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BLACK DIALECT IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Melvin W. Wells

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Black non-Standard English is different in grammar (syntax) from Standard English. The advent of the 60's produced authors who explored the full possibilities of language to deal with their themes. The increased use of dialect by black authors, particularly children's authors, was a sign that the nature of the black experience as they wanted to convey it did not have to rely on traditional forms, and literary devices; that they could treat familiar, realistic ideas and situations using a familiar dialect and relate that idea more effectively.

To black youngsters this had to be a welcome change. Before the 60's there had been little reading material that not only reflected black faces and situations but a familiar language as well. Basal readers (re: Alice and Jerry) were obviously alien to an urban experience, and there wasn't much else available to read in the black literature market that was written for children. The 60's and its pouring out of writers filled this void, and gave children material that was readable and believable. This trend has not stopped as these writers (Jordan, Keats, and Graham, among many others) are refining their skills and producing some very sophisticated forms of writing (*Who Look At Me*, Jordan, and Graham's Biblical transcriptions).

Literary critics judge the greatness of literature by its use of literary devices, plot and style. A book will have lasting value if it appeals to a wide audience, and is time-free. These criticisms might have some merit, particularly if one considers the descriptions in Steptoe's *Uptown*. He uses such phrases as: I be looking sweet then. All the girls will say "There goes a sweet looking man" when I walk by. I'll be John, the man who steady vines.¹

Because he uses slang in his writing, the book is time-bound, for slang is an ever changing form of expression. It is said that a book must "stand the tests of time," yet by this standard *Uptown* would not rank as great literature. The book was probably not intended for a wide audience as written. Black writers have written in dialect and have been successful in creating lasting literature. The most notable examples are Graham's Biblical transcriptions where he has blended Biblical stories with the English that retained some of its West African features. Linguistically, this is important because it shows that there is a consistency in syntax and tense, which are important features of Black English.

Dialect means the collective use of linguistic patterns of a sub-group of the speakers of a language. There are a number of writers who have used dialect in their writing. Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's*

¹ John Steptoe. *Uptown*

Cabin, created an awareness of the slave's dialect, as did Joel Chandler Harris in his retelling of the *Uncle Remus Tales*. Kristin Hunter, John Steptoe, and Lorenz Graham use it as a literary device. We can only speculate that their use of it is to communicate more effectively with their reader than by using Standard English. What I am interested in finding out is the reaction of children to such books that use dialect. Do children find such books easier to read if they speak the same dialect themselves? How do they react to those books vs/ books they like written in Standard English? Do children feel the themes could have been related as effectively in Standard English?

Educational researchers have studied the problems of the dialect speaker learning to read, while linguists have sought to increase man's knowledge about language and how it is learned. Even though there exists no single theory on how the disadvantaged learn to read, a number of learning alternatives have been proposed by educators and linguists alike:

1) Plurality of usage; noting the *difference* not the superiority of one dialect over another. (Labov, 1964; Creswell, 1964)

2) Moving the reading material closer to the dialect of the reader. (Goodman, 1965)

3) Black English should not be corrected in the "grammatical overkill" sense, but meaning should be emphasized. (Smitherman, 1969)

Of my questions, I considered the second alternative in first finding out if children found the books easier to read because they used dialect. I should state as well that five black youngsters, all sixth graders, were given the following books over a two-week period. Their language pattern would more aptly be described as non-standard colloquial rather than Black English the way it is strictly defined in J. L. Dillard's *Black English*. At the end of the two weeks, we discussed the use of dialect and their reactions to it.

R. Blue.	<i>A Quiet Place</i>
L. Graham.	<i>A Road Down in the Sea</i>
J. C. Harris.	<i>Uncle Remus</i>
K. Hunter.	"You Rap, I'll Reap" from <i>Guests in the Promised Land</i>
J. Steptoe.	<i>Train Ride, Uptown, Stevie</i>
E. Rees.	<i>Brer Fox and His Tricks</i>
J. Wagner.	<i>J.T.</i>

How do children react to books that use dialect? Before asking any questions, we began with a discussion of dialect and how it contrasted with Standard English. Questions such as: What kind of audience do you think the author was writing for? How did you react to the way the characters spoke? Did you like the book more or less because of the way it was written? Did you find the book easier to read because of the way it was written? were asked, to focus their attention on the dialect and how it was used to convey meaning, not plot structure.

Name of book:

Steptoe: *Train Ride*
Uptown
Stevie

Comments:

Those guys seem real to me. People in my neighborhood talk like that. I liked *Uptown* the best, because if you live in the ghetto that's the way people talk. I don't think a white man could write it because it wouldn't sound right. He wouldn't know all the right things to say.

(Give examples)

Like when those guys were playing basketball and drinking Colt 45.

Unfavorable reactions:

It was sort of hard to read. Some of the words I didn't know.

K. Hunter: "You Rap, I'll Reap"
from *Guests in the Promised Land*

I know this story. My sister is just like them. I think the story was written for black people, because black people live in projects, and she tells you how she feels about it. I like the way it was written because black people talk like that. It wasn't hard to read at all.

R. Blue: *A Quiet Place*

There wasn't so much dialect in this book, but I liked it because the boy was different from the other boys. It was easy to read. It was more like regular English.

Name of book:

J. Wagner: *J. T.*

Comments:

The people in this book talk like the people I know. They talked in dialect. They didn't talk like the boy in *Train Ride*. The boy in *Train Ride* used more dialect.

Unfavorable reactions:

Some of the words I didn't know, but it wasn't hard to read. I understood it when the people were talking, but not when I have to read it.

J. C. Harris: *Uncle Remus*

I know some of the stories, but I couldn't read them. I like the stories but I still couldn't read this book.

I tried to read "Why Mister Possum Loves Peace" but I didn't understand any of the words. (Why?) They didn't sound like regular words to me.

E. Rees: *Brer Fox and His Tricks*

They were the same stories but I could read these. They were written in Standard English. They could be for anybody. I don't know who wrote them, but a black man, Uncle Remus, tells them to the people on their farm. That's probably where they came from. You could understand this book a whole lot better because it's written in Standard English.

L. Graham: *A Road Down in the Sea*

This is dialect because they (people now) don't talk like that. I understood it pretty well. (Give examples of dialect.) . . . Moses do so.

And Moses be they leader. It should be ". . . be *their* leader."

The reactions to these books seem to indicate these readers could:

- 1) Distinguish speech patterns in dialect and Standard English.
- 2) Identify the audience they feel the book was written for.
- 3) Express the difficulty they had in reading non-Standard English.
- 4) Generally distinguish the speech pattern in terms of urban/rural differences.

There also existed a difference in their ability to understand a dialect in spoken and written form. Expressed by one child, he could understand what was occurring if I were to read a passage of dialect from an Uncle Remus story, but that he tried to sound out the dialect and that it didn't "make sense" after repeated attempts. It has never been shown that if my moving the text closer to the dialect of the speaker results in great gains in reading, but one idea still holds clear; that the *phonic* principles of word attack are applied in both cases. This perhaps poses the question if dialect reading is indeed easier for the dialect speaker. The readers did express the idea that they felt the author communicated his idea more effectively by using dialect with their black characters, and this authenticity in language made the characters seem more believable. From this small sample of students, who were good readers, it seems that dialect reading was more difficult for them. Words and phrases that did not have the syntax or meaning of Standard English were more difficult to understand, and this detracted from its being enjoyed. The hypotheses, advanced by Goodman and Saville suggest that there is an interference of sound between the dialect and Standard English reader. Furthermore, they point out that because a child learns at home to ignore certain speech sounds, meaning may be distorted for him when these phonemes are the critical distinguishable elements of a word. In the spoken form there will be differences in what is pronounced.

Standard English	Non-Standard
that	dat
get	get
other	udder
poem	purm
help	hep

Whereas the dialect speaker might pronounce "help" as "hep," if he were to see "hep" in print, would he derive the same meaning from the word? What I have found in my small sample of students is that in its written form, black students had difficulty deriving meaning from words written in dialect. Words that were written in dialect posed a divergence problem for them, which does not agree with the hypotheses advanced by Goodman and Saville. In their oral form, they could auditorially discriminate its Standard English homonym. My findings also do not agree

with those of Melmed, who found that a black experimental group showed no inability to comprehend words written in dialect while reading silently.²

The variable that might cause some difference in the results is the degree to which the readers used context clues to unlock word meaning, or the kind of reading material used. If the material were totally written in dialect, then use of context clues would be more difficult.

To conclude, the idea that by moving the dialect closer to the speaker's dialect and improving comprehension is still open. Most children learn to read Standard English before they learn to read in dialect, although in the process they are translating that written form to a form they can understand. When asking a child to read and understand "hep," it still may be difficult for him when he has learned the Standard English form.

² Paul Jay Melmed. "Black English Phonology: The Question of Reading Interference," Monograph of the Language-Behavior Research Laboratory. (February, 1971)

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