Research Question
This large-scale longitudinal study examines patterns of dialect and narrative use in four and five-year-old African American English (AAE) speakers in order to determine the relationship between the depth of the children’s dialect and their language skills on narrative tasks.

It compares the language and pre-literacy skills of the African American children with White children from matched SES and Parental Education backgrounds.

Introduction
The relationship between use of AAE and literacy outcomes for African American children is complex.

- In 1st to 5th graders, AA children producing fewer Mainstream American English features (MAE) in their speech scored lower on standardized reading comprehension tests (Charity et al., 2004).

- However, MAE preschoolers with deeper AAE dialects (measured by the number of syntactic and semantic features distinctive of AAE dialect that they produced) produced more complex sentence syntax in their spontaneous speech than children with weaker dialects (Craig & Washington, 1994).

- And Connor and Craig (2006) reported a U-shaped relationship between AA preschoolers’ depth of dialect and emergent literacy skills. Children with the most and the fewest AAE features in their speech had the strongest pre-literacy language skills.

- The present study investigates the relationship between AA preschoolers’ depth of dialect and their narrative skills using a subset of data collected from an ongoing longitudinal NIH Program Project of curricular interventions with children in poverty (The School Readiness Research Consortium).

- Oral narrative skills contribute significantly to early literacy and school success (Price et al., 2006; Snow et al., 2001; Westby, 1999). Narratives contain several features of decontextualized language and discourse that are crucial for text.

- These have been called “literate language” features (Westby, 1999).

Participants
- 273 AA children and 151 White children aged 3:0 to 5:3 (mean 4:5) at the beginning of the study who were participating in an NIH Program Project with preschoolers in poverty. All of the children had nonverbal IGs > 70.

- The School Readiness Program Project is a longitudinal effectiveness study of a comprehensive curriculum intervention with 85% at-risk preschoolers in subsidized daycare programs in the Houston, TX and Tallahassee, FL areas.

- The AA children were matched with the White children for SES, Parental Education Level (PED), Nonverbal IQ and Verbal Memory (Word Span), but they were about 2 months younger than the White children on average.

Method
- All of the children were tested on the DELV Screening Test (Seymour, Roepner & de Villiers, 2003) and produced two oral narratives based on picture sequences from the DELV-NR (Seymour, Roepner & de Villiers, 2005) (see figures).

- The DELV-NR narratives are scored on a 0,1,2 (0: if the feature was not used at all, 1 if at least one syntactically simple form of the feature, 2 if an adjective used for reference specification) scale. Each feature was found to be significantly different for the two ethnic groups:

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Results 1
- ANCOVAs with Age as a covariate and Ethnic Group as a fixed factor revealed that there were no significant differences between the AA and the White children in their narrative language scores at either Time 1 (F(1,400)=.280, p=.957) or at Time 2 (F(1,400)=.821, p=.365).

- However, the relationship between the children’s dialect and their narrative language scores was very different for the two ethnic groups:

- For the AA children the higher their AAE scores on the DELV-ST (i.e., the deeper their AAE dialect), the more literate language they produced at Time 1 (r=.22, p<.01). But there was no relationship with their MAE scores (r=.02).

- For the White children the higher their MAE scores on the DELV-ST, the better their literate language production at Time 1 (r=.29, p<.01). For this group there was a significant negative relationship between AAE scores and literate language (r=-.27, p<.01).

References

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