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HYPOCORRECTION: MISTAKES IN PRODUCTION OF VERNACULAR AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH AS A SECOND DIALECT

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Introduction

African Americans who have learned standard English (SE) natively comprise a minority group within a minority group. In an attempt to demonstrate solidarity with inner-city Blacks, many Black standard English speakers will shift style (i.e. accommodate) toward vernacular Black speech in appropriate ethnographic contexts. These efforts occasionally exceed prevailing linguistic norms for vernacular African American English (AAE) resulting in the creation of hypocorrect utterances that are instances of linguistic over-compensation beyond the nonstandard target.[1] The majority of such examples occur with camouflaged forms, which Spears (1982) defined as lexical items that serve different grammatical and semantic functions for nonstandard dialects of a language. Hypocorrection also provides evidence of (c)overt linguistic prestige (Trudgill, 1983).

DeCamp (1971) observed that 'hypercorrection' is a quintessential sociolinguistic phenomenon. Not only does one observe linguistic variation, but there is also linguistic over-compensation, as nonstandard speakers provide 'too much' linguistic information in their attempt to produce standard English as a second dialect. This paper considers the opposite trend. What happens when Black SE speakers acquire nonstandard dialects? In answer to this question we must also consider the social circumstances that have fostered this linguistic trend. Solidarity among African Americans is preserved, at least in part, through usage of nonstandard vernacular norms. Many Blacks who have learned SE natively will strive to accommodate toward nonstandard speech in appropriate situations (e.g. within the vernacular African American community).

This discussion concentrates on hypocorrection; cases of linguistic over-compensation beyond a nonstandard linguistic target.

An idealized model of mutual second dialect acquisition in a bidialectal speech community is presented initially, to place this topic in theoretical context, and to illustrate the inherent social nature of hypercorrection and hypocorrection. The controversy surrounding hypercorrection for Black English is then reviewed, along with pragmatic suggestions calling for compromise between extreme interpretations. Hypocorrection is finally shown to reinforce observations regarding linguistic innovation among African Americans.[2]

An idealized model of mutual second dialect acquisition

In order to confirm the social nature of hypercorrection and hypocorrection let us consider the prospect of mutual second dialect acquisition in an idealized bidialectal community. This hypothetical speech community would share a single language, consisting of two

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mutually intelligible, but distinctive, dialects. Moreover, there would be a long-standing tradition among all members of the speech community to learn 'the other' dialect as a sign of respect. The speech community is homogeneous in every other way. This type of mutual second dialect acquisition is illustrated in Fig. 1.

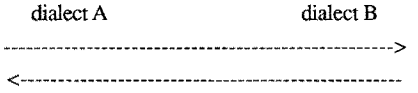

Fig. 1. Mutual second dialect acquisition.

Figure 1 also implies another idealized linguistic state; namely, that speakers of A and B are capable of successfully mastering a second dialect; that is, when speakers of A produce B and vice versa, everyone does so without a trace of their native accent.

Figure 2 illustrates a slightly different case, where speakers of A or B strive to master the second dialect, but they do so with varying degrees of success (cf. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985). Three possibilities exist with regard to hitting the 'other' linguistic target: (1) the speaker undershoots the target, or (2) hits the target (produces native-like speech in the second dialect), or (3) overshoots the target (i.e. hypercorrects or hypocorrects). Although Fig. 2 is another idealized model of mutual second dialect acquisition, it is more accurate than Fig. 1 because it compensates for different degrees of linguistic variation among speakers.

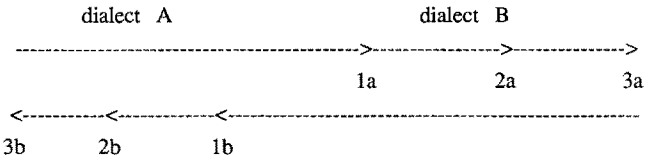

Fig. 2. Mutual second dialect acquisition with linguistic variation.

Since these dialects share equal status, in our hypothetical speech community, we cannot attribute any of this linguistic change to social forces, and therein lies an obvious limitation of these models; typical (i.e. non-idealized) speech communities are composed of speakers who harbor strong linguistic opinions. In the present speculative case, however, there are no social advantages or limitations associated with either dialect A or B.

Inherent social properties of hypercorrection and hypocorrection

Once social differences are added to Figs 1 and 2 our expectations regarding linguistic change must account for the relative social value of each dialect. Figure 3 is illustrative of traditional socially stratified speech communities, where nonstandard dialects (typically spoken by members of the working and lower classes), are devalued in comparison to standard dialects (i.e. the dialect of wider social communication, supported through formal education and mass media).

Mutual second dialect acquisition in a socially stratified bidialectal community

Hypercorrection is derived from two processes: instances of linguistic redundancy which result from efforts to produce a second, institutionally valued, dialect. Stated another way,

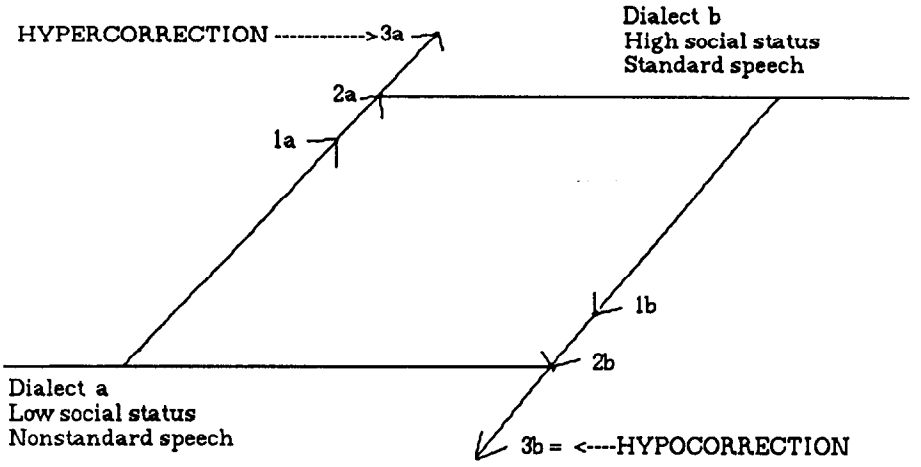

Fig. 3. A model of socially stratified hypercorrection and hypocorrection.

hypercorrection always moves from the lower social classes toward the speech of elites, never the other way around (e.g. Fig. 3-3a). Hypocorrection introduces the less conceivable possibility that speakers of the standard dialect have made sincere attempts to produce nonstandard speech as a second dialect, albeit with some linguistic over-compensation (i.e. Fig. 3-3b).

It is not merely linguistic over-compensation that characterizes these changes, but the social directionality of that change. Only Fig. 3, with its social stratification, has the capacity to reflect hypercorrection and hypocorrection. This type of social dislocation is essential to these concepts because they account for dominant and subordinate linguistic norms, as well as the social domains and populations that maintain them.

The hypercorrection controversy

Before turning to particular examples of hypocorrection we should first consider the hypercorrection controversy. After all, if hypercorrection is questionable then certainly any concept drawn from it would also be suspect. Several scholars, including Schneider (1982), Brewer (1986), and Pitts (1981, 1986) call hypercorrection into question, specifically as it pertains to AAE. Schneider and Brewer worked independently with data from Botkin's slave narratives, and concluded that 'hyper-s' had historical precedent in early English dialects, and that a specific durative function was being fulfilled by most hyper/-s/forms. Synchronic criticism was raised by Pitts, who observed many instances of suffix-s variation that were 'emphatic' rather than hypercorrect; he claims the repetition of suffix-s morphemes was produced for conversational emphasis, and not the result of attempts to produce standard English as a target of linguistic aspiration.

The legitimacy of the concept of hypercorrection has little to do with the preceding debate regarding suffix-s variation in AAE, because other examples of true hypercorrection can be found with this form and elsewhere in the grammar. Suffix-s has several functions, some are hypercorrect while others are emphatic; pragmatic considerations come into play when determining the actual grammatical function. A 58-year-old woman from Shreveport,

Louisiana was being interviewed in a multiracial context with White classroom teachers, and in that situation—which was quite formal for this speaker—she said,

(1) 'I don't want no I.Q. *teses* for these childrens' (/aydonwΔn:oaykyutɛsɪzfoðiztʃIlðnz/),

where one could attribute her redundant usage of /-s/ to an attempt to speak 'more properly' (i.e. traditional hypercorrection). Under different social circumstances, at a bowling alley in the vernacular AAE community, a 37-year-old man bragged—to anyone who would listen—that he was the best bowler in the house, and he challenged anyone to match his boast. In the context of these remarks he exclaimed,

(2) 'You know I *wants* to win!' (/yunoaywðntsta wɪn/).

The discourse context suggests that he was not emulating standard English; he used the emphatic /-s/ that Pitts (1981) describes.

Beyond /-s/ we find several cases of redundant past tense marking, such as

(3) 'He pickeded it up' (/hipɪktɪdɪdðp/) or

(4) 'They done lickeded the bowls and the spoons' (/ðeydðnlIktIdððbowlzænððspunz/).

As with the preceding examples, the burden of proof regarding hypercorrection, as opposed to some other form of morphological redundancy, stems from its directionality (from lower status to higher status dialects) and the linguistic over-compensation that results from attempts to produce standard English as a second dialect. Speaker intention is therefore vital to the final identification of hypercorrect forms; they occur when speakers strive to produce the standard, other cases of redundant morphology are not hypercorrect.

Beyond inflectional morphology

The present operational hypothesis claims that hypocorrection is the opposite of hypercorrection but, since most examples of hypercorrection have been morphophonemic, what are we to do with other linguistic evidence; evidence that is not morphological in nature, but still overshoots the intended linguistic target? In order to include syntactic and phonological evidence, in addition to the established inflected forms of hypercorrection, we include a broader spectrum of linguistic evidence within the defined realm of hypocorrection.[3]

Data from racially segregated interviews combined aspects of Giles and Powesland's (1975) accommodation theory with Labov's (1972b) contextual styles. It was necessary for speakers to provide informal conversation, but that conversation also had to reflect standard and nonstandard variability. Native AAE and SE interviewers were employed in the hope that their interlocutors (i.e. the informants) would feel free to accommodate toward the fieldworker's dialect. This procedure produced some unexpected results. Two examples illustrate the need for a broader definition of hypocorrection.

Evidence of phonological hypocorrection

Several examples of hypocorrection were found in the following linguistic environment:

$$[\Theta] \rightarrow < v > / [+\text{vocalic}] \_\_\_\_\_ \#.$$

A similar rule exists for vernacular AAE:

$$[\Theta] \rightarrow < f > / [+\text{vocalic}] \_\_\_\_\_ \#.$$

Table 1 illustrates the range of variation associated with Fig. 3 (1b, 2b, 3b).

Table 1. Examples of phonological hypocorrection

Lexical example	1b	2b	3b
With	/Ø/	/wIf/,/ wId/	/wIv/
Both	/Ø/	/bof/	/bov/
Tooth	/Ø/	/tuf/	/tuv/
Booths	/Ø/	/bufs/	/buvz/

All examples under 2b are common to vernacular AAE, but the examples in 3b add the feature [+voice], which exceeds vernacular AAE. There are logical phonetic explanations for this process; since the vowel must be voiced, the hypocorrect forms maintain voicing throughout the word, while vernacular AAE (2b) and standard English (2a) employ voiceless consonants after vowels in the representative environment.[4]

Another potential influence grows from the standard distinction between singular /-f/ and ambiguous pluralization with /-v + z/ as in 'leaf/leaves, knife/knives, life/lives', etc. Hypocorrect usage of /v/ may be reinforced by the existence of the phonological and phonemic contrasts found between /-f/ and /-v + z/ elsewhere in English grammar (e.g. roof/rooves).

Syntactic hypocorrection

Other interviews conducted by Black fieldworkers provided examples of syntactic hypocorrection. These include sentences that were produced by Black SE speakers during conversational interviews where they were accommodating toward AAE.

Black fieldworkers were encouraged to employ vernacular norms, including slang, in an effort to provide conversational contexts where AAE would be appropriate, regardless of the background of the informant. Many of the well-documented grammatical forms for AAE were actively used by Black interviewers, such as:

(i) aspectual marking with *steady* (Baugh, 1984);
(ii) stressed *been*, used to mark distant past events (Rickford, 1975);
(iii) habitual and durative *be* (Fasold, 1972; Montgomery and Bailey, 1986);
(iv) semi-auxiliary *come* (Spears, 1982); and
(v) multiple negation (Labov, 1972a).

Beyond isolated lexical variation, such as a marked increase in the use of 'man' by SE males who were being interviewed by Black males, e.g.:

(5) Yeah man. Oh man!, My man!

(etc.), we find examples that employ novel syntax. One such example was produced during an interview between two Black men; one was learning AAE as a second dialect, the fieldworker was a native speaker of AAE. As the informant began to relax he offered more personal opinions, and on one occasion made some derogatory comments about his current, part-time, employer:

(6) 'He *steadily* bes on my case!'

This combined use of *steadily* with *bes* is unattested in previous AAE studies, and suggests that the speaker is mixing AAE *be(s)* with SE *steadily*.

AAE speakers would more readily produce the following sentences:

(7) a. He be(s) on my case.
b. He steady on my case.[5] (Inherent phonological neutralization.)
c. He be steady on my case. (Inherent phonological neutralization.)
d. He steady be on my case. (Inherent phonological neutralization.)
e. He be on my case steady. (With heavy stress on sentence final steady.)
f. He(s) on my case steady. (With heavy stress on sentence final steady.)

Although *steady* is a predicate adverb in AAE (Baugh, 1984), it is not semantically or grammatically equivalent to SE *steadily*. In this case the SE speaker has produced something akin to traditional hypercorrection, in the sense that additional morphemes are added in the attempt to produce AAE as a second dialect.

Another example is:

(8) 'They *dones* blew them brothers away.'

The informant, a Black man from a predominantly White neighborhood near Dallas, was being interviewed by an AAE fieldworker; in retelling the description of a gang war he produced the preceding statement. AAE does not employ suffix-s with perfective *done*. Since contact was maintained with informants we were able to ask follow-up questions of this informant. After listening to his interview he claimed that he was trying to emphasize the point, and that /-s/ was making *done* 'stronger'.

Some tentative implications for camouflage theory

Spears' (1982) study of *come* in AAE introduced the concept of camouflaged forms to Black English research. Most of the hypocorrect examples occur with camouflaged forms; that is, AAE and SE share many of the same lexical, morphological, and phonological properties, but there are instances where each dialect will use common elements for different grammatical purposes. The examples presented in (6) and (7) are indicative of camouflaged forms.

Since most of the hypocorrect forms are camouflaged, in the sense that they exist in SE with different grammatical or semantic functions, we posit that second dialect learners have experienced varying degrees of linguistic interference. In some cases they achieve their linguistic objective, and successfully reproduce nonstandard norms but, during this process, a combination of phonological, morphological, and syntactic features (occasionally) overshoot their intended target, and these examples comprise legitimate cases of hypocorrection.

AAE and covert prestige

Trudgill (1983) has studied the concept of covert prestige at length, and readers who are unfamiliar with this topic are encouraged to consult his work directly for a thorough account of this subject. Hypocorrection is also a by-product of (c)overt linguistic prestige toward AAE, depending upon the circumstances where nonstandard linguistic norms are deemed most appropriate. The covert dimension of this prestige grows from long-standing public devaluation of AAE as 'bad English', but tacit prestige prevails owing to the popularity of jazz and other African American verbal art forms.

Elsewhere (Baugh, 1983) I discuss the educational and linguistic paradox that confronts most African American students, because they are often expected to perform

in two, rather distinctive, cultural contexts: the majority cultural context reinforces the overt value of SE; the street culture reinforces vernacular AAE, and provides the environment where dialect loyalty and in-group linguistic prestige can thrive. With the high visibility of African American music and visual arts, many people who have limited personal contact with AAE speakers have, nevertheless, been exposed to many aspects of vernacular African American culture through mass media. Some of these portrayals are more accurate than others, but all serve to reinforce the factors that support (c)overt linguistic prestige. Educators continue to face these competing linguistic norms in their classes, and this trend is likely to prevail because of undaunted stereotypes that equate AAE with low intelligence (Labov, 1972a; Farrell, 1983; Orr, 1987; Baugh, 1988).

Cultural identity through sociolinguistic accommodation

An undeniable dimension of hypocorrection is the direct result of linguistic accommodation to convey cultural allegiance to speakers of the target dialect. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) observed many instances where cultural loyalties were affirmed through the emphatic use and preservation of colloquial linguistic norms. Their research complements accommodation theory (Giles and Powesland, 1975) in the sense that Black SE speakers have been observed to adjust their speech to perpetuate and preserve vernacular AAE norms. Evidence for hypocorrection also reinforces the notion that 'linguistic prestige' is conditioned by the social context of any given speech event. Readers of this issue are keenly aware of such matters, recognizing the substantive behavioral accommodations required, say, for an audience with Royalty, or the Pope, as opposed to more casual conversations.

Speakers of standard dialects usually notice when hypercorrection occurs because of the striking difference from prescribed linguistic norms; those who perpetrate hypercorrection tend not to be aware of their 'mistakes'. The inverse holds true for hypocorrection; speakers are usually unaware that they are producing nonstandard speech 'incorrectly'. Popular stereotypes imply that a 'nonstandard error' must be an oxymoron, but the following examples refute that interpretation.

Each illustration was produced by a native speaker of standard English who attempted to replicate vernacular African American English:

(9) Scott *bes* cute. (Stated by a White female to a Black female.)
(10) We *bes* the baddest frat. (Stated by a White male to other White males.)
(11) They *been* (unstressed) closed. (Stated by a White male to a Black female.)
(12) They *comes* talkin' shit. (Stated by a Black male speaker of SE to a Black male speaker of AAE.)
(13) He *comes* coming up to me all sweet fixin' to apologize. (Stated by a White female to a Black female.)

In every instance, the standard speaker had no idea that (s)he had violated vernacular AAE norms, which also accounts for the emergence of their hypocorrect forms. Also, hypocorrection need not be produced by Black SE speakers (cf. (9)–(11), nor need the recipient be Black (cf. (10)).

The popularity of 'rap' music has also played a strategic role in the growth of hypocorrection, as more White speakers of the dominant dialect try to refine 'their rap'. It is now common to find upper-middle class youth, gathered at suburban malls and resorts, publicly rehearsing their AAE rap; like anyone learning a second dialect, they tend to make

mistakes on their road to partial fluency. Here I have attempted to identify some interesting instances of hypocorrection in everyday language, drawing upon diverse theoretical foundations in sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, accommodation theory, the sociology of language, and conceptual foundations from speech acts that convey cultural identity (cf. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985).

Limitations and implications for future research

We have not considered other significant sources of linguistic over-compensation in this initial examination of hypocorrection. Slang and speech acts that employ curses are two prime candidates for future hypocorrection research. Many vernacular AAE informants observed that SE speakers use profanity 'all wrong'. These sentiments were expressed by a 27-year-old welder, who had a Black supervisor who was 'lame' (cf. Labov, 1972a).

(14) JR. The brother be trying, but he just don't know how to relax. Every time he see us he always be cursing and carrying on, even around the women, and you know that ain't right.
J. (Do) you mean he don't know how to cuss?
JR. No, . . No . . that ain't it. When he be saying motherfucker this, and motherfucker that, he just don't use the right tone, and a lot of times he disrespects the women. He'll just keep right on bad mouthin' even when an old lady come by.

This sense that SE speakers do not know how to perform AAE speech acts is worthy of in depth evaluation, but exceeds the scope of the current study.

The qualitative introduction of hypocorrection, in linguistic terms, lays the foundation for future quantitative research. Here we have established the existence of hypocorrection, and identified that it thrives at different levels within the grammar. The theoretical consequences of this expanded definition are considerable, because morphological (i.e. semantic) constraints are not the only means of exceeding linguistic targets in secondary dialects. The issue of voicing, for example, illustrated in Table 1, hinges greatly on matters of voice onset/offset timing, which is an anticipated direction for future study.

Conclusion

The 'divergence hypothesis' has dominated AAE literature for the last half of the 1980s, and has proved to be highly controversial. Some scholars claimed that Black and White vernaculars were diverging (Labov and Harris, 1986; Myhill and Harris, 1986; Bailey, 1987), while others were skeptical (Rickford, 1987), or critical (Vaughn-Cooke, 1987) of these results. Proponents of the divergence hypothesis conducted interviews with vernacular AAE informants, and claimed grammatical divergence from standard English based on nonstandard linguistic competence. Despite being second dialect learners, hypocorrect speakers are reinforcing linguistic divergence. Recalling that hypocorrection exceeds vernacular AAE norms, it is divergent (from SE) by its very nature; it not only moves away from SE, but goes beyond AAE in the process. Thus, despite their native competence with SE, the hypocorrect speakers may be viewed as complementing Black and White dialect divergence, because they too are using language in innovative ways that are exceedingly nonstandard.

African Americans are pulled between competing linguistic forces from majority and minority cultures. The legacy of racial segregation has fostered this diversity. Although

more Blacks than ever have achieved positions of social prominence, far too many still suffer the consequences of poverty, and it is within this dynamic social context that hypocorrection exists. As far as the divergence hypothesis is concerned, hypocorrection reinforces observations made by proponents and detractors of the divergence hypothesis. The advocates are reinforced by hypocorrection because it diverges from SE, at several points in the grammar. The fact that this process is taking place among Blacks who already speak SE reinforces the social complexity among African Americans that Vaughn-Cooke (1987) raised when she criticized the divergence hypothesis. Hypocorrection reinforces that diversity, and affirms the breadth of cultural and linguistic norms that coexist in African America. My remarks are offered in the hope that we may also broaden interpretations of linguistic prestige, as well as our appreciation for the intricate web of social and linguistic factors that influence language variation and change.

NOTES

[1] Dell Hymes was first to alert me to the prospect of hypocorrection, and his contribution to this research is not adequately conveyed in the text. William Franklin, William Labov, Paul Newman, Walter Pitts, Peter Trudgill, Walt Wolfram, Malcah Yeager, Joshua Fishman, Howard Giles and anonymous reviewers have provided helpful suggestions at various stages of development. Support for this research was generously provided by the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, The National Science Foundation, The American Council of Learned Societies, The University of Texas Research and Policy Institutes, and the Stanford University School of Education. I am responsible for any limitations in this text.

[2]The 'divergence hypothesis' that Black and White dialects are growing apart is highly controversial. Proponents of the divergence hypothesis have presented strong evidence of linguistic innovation for AAE, and hypocorrection represents linguistic innovation among Blacks who strive to learn vernacular AAE as a second dialect. This innovative linguistic tendency is a common denominator, and by using this terminology we seek to avoid the controversy that has surrounded the divergence debate.

[3]Since the original research objective has been to analyze 'the opposite' of hypercorrection, the possible inclusion of phonological and syntactic evidence go beyond traditional definitions of hypercorrection, which tended to focus on redundant inflections to the exclusion of other instances of linguistic over-compensation. Our working hypothesis for hypocorrection seeks to overcome this limitation by considering morphological and extramorphological instances of linguistic excess as integral dimensions of hypercorrection and hypocorrection.

[4]Regardless of the cause, since neither standard English nor AAE use voiced consonants in this environment, we have included this type of phonological variation as examples of hypocorrection.

[5]Several examples exhibit cases of potential phonological neutralization. These are instances where contracted forms of 'is' could occur before the initial /s____/ in 'steady'. Since these linguistic environments produce adjacent sibilant phonemes one cannot distinguish standard speech from nonstandard speech based on ordinary conversational data, that is, for this linguistic environment.

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