

## **Generalized acquisition constraints and dialect-specific norms in child AAE copula development**

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Within the tradition of sociolinguistic descriptions of the AAE copula, a small but growing body of work examines the variable occurrence of copula/auxiliary absence in the childhood development of (Steffensen, 1974; Kovac 1980; Green, Wyatt, & Lopez 2007). This research examines whether children acquiring AAE show adult AAE constraint hierarchies, such as the preceding and following structural contexts. This analysis examines the constraints on childhood acquisition of AAE copula and compares them with stages of acquisition in Mainstream American English (MAE)-speaking children as well as adult AAE copula norms. Child AAE copula at several different temporal data points is also compared to Becker's (2000) account of MAE copula expression – which distinguishes stage-level and individual-level predicates – in child MAE to determine whether differential development might be found in AAE and MAE copula acquisition.

Longitudinal data come from 25 southern AAE speakers, recorded at ages 24 months, 36 months, 48 months and Grade 1, in play interactions with their primary caregiver (Van Hofwegan & Wolfram 2010). The incidence of deletion in all environments decreases as children age, but the progression is not linear: invariant constraints predominate in the 24-month data, with dialect constraints emerging at 36 months. Beyond 24 months, AAE-speaking children preserve the stage-level vs. individual-level contrast only in environments aligned with dialect constraints (e.g. less deletion for NP vs. locative complements). At 36 months and older, where invariant and dialect constraints proceed in opposite directions (e.g. within the class of adjectival predicates), deletion patterns fall into line with the constraint hierarchy observed in adult AAE. This analysis suggests that the structure of early productive multiword utterances (*Airplane gone*) around MLU 2.0 (Brown's (1973) Stage I) may be sensitive to invariant semantic constraints, but that the subsequent development of complex sentences precipitates the developmental convergence with the adult AAE norms for copula variability.

The data further demonstrate that forms considered in adult AAE as —don't count cases (Blake 1997)— such as [was], [das], and [is], as well as (WH-)questions— exhibit distinct patterns of variability in child AAE. For example, variability is constrained on the basis of, question word (*Why he's not gonna get any?* vs. *Where [0] Mickey 0 at?*), as they are in developing MAE (De Villiers 1991; Green 2010). In addition, a reconsideration of forms typically excluded = in adult AAE (*Whas that?* vs. *What 0 that?*; *I 0 finished* vs. *'m gonna pop it!*; *It 0 hot* vs. *Iss pamper*) on the basis of developmental/semantic variation leads to a clarification of the role of generalized acquisition vis á vis dialect-constraint learning in the progression towards adult AAE.