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Dialect Influence
in Writing

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INTRODUCTION

Clearly there is much concern among educators, and among the public at large, over the apparent inability of many students to produce what is referred to as "acceptable written standard English." It is difficult to define just what "acceptable written standard English" is; however, we know by the use of "acceptable" and "standard" in this phrase that it must be written English which reflects current textbook conventions of capitalization, punctuation and spelling (i.e., the "mechanics" of writing), and that it must reflect standard English grammatical patterns (usually indicated in such areas as subject-verb agreement, negation, etc.). When a student produces writing which does not reflect control of mechanics and/or of standard grammar (even if in fact it does communicate its content effectively), it is not acceptable as "good writing" to most educators, nor to the general public.

I would like to focus in this paper on the second of these two aspects of "acceptable written standard English," that is, the occurrence in writing of features which seem to be traceable to nonstandard patterns in the writer's oral language.

Three such nonstandard features occur in the following sentences taken from a thirteen year old's essay about Mickey Mantle (NAEP: Report 10, 1972):

Mickey was T.V. star and everyone *love* him. Mickey *have* so many *friend* and the want to be like him.

The first noticeably nonstandard feature in the above is the omission of *-d* in *love* where the past tense is clearly intended. The second nonstandard feature is the use of *have* rather than *had* for third person singular present tense. The third nonstandard feature is the omission of *-s* in *friend* where the plural is clearly intended. All three of these features are characteristic of what is often called Vernacular Black English (VBE), which is the variety of English spoken primarily by working class Black Americans.

I would like to emphasize here that everyone speaks a "dialect," that is, one variety or another of the language he/she speaks. It is only when a "dialect" is different from our own that we notice it. Dialects of a language vary according to phonology (pronunciation) and grammar; there are also differences among dialects in the lexicon and in such aspects of language as semantics, pragmatics and rhetorical devices as well. Variation is abundant in every language, and dialects are only generalized groupings of such variation. Even though they are not in reality self-contained, isolated language systems, dialects are socially and regionally recognizable and thus are called standard English (SE), Vernacular Black English (VBE), Appalachian English (AE), etc. However, the number of features all the dialects of English share is undoubtedly greater than the number they do not share. This aspect of language variation is illustrated in figure 1 below, taken from Wolfram and Fasold (1974):

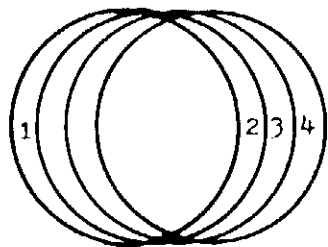


FIG. 1. Relationship among several dialects of English.

1. Standard English
2. Northern White Non-standard English
3. Southern White Non-standard English
4. Vernacular Black English

To sum up then, every language has dialects which differ from each other at many levels of language structure, and everyone speaks one dialect or another of his/her language. These facts, however, conflict with educational goals. Standard English is called standard English precisely because it is socially and economically preeminent over other dialects of English (and not because it is inherently superior in its grammar or phonology). One educational goal of our schools, upon which most people agree, is to get students to be able to produce acceptable written standard English. If a student's natural dialect is not standard English, there will be some features of his/her oral language

which are not going to be acceptable in school writing (an exception, of course, is the effective use of dialect patterns in creative writing). In this paper, I will discuss the occurrence of nonstandard features in writing and whether or not their occurrence is entirely attributable to oral language patterns of the writer.

DEFINING DIALECT INFLUENCE

It has been amply demonstrated that features which are characteristic of nonstandard dialects occur quite frequently in the expository school prose of students whose natural dialect is not standard English (Smitherman 1969, D.G. Briggs 1968, O.D. Briggs 1968, Schotta 1970, Wolfram and Whiteman 1971, and Crystal 1972). Because it has been assumed that the occurrence of these features in writing stem from the natural oral language patterns (i.e., the dialect) of the writer, this phenomenon has been called *dialect interference* (Wolfram and Whiteman 1971). This term was created by analogy with the concept of language interference, which occurs when a speaker who knows two languages uses features from one language while speaking the other language. When we are dealing with the use of features from one dialect in the attempt to produce another dialect (SE), however, we cannot assume two separate systems. Two languages may more clearly be spoken of as two separate systems, but given the evidence from linguistic variability studies (Labov 1966, Labov, et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, 1973, Fasold 1972a, among others), it is very difficult to conceive of two dialects as distinct systems.

For this reason, it might be more appropriate to speak of *dialect influence* rather than *interference*, in order to avoid the implication that there are two separate systems interfering with each other, and to allow the recognition that the speaker of a nonstandard dialect already knows and uses many of the rules of standard English, and that there really may be only a limited number of features out of his/her total language competence which are unacceptable in written standard English. Thus *dialect influence* would refer to the use of nonstandard features in writing which are traceable to the oral language competence of the writer.

A Study of Dialect Influence

At this point, I would like to specify and characterize the major nonstandard features which occur most frequently in school writing and which seem to be traceable to dialect influence. That is, when we speak of nonstandard features in writing ("dialect influence in writing"), what specifically do we mean?

In a comprehensive investigation of dialect influence in writing (Whiteman 1976), I found that a limited number of nonstandard features occur in the

writing of students who speak a nonstandard dialect of English, but that those few features occur rather frequently. Following is a list and brief description of these features:

1. *Verbal -s absence.* The omission of the standard English *-s* suffix to indicate present tense with third person singular verbs (e.g., He *walk* to school every day) is a characteristic feature of VBE. In fact, this is a very frequently occurring feature of spoken VBE, with some speakers using it essentially categorically (i.e., at least 95% of the time). Some white nonstandard dialects use *do* and *have* (rather than *does* and *has*) as third person singular verbs, but do not generally omit the verbal *-s* suffix in this position with regular verbs like *walk*, *go*, etc.

2. *Plural -s absence.* The omission of the standard English *-s* suffix to indicate plurality is also a characteristic feature of VBE; (e.g., They walk down the street with their *radio-* in their *hand-*). Most white nonstandard dialects do not omit this *-s* suffix.

3. *Possessive -s absence.* The third *-s* suffix characteristically omitted in VBE (but not generally omitted in white nonstandard dialects) is the *-s* suffix which is used in standard English to indicate possession (e.g., Then we went over to my *girlfriend-* house).

4. *Consonant Cluster -ed absence.* This feature (e.g., He *miss-* the bus *yesterday so he walk-* to school) also occurs rather frequently in the writing of nonstandard speakers, but only in certain linguistic environments. The relationship between the occurrence of this feature in writing and its occurrence in speech (it is in fact characteristic not only of VBE and white nonstandard English, but also of standard English in certain linguistic and social contexts) is somewhat complicated and will be explained in detail later in this paper. At this point it is sufficient to say that the *-ed* suffix which is used in standard English writing to indicate past tense is often absent in the writing of nonstandard speakers.

5. *Is and are absence.* These two conjugated forms of the English copula (the verb *to be*) are characteristically absent in VBE (e.g., *She so calm and look so at ease* and *They tring to get away front the fire*). Copula absence is also characteristic of southern white nonstandard English in certain linguistic environments (e.g., *We gonna win this time*).

There are numerous other features, primarily phonological ones but also grammatical ones, which are characteristic of VBE and white nonstandard dialects of English that seem to occur rarely, if at all, in the writing of

nonstandard speakers. Noticeably absent in the above list and in my (Whiteman 1976) data are most nonstandard phonological features (e.g., /f/ for /θ/, as in *wif* for *with*, or postvocalic *-r* absence, as in *motha'* for *mother*). The extreme rarity of phonological dialect influence in writing is shown by Table 1 below, which displays the frequencies of occurrence in writing of two typical VBE phonological features (postvocalic *-r* deletion as in *motha'* for *mother*, and monomorphemic consonant cluster simplification as in *col'* for *cold*). How this latter feature works in speech will be explained in detail later in this paper.

Also noticeably absent in my data (Whiteman 1976) are several prominent VBE grammatical features (e.g., 1) multiple negation, as in, *He can't do nothin' about it*, 2) *Ain't* or 3) iterative *be* as in, *Sometime my ears be itchin'*). The relative absence of these nonstandard features in writing, and the frequent occurrence of those discussed above, raises some interesting questions about dialect influence in writing.

First, are the occurrence of nonstandard features in writing really attributable to oral language patterns? If so, are they solely attributable, or are there other factors operating? Second, assuming that dialect influence is at least partially responsible for the occurrence of nonstandard features in writing, what kinds of features are most influential? That is, do phonological (pronunciation) features affect the spelling of words very often? Do grammatical features affect the syntax of sentences very often? If so, why do some grammatical features occur frequently whereas others occur rarely if at all?

To answer the first question, I compared nonstandard features in the speech and writing of 32 working class black and white eighth graders from southern Maryland (Whiteman 1976). The black students were speakers of VBE, and displayed the features found regularly in other studies of VBE. The white students spoke a variety of nonstandard southern white English, and regularly used features associated with that variety of English. Since the two spoken dialects, while sharing some features, were distinct in other ways (e.g., plural *-s* absence was characteristic of the speech of the blacks but not of the

TABLE 1
Frequency Rates of Postvocalic *-r* Deletion and Monomorphemic Consonant Cluster Simplification in Writing of VBE Speakers (Whiteman 1976).

	Deleted/ Simplified	Not Deleted/ Not Simplified	Total	Percentage Deleted/Simplified
Postvocalic <i>-r</i>	59	3292	3351	1.8
Monomorphemic Consonant Cluster	22	626	648	3.4

whites), it was possible to determine whether the occurrence in writing of some of these nonstandard features (i.e., plural *-s* absence) were traceable to dialect influence. For example, if plural *-s* absence were found in the writing of both groups of students, but only in the speech of one of the groups, then it would be apparent that dialect influence could not be solely responsible for the omission of the plural *-s* suffix in writing. If, on the other hand, plural *-s* absence occurred only in the writing of those who used it in speech, then it would be reasonable to attribute its occurrence solely to dialect influence.

The oral data were obtained in an informal interview of the type used in a number of sociolinguistic studies (Labov 1966; Shuy, Wolfram and Riley 1968; Wolfram 1969; and Fasold 1972a). Contextual factors (physical setting, peer groups, etc.) were manipulated to obtain the most natural speech possible in an interview situation. Written data were gathered from compositions written in English classrooms, with the topic controlled.

In addition to the spoken and written data from the southern Maryland students, more extensive written data were gathered from a compilation of thousands of compositions written by Americans in four age groups (9, 13, 17, 25, and over) who were additionally classified by region, sex, race, size and type of community and parental education (NAEP 1972). Racial, regional and educational classifications were used to gather two sets of compositions from the NAEP data, one written primarily by VBE speakers, and one written primarily by rural white nonstandard speakers.

An analysis of the spoken and written data from southern Maryland indicate that dialect influence apparently is responsible for some occurrences of nonstandard features in writing, but that it is not solely responsible. As can be seen in Figure 2 below, certain features occur rather frequently even when

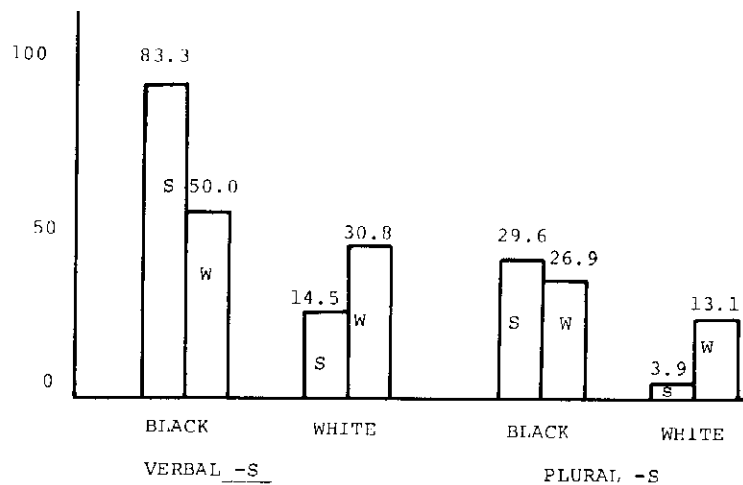


FIG. 2. Percentages of *-s* suffix absence in Speech and in writing for Southern Maryland Blacks and Whites.

they occur much less frequently in the speech of the writer. Specifically, plural *-s* was absent (e.g., They had their *radio-* in their *hand-*) 13.1% of the time in the writing of the white students, even though it was absent only 3.9% of the time in their speech. Clearly, the occurrence of this nonstandard feature in this group's writing cannot be attributed to influence from their speech patterns. Similarly, verbal *-s* was absent (e.g., He *go-* to the pool every day in the summer) 30.8% of the time in the writing the white students, but only 14.5% of the time in their speech. Again, the occurrence of this nonstandard feature in writing cannot be attributed solely to dialect influence.

In the case of verbal *-s* absence, where there is substantial occurrence of the feature in speech, some of the occurrence in writing may indeed be due to dialect influence; all of it, however, cannot be, since the percentage in writing far exceeds that found in speech. Such is not the case with plural *-s* absence; the data here give an even stronger indication that something other than dialect influence is causing occurrences of nonstandard features in writing.

I would like to explain here that the frequencies of occurrence of these two features were obtained from the two sets of data by counting actual and potential occurrences of each feature. For example, in the speech of all the white females, there were 25 occurrences of verbal *-s* absence and 60 occurrences of verbal *-s* presence. A percentage of absence is then obtained by dividing the number of absences by the total of all absences and presences. Thus, the white females did not include the verbal *-s* suffix in 25 of the 85 times that they used third singular present tense verbs, or 29.4% of the time.

These results were replicated in the analysis of more extensive written data from NAEP (1972). Both *-s* suffixes were found to be absent more frequently in the writing of whites than would be expected in their spoken dialect. Verbal *-s* absence was found 19.1% of the time and plural *-s* absence was found 11.7% of the time. Both of these frequency rates approximate those found in the writing of the southern Maryland whites (see Figure 2 above). Clearly, these results indicate a factor other than dialect influence can explain some occurrences of nonstandard forms in writing. That this factor apparently involves inflectional suffixes is shown by additional data on consonant cluster *-ed*.

Before discussing this additional data, it is necessary to explain briefly how consonant cluster simplification works in speech. In word-final position, the final member of a cluster of two consonants (e.g., *hand*) is often deleted. In order for this to occur, both members of the cluster must agree in voicing (i.e., both must be voiced or both must be voiceless) and the final member must be a stop (Wolfram 1969). This kind of cluster simplification occurs quite frequently in nonstandard speech, but it also occurs, less frequently, in standard varieties of English, especially if the following word begins with a consonant (e.g., *cold cuts* becomes *col' cuts* in informal standard speech). In speech, such clusters are simplified more frequently if they are *monomorphemic*, that is, if both members of the cluster belong to the same

morpheme, or meaning unit. For example, the *-ld* cluster in *cold* is a monomorphemic cluster. Each consonant of a *bimorphemic* cluster, on the other hand, belongs to a separate morpheme (e.g., the final /st/ sounds of the word *missed* are a bimorphemic consonant cluster). Bimorphemic clusters, then, are represented in writing partly by the *ed* suffix. This is not to say that all *-ed* suffixes belong to bimorphemic clusters, since some of the verbs to which they are affixed do not end in consonants (e.g., *played*) or end in /t/ or /d/ already, requiring a pronunciation of /ɪd/ (e.g., *wilted* or *headed*). It does mean, however, that there is a subset of verbs with *-ed* suffixes (*walked*, *missed*, *jumped*, etc.) which represent spoken bimorphemic consonant clusters.

This subset of verbs, in fact, occurs quite frequently in the writing of nonstandard speakers without the *-ed* suffix, resulting in the observation of many teachers that such students do not know the past tense. A closer look at the speech pattern of the students will reveal that it is not really a matter of not knowing the past tense, but, rather, is representative of an oral language pattern which deletes the final member of some consonant clusters.

Although such *-ed* absence in writing is representative of a speech pattern, the influence of speech on writing seems to end there. In speech, monomorphemic clusters (e.g., *cold* becoming *col*) are simplified more frequently than are bimorphemic clusters (e.g., *missed* becoming *miss*). In writing, this order is reversed: bimorphemic clusters are simplified far more frequently than monomorphemic clusters. In fact, the simplification of monomorphemic clusters is so rare in writing as to be almost nonexistent; the crucial condition for simplification in writing seems to be that clusters be bimorphemic, i.e., partly represented by the inflectional suffix *-ed*. In the writing of the VBE speakers from the NAEP data, bimorphemic clusters were simplified 25.9% of the time; monomorphemic clusters, on the other hand, were only simplified 3.4% of the time, a striking contrast.

Discussion of Results

It seems clear from the data on verbal *-s*, plural *-s* and consonant cluster *-ed* that in the writing of nonstandard speakers there is a strong tendency to omit inflectional suffixes. Although these same suffixes are often omitted in nonstandard speech, it is not solely dialect influence which is responsible for their omission in writing. If it were, we would find monomorphemic clusters simplified in writing at least as often as, and perhaps more often than, bimorphemic clusters. Furthermore, we would not find *-s* suffixes omitted in the writing of those who rarely omit them in speech. Instead, these features (plural *-s*, verbal *-s*, and consonant *-ed*) seem to be omitted in writing at least partly *because* they are inflectional suffixes.

This conclusion is supported by a comparison of four nonstandard features (see Table 2 below) in the speech and writing of VBE speakers. In this table,

TABLE 2
Absence Rates of Four Inflectional Suffixes in Speech
(Wolfram 1969) and Writing (Whiteman 1976) of VBE
Speakers

	Speech	Writing
Verbal <i>-s</i>	up to 71.4%	37.0%
Plural <i>-s</i>	up to 5.8%	31.1%
Possessive <i>s</i>	up to 26.8%	44.4%
Consonant Cluster <i>ed</i>	up to 76.0%	25.9%

the absence rates in speech were taken from Wolfram (1969); the absence rates in writing are from the NAEP data in Whiteman (1976).

What is striking here is that, regardless of the widely varying absence rates in speech, the absence rates in writing for all four features are at the same general level. There seems to be no established relationship between the absence rates in speech and those in writing: two of the features (plural *-s* and possessive *-s*) show higher frequencies of absence in writing than in speech; the other two features (verbal *-s* and consonant cluster *-ed*) show lower frequencies in writing than in speech. The dominant pattern is that the absence levels in writing of these four inflectional suffixes cluster much more closely than their absence levels in speech, which in fact do not cluster at all. Since the primary characteristic these four features share is the fact that they are all represented in writing as inflectional suffixes, it apparently is this fact which is at least partly responsible for their frequencies of occurrence in writing.

It may be for those who are learning to write a language, as for those who are learning to speak one, inflectional suffixes are among the less crucial elements to be learned. For this reason they may be among the last elements learned; in fact they are often absent in early stages of child language (Slobin 1971) and in writing of the deaf (Charrow, this volume). Features such as these inflectional suffixes (articles and prepositions might be included also) are not only absent in the writing of relatively unskilled writers, but are also omitted by more experienced writers when they are writing quickly or under pressure. Similarly, in language contact situations which result in pidginization of one of the contact languages, such features are quickly eliminated from the language being pidginized (Fasold, 1972 b) during the learning process. Thus it would seem that, perhaps in an unconscious effort to simplify what is being learned, these features are particularly vulnerable to omission.

A pattern of age grading in the NAEP data supports this explanation. As can be seen in figures 3, 4, and 5 below, there is striking age grading in the absence rates in writing of verbal *-s*, plural *-s* and consonant cluster *-ed* for

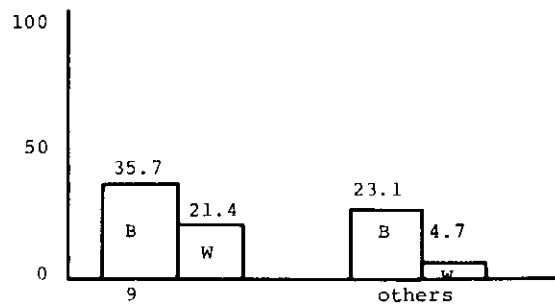


FIG. 3. Age grading for plural -s absence in writing.

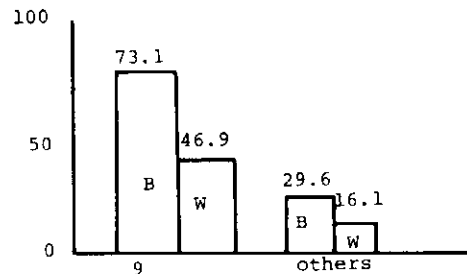


FIG. 4. Age grading for verbal -s absence in writing.

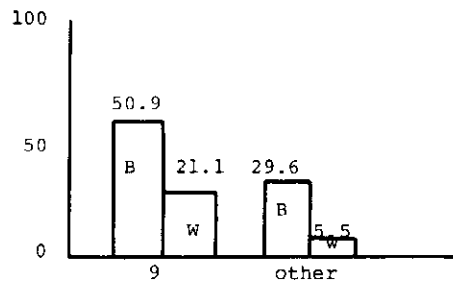


FIG. 5. Age grading for consonant cluster -ed in writing.

both blacks and whites when the nine year olds are contrasted with the older writers.

A repeated age grading pattern for all three inflectional suffixes is shown regardless of spoken dialect. Although the VBE writers can be assumed to have similar age grading in the use of these features in speech (Labov 1966, Labov, et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, 1974 and Fasold 1972a, among others), a similar assumption would not be made for the rural white writers, since these features are not particularly characteristic of their speech. Thus the fact that the white writers show such age grading in the use of these features in their

writing is strong evidence that the omission of inflectional suffixes in writing is at least partly an acquisitional phenomenon.

There is also evidence from first and second language acquisition studies (Dušková, 1969, Richards 1971, Dulay and Burt 1972, Taylor 1974, Burt and Kiparsky 1972) that supports the contention that we are dealing with an acquisitional phenomenon. Wolfram and Leap (1979), citing the above sources, suggest that there are "general acquisitional strategies" which operate in both first and second language acquisition and which often have the same effect on the language being learned (the "target" language). Thus the target language is modified by the learner during the process of acquisition in certain predictable ways. One strategy which learners apparently use to modify a target language might be referred to as redundancy reduction. Wolfram and Leap (1979) note:

Structurally superfluous forms may be modified or eliminated as a strategy of acquisition. For example, a plural inflectional marker on a noun along with a plural quantifier in the noun phrase might be considered redundant and therefore a likely candidate for elimination.

It is quite plausible that relatively unskilled writers use a similar "redundancy reduction" strategy in their attempt to learn a new code (writing). It certainly is striking that the same inflectional suffixes are often eliminated in the learning of English as a first language, as a second language, and in the learning of written English. As was mentioned above, these suffixes are also notably absent in pidgin languages, in the sign language and writing of the deaf, in early stages of child language, and in "baby" and "foreigner" talk (Ferguson 1971). Ferguson suggests that the characteristic element in these language situations may be that of "simplicity." Perhaps the language user unconsciously attempts to simplify the code; learners might do this during the attempt to learn control of a relatively unfamiliar code. Fasold (1972b), also noting the elimination of inflectional endings in a variety of language contexts, goes on tentatively to identify the "simplification" process with the linguistic concept of marking:

Because the "simplicity" features tend to recur in such a variety of circumstances, it is tempting to search for a universal principle to explain the phenomenon. It will not be possible to articulate such a principle too clearly, but it may well be the case that under conditions of special stress on communication situations, marked aspects tend to be lost. What are retained are the unmarked aspects which seem also to be the simplest. Under the stress of cross-language communication as in "foreigner talk" or in the formation of pidgins, or when a young child is acquiring his first language or when an adult is addressing a child in the earlier stages of acquisition, marked aspects of language tend to be dropped.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear at this point that there seems to be a general acquisitional strategy causing the omission of some inflectional suffixes in writing (as well as in a number of other communication contexts). In writing, this strategy apparently operates independently from the dialect of the writer. That is, whether or not these same inflectional suffixes are omitted in the speech of the unskilled writer, they are frequently omitted in his/her writing. We cannot, however, totally discount the role of dialect influence in writing, since there are significant differences in suffix omission in writing between dialect groups. As can be seen in Figure 6 below, frequencies of suffix absence greatly increase when that suffix absence is highly frequent in the oral dialect (in this case VBE) of the writer.

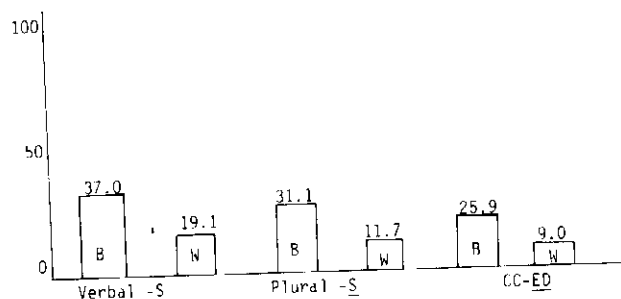


FIG. 6 Frequencies of suffix absence in writing of blacks and whites (NAEP data).

Thus we can see that dialect definitely influences writing, although it is not solely responsible for the occurrence of nonstandard features in writing. Instead, it combines with an acquisitional tendency to omit inflectional suffixes, with several results. First, nonstandard features occur more frequently in the writing of those who use them in speech. Second, some nonstandard features occur much more frequently than others. For example, nonstandard phonological features rarely occur in writing, even when these features are extremely frequent in the oral dialect of the writer. This is not surprising, in view of the fact that phonological dialect features tend to be integral parts of words (e.g., the pronunciation of such words as *mother*, *car* and *four* without the final, postvocalic *-r* or the pronunciation of such words as *cold*, *hand* and *mist* without the final consonant). As integral parts of base words, such features are apparently not so "marked" and are not so vulnerable to omission.

A third example of the combined effect of dialect influence and the acquisitional tendency to omit inflectional suffixes is the lack of occurrence in writing of nonstandard grammatical features which do not involve suffixes (e.g., *ain't*, multiple negation, iterative *be*). It could be that the acquisitional factor acts to constrain dialect influence from occurring anywhere except

with suffixes. It could also be, of course, that non-suffixial dialect features are more clearly stigmatized socially and are more easily separable from standard English patterns. Thus, such features as *ain't*, multiple negation and iterative *be* might occur during the very early stages of learning to write but are rather quickly and easily spotted (by the teacher) and eliminated. To check this hypothesis, the writing of first through third graders should be looked at; unfortunately the NAEP does not provide such data, since their youngest writers are nine years old (presumably fourth graders).

Further research to extend the analysis of dialect influence in writing could focus on the writing of beginners (grades one through three). First, the writing of standard English speaking children in these early grades could be studied to see whether or not it displays the general acquisitional phenomenon of suffix omission discovered here. Also, it could be examined to determine whether or not this acquisitional phenomenon extends to such features of language as articles, prepositions, and derivative suffixes (e.g., *-ly*) as might be expected. Second, the writing of nonstandard English speaking children in these early grades could be studied to see whether or not highly stigmatized features such as *ain't* and multiple negation do occur in beginning writing but disappear by fourth grade. Finally, this early writing could be investigated for supporting or negating evidence of the age grading found here.

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10 Identity, Power and Writing Skills: The Case of The Hispanic Bilingual Student

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INTRODUCTION

Before an effective language arts program can be planned for Hispanic bilingual students, several important characteristics of the students' language and the significance of literacy to this population should be understood. This article begins with a discussion of the term *bilingualism*, for this ambiguous word does not indicate the many levels of linguistic ability, different dialects, or speech styles, the bilingual person may be able to use. An exploration of the functions of writing for three distinct, but related groups follows, in the second part of the article, which addresses the personal needs that literacy serves barrio youth, South American peasants and Chicano college students. The final section of the article outlines concerns which language arts curriculum planners must address as they develop teaching ideas for the Spanish speaker in the classroom.

I. BILINGUALISM

The term *bilingual* is used to designate a person who speaks two languages. This definition, however, says nothing of the degree of facility with which a person uses the two languages.

There are three dimensions to this variability which merit at least some elaboration in this paper:

- (a) The degree of fluency in speaking (oral production) and ability to comprehend (aural comprehension) in each language.