



Considerations for Students who Speak Nonmainstream Dialects of American English

“The type of English spoken in the United States is commonly referred to as American English (AE)” (ASHA 2003). Dialects of American English have evolved due to geographical, historical, social, and linguistic factors (ASHA 2003). The terms Mainstream or Standard American English (MAE or SAE) have been used across ethnic categorizations to refer to the English dialects that are typically used in commerce, government, and education (Charity 2008). “It is the position of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) that no dialectal variety of American English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech or language” (ASHA 2003). However, assessments utilized by speech-language pathologists (SLPs) tend to be standardized and most norm-referenced assessments are created and based on Mainstream American English (MAE). As a result, considerations need to be made during assessment of students who speak other dialects of American English. If you suspect that a student uses a dialect of American English other than MAE, evaluation probes should focus on noncontrastive aspects of the dialect.

Definitions of the following terms may be useful when assessing students:

- *Mainstream American English dialect (MAE)*: The American English dialect that is typically used in commerce, government, and education (Charity 2008).
- *Nonmainstream American English dialects (NMAE)*: Rule-based, linguistic systems that have features that differ from MAE.
- *Contrastive features of a dialect*: Language features that differ between mainstream and other American English dialects. Examples include:
 - Omission of object after preposition “with” (e.g., “Do you want to come with?” in North-Central American English; “Do you want to come with me?” in MAE).
 - Zero marking of inflectional morphemes (e.g., “he walk” in African American English; “he walks” in MAE); See [Washington and Craig](#) for additional examples of African American English, provided in the appendix.
 - Redundancy of auxiliaries (e.g., “he might could go” in Southern American English; “he could go” in MAE).

- *Noncontrastive features of a dialect*: Language features that **do not** differ across American English dialects. Noncontrastive features are consistently used across American English dialects. **Because these features are relatively consistent irrespective of dialect, they should be strongly considered during comprehensive assessments.** Examples include:
 - Complex syntax
 - Past tense copula and auxiliary (e.g., they were happy; they were walking)
 - [Cohesion in discourse](#)
 - [Narrative organization skills](#)
 - Participation in classroom discourse
 - Ability to provide a compelling argument
 - Academic success with aspects of curriculum requiring grade-level language skills

Using Norm-Referenced Tests for Students Suspected of Speaking a Nonmainstream Dialect of American English

Most norm-referenced tests were developed for and normed on children who speak MAE. This means that most norm-referenced language tests will be biased against students who speak other American English dialects, and therefore should not be used. Some norm-referenced tests provide guidance on adapting scoring for children who speak dialects, such as African American English. Interpreting tests with scoring adaptations is problematic, as examiners lose much of the power of the assessment (see [Hendricks and Adlof](#)). The items that contain contrastive features are essentially removed from the test, significantly reducing the strength of the test. Furthermore, these tests typically do not validate the use of these adaptations and the norming sample contains few children who speak AAE. **Use of most norm-referenced tests with AAE speakers is strongly discouraged and any interpretation of norm-referenced test results should be made with extreme caution, even if using adapted scoring rules.**

One currently available norm-referenced language test was specifically designed for children who speak AAE. The [Diagnostic Evaluation of Language Variation \(DELV\)](#) only includes noncontrastive features of AAE. This test was normed on children who speak AAE. Our goal is not to fully endorse the DELV nor state that all examinations of students who speak AAE should use the DELV (for example, see [Moland and Oetting](#)). Rather, the features of the DELV illustrate how testing noncontrastive features allows examiners to focus on language features not impacted by the dialect.

Cultural Considerations When Assessing Students Who Speak AAE

In Wisconsin, most children who speak AAE are from culturally minoritized backgrounds. Most norm-referenced language assessments were not developed considering the experiences of individuals from minoritized backgrounds. In addition, most norm-referenced tests have limited representation from children from minoritized backgrounds in their norming samples. Therefore, most norm-referenced tests will have both linguistic and cultural biases against children from minoritized backgrounds who speak AAE.

When assessing nonmainstream dialect speakers, including students who speak AAE, examiners should focus on assessments that are familiar to the students and allow examination of noncontrastive features. For example, storytelling is a relatively universal skill and familiar to most speakers, irrespective of dialect. Narrative organization skills are noncontrastive, making measures of narrative organization a useful tool within the assessment. Another strategy is to examine children's language learning potential with a dynamic assessment. As with all comprehensive assessments, examiners must collect a diverse set of assessment data, coupled with observation and stakeholder input, to determine if there is a significant discrepancy in language ability when compared to their peers and if those language difficulties have a significant educational impact.

References

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). 2003. "American English Dialects [Technical Report]." Accessed June 7, 2022 at <https://www.asha.org/policy/tr2003-00044/>.

Charity, Anne H. 2008. "African American English: An Overview." *Perspectives on Communication Sciences and Disorders in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Populations* 15(2): 33-42. <https://doi.org/10.1044/cds15.2.33>.