (1964) described Leonora's general "problem reader" behavior as follows: "She reads school texts haltingly, with many mistakes, and with little ability to grasp the meaning of what she reads" (p. 172).

11. One means of documenting such errors is the Informal Reading Inventory marking system provided by Rouch and Birr (1984). In their system, omitted words are circled, inserted words are marked with a caret, and substituted words are inserted above the word which was substituted for in the text, with the latter crossed out; repetitions of syllables or words are indicated by a horizontal line drawn from above them, and so on. The result is an informative record of the kinds of reading mistakes made by a student learning to read.

12. See Stewart (1969, p. 203, Footnote 3), Labov (1969), and Baugh (1988) for critiques of John (1963), Bereiter and Engelmann (1966), and Farrell (1983), respectively.

13. One exception was Goodman (1969), who felt that dialect readers were

> impractical on several accounts. Primarily the opposition of the parents and leaders in the speech community must be reckoned with. They would reject the use of special materials which are based on a non-prestigious dialect. They usually share the view of the general culture that their speech is not the speech of cultivation and literature. They want their children to move into the general culture. (p. 26)

14. Compare this recent dialect version of the same verses by an African American woman (McCary, 1994) who is an author, journalist, lecturer, and stage artist. Unlike the Wolfram and Fasold (1969) translation, it draws more heavily on AAVE words and phrases (including slang) than on AAVE syntax.

> One Pharisee brother named Nicodemus came to Jesus one night. "Look, Teach," he said to Jesus, "You gotta be the Man 'cuz nobody could do these things unless he was on the one with the Almighty."
>
> *"For sure. Unless a brother is born again he can't even get in the Almighty's front door."* (p. 151)

15. There were 530 African American Students and their schools were located in five parts of the country: Chicago, Illinois; Macon County, Alabama; Memphis, Tennessee; Phoenix, Arizona; and Washington, DC.

16. See Starks (1983, pp. 109–113) for a review of publications that critique dialect readers on other grounds, including their emphasis on oral reading in the upper grades and their content.

17. Information about their grade level is not explicitly given, but because ideas for the stories came from recordings with children from kindergarten, and first, second, and third grades (Leaverton, 1971), we presume that the experimental and control groups included children from one or more of these grades. Leaverton was one of the coauthors (Davis, Gladney, & Leaverton, 1968) of the Psycholinguistic Reading Series, a bidialectal reader developed for experimental use in Chicago schools.

18. On four of the six relevant measures, the chi-square test for the contingency table was significant at the .05 level; on one other it was significant at the .01 level, and on the sixth it was not significant.

19. Note the following quotations:

> Among the attitudes and behaviors that black students at Capital High [in Washington, DC] identify as "acting white" and therefore unacceptable are: (1) speaking standard English. (Fordham & Ogbu, 1968, p. 186)

> It pisses me off when the Oreos—they be trying to correct your language, and I be like "Get away from me! Did I ask you to—correct me?! No! No! No, I didn't! Nuh-uh!" (Fabiola, African American teenager from East Palo Alto, quoted in Rickford, 1991, p. 191)

> I found the strongest signifier of acting White [among young African American adult women at Community School in San Francisco] was speech. Speaking standard English or "talking proper" as the community terms it, was viewed as the prime indicator that someone was acting White. It produced criticism and hostility. Standard English was viewed as something Blacks had to learn or take on. It was definitely not endemic to Black culture. (Luster, 1992, p. 150)

> Yeah, because if you notice, the way they write books, have written books, they're for English, what they say. White people's language and we as Black people have to learn that language but they expect us to change our language . . . to act out with their language. But then if we want to speak our language, it's this, "What are you saying? What are you trying to say?" and know damn well they know, some of them all right. (African American woman from Community School in San Francisco, quoted in Luster, 1992, p. 152)

20. Two of the AAVE stories were vernacular versions of "A Friend in Need" and "Dreamy Mae" from the *Bridge* series, and two of the SE stories were the corresponding SE versions of these stories. One of the AAVE stories was, however, a "transitional" variety from the *Bridge* series, "Preacher and the Deacon."

21. Note, however, that although every one of the eight teachers rated the SE stories higher than the AAVE ones with respect to Statement 1, one African American (AAM2) and one White (WM4) rated the AAVE and SE stories equally with respect to Statement 2.

22. Geneva Smitherman informed us (personal communication, March 5, 1993) that Gary Simpkins, William Labov, and herself plan to work on an updated version of the *Bridge* materials.

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APPENDIX

Excerpts From AAVE and Standard English Versions of "Dreamy Mae" (From the *Bridge* series; Simpkins, Holt, & Simpkins, 1977)

"Dreamy Mae": A Story in Black vernacular

This here little Sister name Mae was most definitely untogether. I mean, like she didn't act together. She didn't look together. She was just an untogether Sister.

Her teacher was always sounding on her 'bout day dreaming in class. I mean, like, just 'bout every day the teacher would be getting on her case. But it didn't seem to bother her none. She just kept on keeping on. Like, I guess daydreaming was her groove. And you know what they say: "don't knock your Sister's groove." But a whole lotta people did knock it. But like I say, she just kept on keeping on.

One day Mae was taking to herself in the lunch room. She was having this righteous old conversation with herself. She say, "I wanna be a princess with long golden hair." Now can you get ready for that? Long golden hair!

Well, anyway, Mae say, "If I can't be a princess I'll settle for some long golden hair. If I could just have me some long golden hair, everything would be all right with me. Lord, if I could just have me some long golden hair."

[Excerpt from Related Comprehension Test]

Directions: Go for what you know about the story "Dreamy Mae." Check out each sentence down below. Circle the letter of the correct answer (a, b, c, or d). There ain't but one right answer to each question, so don't be picking out two.

1. In the beginning of the story, Mae was tripping out on being princess with
   a. dyeing her hair b. long golden hair
   c. a long dress d. an Afro

"Dreamy Mae": A Story in Standard English

"What is the capital of California, Mae?" asked Miss Carter.

Mae shook her head, trying to wake up. She was off in another world. She shook her head again and said, "I don't know."

"Dreaming again, Mae?" asked Miss Carter.

"Yes, I . . . " But before she could finish what she was saying, she was dreaming again. She dreamed that she was a beautiful princess with golden hair. Men came from miles around to admire her beauty.

Ring! It was time for recess. The boys and girls ran outside to eat their snacks and talk and play ball. Mae began unwrapping her peanut butter sandwich. It was the fourth time she'd had peanut butter this week. She took one bite and dropped the rest into the garbage can. "I don't need it anyway. I've got my dreams."

Two girls ran by chanting, "Dreamy Mae! Dreamy Mae! Mae didn't hear them. She was dreaming that she was a princess with beautiful golden hair.

[Excerpt from Related Comprehension Test]
Directions: Circle the letter of the correct answer (a, b, c, or d). There is only one correct answer for each question.

1. Why didn't Mae hear the girls chanting, "Dreamy Mae! Dreamy Mae!"?
   a. She was talking to her friend.
   b. She was dreaming.
   c. She was too busy eating.
   d. She was talking to herself.