

Cross-Dialect Perception by Speech-Language Pathologists

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Abstract

Description of Study

This study aimed to determine the extent that selected amounts and types of African American English features contribute to subjective judgments by non-AAEspeaking SLPs in predominantly Anglo-European American rural Michigan school districts. The AAE phonological patterns under investigation were limited to the final position of words: (a) deletion of post-vocalic /t/, (b) deletion of post-vocalic /k/, (c) cluster reduction of /st/ to /s/, (d) cluster reduction of /sk/ to /s/, (e) t/th substitution, and (f) f/th substitution. These six phonological patterns were categorized into two groups of perceptual salience based on how noticeable their presence or absence was in nonsense syllables. The low salience group included the two cluster reduction patterns and f/th substitution; the high salience group included the two post-vocalic deletion patterns and the t/th substitution. The patterns occurred at varying frequencies (0, 1, and 3 features) imbedded into consistent carrier phrases.

The subjective judgments under investigation were *comprehensibility* (i.e., how easily understandable the speaker would be to the general population) and *dialect detectability* (i.e., how noticeable the use of AAE was). The SLPs rated each sentence on five-point scales regarding how noticeable the dialect was (1= AAE dialect was not noticeable, 5= AAE dialect was extremely noticeable) and how understandable the speaker would be to people in the general population (1= Very difficult to understand, 5= Very easy to understand). The ratings for the different sentences were compared to determine how the number of features and their perceptual salience classification contributed to the SLPs' judgments.

The data indicated that as the number of AAE features increased in the sentences, so did the dialect detectability ratings. Conversely, comprehensibility ratings decreased as the number of features increased. High salience features elicited lower comprehensibility ratings than low salience features; however, salience effects were not as consistent in the dialect detectability ratings. It appeared that other factors such as iconicity (i.e., how identifiable the feature is with the dialect) interacted with perceptual salience causing inconsistent salience effects in the dialect detectability data.

Implications

Before an SLP may seek less dialectally biased assessment procedures, he/she must first notice when a nonmainstream dialect is being used. The findings of this study indicate, however, that some features may be readily identified by SLPs as destructive to comprehensibility in the general population and not characteristically "dialectal." The use

of such features by clients could create a greater likelihood for misdiagnosis. The SLP profession cannot assume that misdiagnosis in minority groups is solely the result of invalid/unreliable standardized tests. SLPs must recognize how normal linguistic features affect their own perceptions and equip themselves with knowledge to counteract any effects that could jeopardize the accuracy of their assessments. Such knowledge is inherently fueled by research. In this sense, further research should be done that illuminates the multifaceted puzzle of cross-dialectal speech perception.