Children's comprehension of unfamiliar dialects is influenced by the presence of multiple sociolinguistic cues

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Children who speak African American English (AAE) sometimes experience difficulty understanding General American English (GAE). However, it is unclear whether these challenges are primarily due to linguistic differences between dialects (perceptual analysis hypothesis) or complex interactions between the linguistic signal and speaker identity. The present study examines children's comprehension of AAE and GAE in two social contexts: a) auditory-only (dialect) and auditory-visual contexts (speaker face and dialect). Black and White children, ages 5;1-11;8, heard sentences in both dialects differing in semantic predictability (Caleb helps his friend read/choose the book). In auditory-only contexts, GAE-speaking children recognized words least efficiently in AAE. In auditory-visual contexts, White participants were least efficient at comprehending words in AAE paired with Black faces and Black participants' comprehension of AAE and GAE depended on their use of AAE and familiarity with different dialect-face pairings. These results suggest that dialect comprehension goes beyond analyzing the linguistic signal and depends on children's integration of linguistic and non-linguistic speaker cues. [Supported by NIH F31 awarded to Michelle Erskine and NSF #1449815 awarded to Colin Phillips].