

Narrating through time and space: An analysis of preverbal HAD in school-age Black children

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Abstract

Child African American English has been described in terms of discrete features that are clinician-friendly. However, lists of features can prevent one from finding patterns within the system of a linguistic variety. The current study employs a patterns and systems approach (Green, 2002) to investigate the tense-aspect system of child AAE. Specifically, we explore how seventy-eight 7- to 10-year-old children express preverbal *had* across three narrative contexts: narrative generation, narrative writing, and narrative reading. Specifically, we explore the linguistic contexts—achievement/accomplishment versus activity—in which AAE-speaking children use preverbal *had*, simple past, and past progressive. Preverbal *had* can be marked as an accomplishment/achievement or as an activity (Green, 2011). Accomplishments and achievement refer to having a final endpoint (e.g., *walk to school*) or occurring very quickly (e.g., *find*). Activities refer to events that are an activity (e.g., *laugh*). Preliminary findings indicate that preverbal HAD is produced at relatively low rates at this stage of development. Preverbal HAD was produced by 14 children in oral narration, 4 children in narrative writing, and 1 student in oral reading. Of all of the tallied productions of preverbal HAD 26% occurred in oral narrative, 6% in narrative writing, and 2% in oral reading. Across narrative condition, children tended to produce preverbal HAD as an achievement/accomplishment more often than as an activity. Interestingly, preverbal HAD is produced at lower rates in oral contexts than in literate contexts. It appears that children between 2nd and 5th grades are noticing the need to shift to the language of the school context, which favors a standardized variety of American English.