

Properties of Discourse in Children and Caretakers in an AAE-Speaking Community:
Moving Beyond the Myth

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The focus of this presentation is on a description of discourse structure and discourse marking used by children and caretakers in an African American English (AAE)-speaking community. Discourse modes and strategies for moving narratives along, properties of tense-aspect in relation to morphological marking, and the levels of variation exhibited in the discourse structures are discussed. By considering data from developing AAE-speaking children and their caretakers within the community, it is possible to raise questions about early patterns of discourse marking and developmental paths toward the adult grammar. Research on African American language varieties in the 1960s grew out of efforts to counter deficit-based characterizations of the speech of some African Americans. Researchers took the approach of shining the light only on the features of African American language that were in direct opposition to grammatical features of general American English, and this approach has led to a type of mythical AAE that is commonly referred to in the current literature. In such an approach, although terms such as “systematic” and “rule-governed” have come to be used, these descriptors are often used vacuously, so they do not shed much light on the structure of African American language varieties. In this presentation, I take a patterns and systems approach and consider child and adult AAE within a community from the perspective of its own grammar, not general American English.