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Acquisition of Go Copula Constructions by African American Children

This study focused on what appears to be unique semantic use of the verb, *go*, in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), as instantiated by syntactic constructions such as “*Here/There go + [NP]*.” Such expressions occur in stative contexts of nonmoving as opposed to the dynamic contexts of moving objects (e.g., “*They go up/in*”). Go copula use by child speakers of AAVE has been documented in several studies but never described formally. Their infrequent occurrence in natural speech samples has made them less accessible to description than other AAVE forms. **Purpose:** This study aimed to reveal whether AAVE go copula use is analogous to the use of such existential locative forms in Standard English (SE) as “*Here/There is/are +NP*,” and whether AAVE use changes across age. In SE, existential locative expressions point out the presence of objects/events in the perceptual field and occur most often at early ages **before** children talk frequently about absent events. If so, then the relative frequency of analogous go copula constructions in AAVE should be larger at younger than older ages. For mature speakers, the need for such a semantic distinction should be context-restricted.

Method: This hypothesis was tested with archived speech samples taken from 11 typically developing African American children during natural social interactions in their homes. Two-hour samples had been videotaped longitudinally at monthly and bi-monthly intervals across 18 months in Washington DC. Speech was sampled from children at three age cross-sections; 18, 36, and 48 months. Data spanned the preschool developing years. Data were reliably transcribed orthographically and coded for all uses of “go” inclusive of copula *go*, using uniform criteria and event context notes.

Results: Go copula use was among six referential uses of “go” in sentences used by the children between 1;6 – 6;0 years. Each child contributed an average of 45 go copula forms to the 499 observed in the data. They were observed in the contexts of pointing or looking at **nonmoving** objects in the perceptual field. The uninflected “go” verb co-occurred with the prolocative, *here*, twice as often as, *there*. The verb noun phrase complement increased in grammatical complexity with age. Every child contributed to the growth curve in which the frequency of *go copula use* increased from 12% (499) at 1;6 years to a peak of 31% at 3;0 after which use declined steadily to 4% at 6;0 years.

Go copula constructions predominated but alternated with the uses of two other forms that coded the same meaning: (1) those without any verb, e.g., “*There/here + [NP]*,” the earliest observed pattern and (2) those with the copula e.g., “*There/Here is/’s + [NP]*,” the latest pattern observed around kindergarten.

Conclusion: African American children use the “go” verb in stative expressions that appear analogous to the existential locatives in SE. The frequency of their use is age - dependent. The findings are useful for assessing African American children’s language to meet applied goals and for the study of polysemy in their semantic development.

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