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Hypercorrection and grammar change

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Pfaff (1973, 1975) reports on 81 low- and middle-income first-grade Black children who produced multiple instances of linguistic variables by answering questions about a set of pictures and telling the story of *Goldilocks and the three bears*. No models were given of the linguistic variables under investigation, which included a number of third person singular present-tense verb forms: -s inflection of regular verbs, auxiliary and main verb *be*, auxiliary and main verb *have*, auxiliary *do* and possessive marking on nouns. Standard marking of all of these linguistic variables has been shown by previous studies of free conversation to be variably lacking in Black English (Labov, Cohen, Robins & Lewis 1968; Fasold 1972).

In addition to the widely reported standard and nonstandard realizations, the results included the structural hypercorrections shown in Table 1. While the number of actual occurrences of the hypercorrect forms was small (a total of

TABLE 1. *Hypercorrect, nonstandard and standard forms used by Black first-grade children*

Hypercorrect form	Nonstandard form	Standard form
<i>regular verb</i>		
(1) she's ride horses	she ride horses	she rides horses
(2) she's rides horses		
<i>irregular verb</i>		
(3) one's have three spots	one have three spots	one has three spots
(4) one's has three spots		
(5) this one's does	this one do	this one does
(6) this one's don't	this one don't	this one doesn't
(7) that bird's does	that bird do	that bird does
(8) this clown's isn't	this clown ain't	this clown isn't
<i>perfect</i>		
(9) somebody's was eating my porridge	somebody been eating my porridge	somebody's been eating my porridge
(10) somebody's has been eating my porridge		
(11) somebody was been eating my porridge		
<i>possessive</i>		
(12) papa's bear bowl	papa bear bowl	papa bear's bowl
(13) papa's bear's bowl		
(14) baby porridges		

37 instances), all except (11) involved an extraneous *-s* after a noun or pronoun. Note that *-s* insertion is not randomly located; forms such as (15) and (16) with *-s* inserted after the determiner do not occur:

(15) *that's bird does.

(16) *that's one have one spot.

The occurrence of (1-14) but not (15-16) suggests that the standard English *is* and *has* in these constructions have been reanalyzed as nominal inflections. The basis for such reanalysis is to be found in the utterances which serve as the primary linguistic data for the children. Previous empirical studies (Labov *et al.* 1968; Legum *et al.* 1971) have shown that contracted rather than full forms of *is* and *has* occur with high frequency in casual conversation.

When the overall responses of the individuals are examined, it appears that the informants who produced hypercorrect forms generally have lects which are variable with respect to the linguistic feature in question.¹ Moreover, there is some indication that the type of hypercorrection is related to the particular set of forms used by the informant. Discovery of such relationships requires the extension of the notion 'accountable reporting' (Labov *et al.* 1968: 70) to include other structures which can be employed to fill the same communicative function as the primary linguistic variable under investigation.

TABLE 2. *Realization of 3 sq. auxiliary 'have' by low- and middle-income Black children (per cent)*

	Standard		Nonstandard		
	<i>has</i>	<i>'s</i>	<i>have</i>	ϕ	
Low-Income	5	9	0	86	(n = 98)
Middle-Income	1	19	2	78	(n = 111)

A case in point is auxiliary *have*. Both the typical standard and nonstandard realizations occurred with quite low frequency, as shown in Table 2. Of the 81 Black informants, only 37 produced instances of the perfective in which auxiliary *have* could have occurred. Of these, only 12 produced any instances of either standard or nonstandard *have* – the rest used null forms, which strongly suggests that the majority of informants' grammars lack auxiliary *have*. In the *Three*

[1] Although rules written to account for the speech of first-grade Black children taken as a group are variable, not all individuals produce inherent variation (Pfaff 1973: 143-9). Nor do the observed patterns of categorical and variable realizations form a simple two-dimensional implicational scale. The significance of the results for the 'static' variable rule model developed by Labov (1969) and modified by Cedergren & Sankoff (1973) and for the 'dynamic' implicational wave model developed by Bailey (1972) and Bickerton (1971, 1973) is discussed in detail in Pfaff (1975).

Bears story this linguistic structure, which is not within the productive competence of many speakers is emphasized by repetition. Because the implicit rules for telling a traditional children's story require the narrator to reproduce the model as closely as possible, the informants sometimes attempted to produce the non-vernacular forms, resulting in the hypercorrections noted above (9-11), and other times used either past progressives such as (17) or simple pasts such as (18):

(17) Somebody was sitting in my chair

(18) Somebody sat in my chair

The following relationships between hypercorrect and standard or nonstandard forms used by the informants were noted: the informant who used the hypercorrect form (9) *somebody's was*, otherwise used either past progressives such as (17) or simple past such as (18), but neither standard nor nonstandard perfect forms. The informant who used the hypercorrect (10) *somebody's has been*, on the other hand, also used both standard and nonstandard perfect forms, but no past progressives or simple past forms. The informant who used (11) *was been*, which combines elements of both the past progressive and the perfect, varied between past progressives and nonstandard perfect forms containing nonstandard *have*, without agreement, or *o been*.

The importance of such phenomena for the study of language acquisition and language change warrants the inclusion of functional equivalence and hypercorrection elicited under controlled conditions in non-vernacular performance of individual speakers as a legitimate part of future studies of linguistic change in progress.

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