ALICE SPRINGS ABORIGINAL CHILDREN'S ENGLISH

M.C. Sharpe

1. INTRODUCTION

From February to August 1976 (five and a half months) I spent time in Alice Springs for study of the English of Aboriginal children there. The project was funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, in response to a request by the staff of Traeger Park Primary School and a good number of the parents of Aboriginal children attending the school. In that time I recorded children interacting informally with each other and with white adults, and analysed the data gained. Analysis was speeded up by the use of a computer concordance. Detailed descriptions of the recording techniques are given elsewhere (Sharpe 1978), and a report of initial results appeared in 1977 (Sharpe 1977a). Data from the sample was compared with extensive data obtained in Brisbane from eight and a half year-old white middle-class children by the Mt Gravatt C.A.E. Language Research Unit. Children in the Alice Springs sample ranged in age from four to thirteen, with a mean and median age of eight and a half. Two-thirds of the children were at least six years old and under eleven years old. For this study I defined children as Aboriginal if they had some Aboriginal ancestry and a noticeably Aboriginal voice quality (see Sharpe 1970). With a couple of exceptions, all these children would have identified themselves as Aboriginal, although they may not have used the term 'Aboriginal'. (Children tended to use the term 'Aboriginal' in the sense 'traditional Aboriginal' or 'native'. They would, for example, refer to Aboriginal paintings or Aboriginal dances.)

Although only minor differences exist between different forms of Aboriginal English in Alice Springs, at least two main sub-dialects can be isolated. The division is between camp children's English and town children's English, the former including camps in the town area

Sharpe, M.C. "Alice Springs Aboriginal Children's English". In Wurm, S.A. editor, *Australian linguistic studies*.
C-54:733-748. Pacific Linguistics, The Australian National University, 1979. DOI:*10.15144/PL-C54.733*
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and outside, and the latter including children from children's homes run by the Anglican and Lutheran churches. There is perhaps a very slight difference between town and children's homes' English, and children from the Lutheran compound appeared to have some forms which differed from those of children from the Anglican children's cottages. Most camp children I was able to record were from Aranda speaking camps and the children were bilingual; unfortunately I was not able to obtain data about English from camps using another Aboriginal language. Some town and children's home children also spoke an Aboriginal language, most commonly Aranda, less commonly Pitjantjarra or another language from the centre, or (for a couple of children) from elsewhere.

Although I refer to two dialects of Aboriginal English, there is no clear-cut line of demarcation between Aboriginal English and standard English in either dialect. Most children fluctuated between standard and non-standard forms, almost as though many non-standard forms behaved as additional optional contractions or variations on standard forms. This will be discussed further below. But some of the more complex standard English constructions are lacking by comparison with the eight and a half year-old white Brisbane sample, and sentences rarely had more than one subsidiary clause, although multi-clause sentences, usually with *and* as connector, were common.

In the following discussion and description, standard English (SE) is taken to mean the dialect(s) *spoken* by middle-class white Australians, including their informal styles (i.e., not just their 'correct written' style), and including, where indicated, immature or developmental forms used by children with white middle-class upbringing.

2. PHONOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Phonological differences between Aboriginal English (AbE) and SE are of the type common among Aborigines, although some features may be specifically Centralian. Children tend to fluctuate between 'AbE' and 'SE' phonology. For forms most different from SE, the following summary applies:

> Distinction between voiced and voiceless stops can be lost, particularly word finally, where the voiceless forms are quite often used, and before nasals, where the voiced forms are used. As the stops in Aboriginal languages of the area are more commonly voiceless, voiceless stops are rather more common in AbE than in SE. Children at school apparently absorb a reasonable knowledge of phonics, because they often spell words

as they say them, e.g. bet *bed*, at *had*, etc. It does appear, however, on limited data, that words with voiced final stops in SE take the voiced plural and past tense allomorphs (-z, -d respectively), whereas words with voiceless word final stops in SE take the allomorphs -s and -t respectively.

Stops /b/, /p/ sometimes replace the fricatives /v/, /f/ respectively in isolated words (e.g., fibe, Beberly, wil' pigs *wild figs*, Preezer *Frazer*). Other words have the fricatives as in SE. No substitution of fricatives for stops occurs.

An interdental stop is sometimes used where SE uses /ð/, and a /t/ is used where SE uses /θ/, e.g. wid̪ *with*, d̪is *this*, d̪at *that*, ting *thing*.

An intervocalic /t/ in SE is sometimes replaced by a flapped or trilled /ř/, e.g. gořit *got it*, puřit *put it*, etc.

The Aboriginal language sound /ʈ/ sometimes replaces the affricates /tš/, /dž/, but most commonly English sounds are used. However, some children appear to substitute one fricative/affricate for another or to fluctuate, e.g. chuch/shuck *chuck*, shiraffe *giraffe*, secrets/checrets *secrets*. /s/ is occasionally used where SE has /t/, /θ/, or /ð/, e.g. das one, nasing *nothing*, and once sree *tree*, and once conversely, twitch *switch* (with variant /w/ sound, see below). For some children, the sibilants /s/, /š/, /z/, /ž/ are sometimes confused; these children may not recognize them as separate phonemes.

The aspirate /h/ is often dropped.

The lateral /l/ has a conspicuously different quality, which I find hard to define, particularly syllable finally after /u/. It is probably a lighter /l/ than English syllable final /l/.

/w/ at times sounds somewhat like /r/, in such phrases as all-ə-w̥ay *all the way*, and twitch/switch/tw̥itch *switch* (where w̥ symbolises this r-like w).

Some children have only two short front vowels /i/ and /æ/ where SE has three, /i/, /ɛ/, /æ/, e.g. Windy *Wendy*, pin *pin/pen* (the word biro is used by some to avoid homonyms), pig *pig/fig/peg* (clothes pig is unambiguous, and wil' pig usually refers to a native fruit, there being a scarcity of pigs around Alice Springs), and men *men/man*

(number is usually clear from preceding articles, or the plural morpheme -s can be suffixed for *men*). Preceding /g/ a SE /ɛ/ or /æ/ can be pronounced /ey/, e.g. iyg/eyg *egg* and fleyg *flag*.

The /aw/ diphthong (as in *down*) is often pronounced as long /æ/ vowel, with little or no final /w/ glide. This is only slightly different from broad Australian pronunciation, but differs markedly from average Australian, and can cause some comprehension difficulties at times, especially when combined with a variant stress and rhythm, e.g. /dæ:n/ *down*, /'mæntriyn/ *Mt Doreen*.

Some children insert a transition vowel between such clusters as /bl/, /kl/, /gl/ and /my/, particularly word initially, e.g. /pə'riyza/ *Frazer*, /'imiyu/ *emu*, /pigəli wigəli/ *Piggly Wiggly* (one of the town's supermarkets).

Initial vowels or syllables can be dropped from such words as about, around, because; and you/your is contracted to /yə/ at times, it/at/that to /ət/, and them to /əm/.

Word final clusters /nd/, /nt/ are more often than not reduced to /n/, and /dnt/ to /dn/. Most children also use the full forms. I have examples of the dropped /d/ being inserted as though it belonged with the next word phonologically: roun dan roun dan roun *round and round and round*, and she puttin er hans dup *she's putting her hands up*.

The vowel of the is always phonetically [ə], never changing to [iy]/[əy] preceding vowels, which it does in mature SE. Similarly, a never has the allomorph an before vowels (with two exceptions in the data). The consonant in the can be assimilated to a preceding consonant in certain common prepositions, in, on, at, all. The definite article is still almost always phonologically distinct from a in such cases, as the assimilation lengthens the preceding consonant, and the vowel is neutral, whereas the vowel of /a/ is usually more open, cf. [in:ə] *in the*, [ina] *in a*.

Stress and rhythm of speech was slightly different from SE, so whites need a period of tuning in to the dialect for easy comprehension. But after tuning in, problems were usually confined to isolated words, e.g. ['mæntriyn] *Mt Doreen* and confusion of 'probably' with 'properly' [probli] and [propli] respectively), etc. By this stage in

comprehension, the white person has also tuned in to many grammatical differences and does not notice these very much either.

3. GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES

As in phonology, so in grammar, AbE speakers show fluctuation between standard and non-standard forms. In some areas of grammar however, AbE has standardised on certain non-standard forms. In others, contractions are permitted. These contractions include ones used in informal and sometimes immature SE speech. But as most children used the full SE forms at times, we can conclude that they recognise these as the underlying forms.

3.1. Non-standard Forms used as Standard in AbE

The past tense was copula is used almost exclusively preceding plural as well as singular pronouns. Was is often contracted, see below.

Bin is used frequently by camp children and infrequently by town children to indicate past tense, e.g. we bin go. Some 'wrong' verb forms are also used: seen for saw, brang, brangim for brought, drownded, etc., but there are insufficient examples to draw firm conclusions on the use of these.

Some words used only as nouns in SE are used as verbs in AbE. AbE speakers used photo, typewriter and taperecorder as verbs, paralleling the SE use of photograph and tape:

> You gonna photo us?
> Miss Marg'ret, cin I typewriter?

Thing/ting is also used both as noun and verb, and is used as equivalent to the expressions what's-it, thingummy, thing-oh, etc.

> 'E's um thingin' 'is tail up (of man placing section of harness under horse's tail).
>
> P'renti's different, p'renti's got things.
>
> Miss Ting, Miss Wilkins, ...

Eh uttered with falling intonation is the standard AbE tag question marker, replacing SE isn't it, is it, wasn't she, etc.

> Marg'ret, it good fun, eh.
>
> You cin eat baby goanna eggs, eh Danny.
>
> Your name Marg'ret, eh.

That's the blue one, eh.

You do really, eh.

It is safe to assume that the SE tag forms are hardly ever used by AbE speakers, although children may well respond correctly to them when used by whites, particularly if the intonation is falling, as it is on the eh tag in AbE.

Many mass nouns in SE occurred in the AbE sample as count nouns. Enough examples occur to be reasonably sure this is a general pattern for such nouns.

(white adult): What are they taking?

(reply): Woods, an' a gas tank.

They must be pickin' up wood, little woods.

Her wood is bigger than mine (her piece of wood).

I got two woods over there.

They got paints on their faces.

An' they made lots of dusts (from dancing).

-mob and -two are pluralisers, and as well as suffixing these to them, you, we, they can be suffixed to other words, including SE mass nouns, which must therefore function as count nouns in AbE.

Clean water-mob Marg'ret. 'S deep inside.
(followed by comment from another): Like quicksand-mob.

Compare also:

We like eatin' green ones (pieces of grass), really dark greens.

3.2. Contractions

Aboriginal English in Alice Springs allows a broader spectrum of contractions of the standard forms than does standard English. The evidence suggests all children are familiar with SE uncontracted forms, SE contracted forms, and some further contractions. The most obvious example of this is in the use of the present continuous forms like I am going, I'm going. SE speakers use and recognise these. Some SE speakers will even intermittently omit the copula in casual speech, and produce forms I going or I goin' (and I gonna for I am going to with following verb), though most are unaware of their omission of the copula and would deny it.

AbE speakers use all forms I am goin(g), I'm goin(g), and I goin(g) (and their equivalents for other persons and numbers). They also use I'm gonna, I gonna and a further contraction I ng'na before another verb. The non-standard we was goin(g) can also be contracted by loss of /w/ and neutralisation of vowel to we'əz goin(g). Enough of the children used the copula and forms in -ing to be reasonably confident all knew the standard forms. I have no figures on white children other than those I recorded in Alice Springs in interaction with Aboroginal children, but the Alice Springs evidence suggested town Aboriginal children and white children (including one recent arrival from Brisbane who would not have been heavily influenced by Alice Springs usage) used forms in -ing and -in' in equivalent proportions. Table 1 shows the proportions of usage. The data suggests, for Aboriginal speakers, a very slight preference for the use of the form in -in' when the copula is omitted, and for -ing when the copula is used.

Table 1: Proportions of -in' to -ing

Town Aboriginal	White	Camp Aboriginal	Lutheran Homes	Anglican Homes
2:1	2:1	6:1	1½:1	5:1

Just as the copula can be omitted in continuous aspect verbs, so it can be omitted when it stands alone, and most children used forms with and without a copula. They also would use forms with or without third person singular verb agreement, as in:

Apple doesn't, apple don't.
(and in a game of school, successive questions from the one 'teacher'): What's come after four?
What comes after five?
What comes after six?
What come after eight, I mean seven?
What comes after un, sev-, eight?
What come after nine?
What comes after ten?
What comes after eleven?
What comes after twelve?
(another girl): I know what comes after twelve.
('teacher'): What's come after twelve?
What come after thirteen?

There is no obvious triggering mechanism to cause presence of absence of copula or third person singular verb agreement (or of misplacement

of the latter), at least when children are at ease. There is, however, evidence in the data of the deliberate use of some formal uncontracted use of English in 'formal' situations from camp children, for example when deliberately recording on a taperecorder.

Just as third person singular verb agreement can be omitted, so can the homophonous morphemes for plural and possessive, other plural morphemes, and the past tense morpheme. Again there is no obvious triggering mechanism for presence or absence of these inflections, except that they sometimes are present or absent together, e.g.

> That someone else house, an' this is someone else's house, an' this is my house.

In negative clauses using the copula in SE, there is a preference in AbE for copula omission and the use of the full negative form not rather than n't. This is shown in Table 2. But in negative clauses with other auxiliaries in AbE, with the one exception of did not occurring once, the negative is contracted to n't or n', e.g. can'(t), couldn'(t), don'(t), didn'(t), (h)aven'(t), won'(t), wouldn'(t).

Table 2: Use of negative with copula

not (copula omitted)	not (after contracted copula)	not (after uncontracted copula, is not)	n't (after uncontracted copula, is, was)
9	9	1	2
	('s not 6) ('re not 2) ('m not 1)		

Brisbane white children and Alice Springs Aboriginal children all used the following forms for future tense: 's goin(g) to, 's gonna (and other persons and numbers, with omission of copula allowed in AbE), will and 'll, except that camp children never used the full form will. Shall, which occurred with low frequency in the white sample, only occurred in question inversion form in the AbE sample, and from camp children, who used shall rather than will for questions:

> Shall I switch it on/off?

AbE speakers used gonna more frequently for future tense, while Brisbane white children used 'll more frequently. Gotta was also used for future tense in AbE.

Another phrase which can be contracted is want to. Most SE adult speakers are familiar with the contractions wanna and wantə, and young SE speakers often contract want to to -na after the pronoun I. AbE

speakers in Alice Springs, just as did AbE speakers in Queensland, could and did contract want to to -na after any pronoun; want to was also contracted to əna after we, but no examples of əna occurred after other pronouns. After don't, only the contractions wanna and wantə occur.

3.3. Passives

Passives are comparatively rare in children's speech, or even in mature SE speech, as opposed to written and formal English. In passives used by younger white children (six and a half year-olds), according to the evidence collected by Mt Gravatt C.A.E. Language Research Unit, the being undergoing the action is always first person, e.g.

I was bitten by a bee.

I am being eaten by a lion.

Older children use the passive with other subjects, e.g. he.

The AbE sample contains a number of 'agentless passives', which it is unwise to classify as passives, as they parallel the structure of adjectival predicate constructions such as I'm hot, He's not dead, e.g.

I'm allowed to do that.

You're not allowed.

... so I get paid tomorrow.

I gettin' paid tomorrow 'cos I bin working.

I'm s'posed to go over there.

Only two examples of passives with stated agent occur in the Alice Springs sample, and got is used rather than be/was as the auxiliary verb. The same use of get/got occurred in the data collected at Palm Island in Queensland by the Van Leer Project team. The Alice Springs examples are:

'E got bitten by a snake.

'E got hit with a boomerang.

It is worth noting here that children with significant hearing losses rarely acquire understanding of the passive construction. Although only one of the children recorded in the Alice Springs sample had severe and current hearing loss, the undisputable fact that there is a higher proportion of children with hearing losses among Aboriginal children would lessen the possibility of the use of the passive by Aboriginal children even with normal hearing.

4. COMMENTS

Argument has waxed hot over recent years on whether the English of such groups as urban Negroes in the U.S. and urban and fringe dwelling Aborigines is an adequate language of itself. Bernstein (1972), at least as commonly interpreted, regarded the language of such groups as 'restricted'. Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) are often quoted as suggesting some children had virtually no language. As Labov convincingly showed ((1969) 1972, 1973), evidence to support these ideas was often obtained by white investigators (and even coloured investigators) in situations which, as we see with more sociological insight now, put the child on the defensive. The child therefore was uncommunicative as a defensive action. When the children were at ease, they became most communicative. Similar responses have been noted in Australia with Aborigines. During research in the Van Leer Project in Queensland, teachers reported on children being shy and uncommunicative, though they were very talkative with Julia Koppe and myself. Koppe and myself used differing techniques which were equally effective in putting children at ease. In Alice Springs I found a most communicative camp child who was regarded as shy by a senior teacher. After implementation of the Van Leer Program in Queensland, teachers found children to be much more communicative and forward with them and with visiting V.I.P.'s. I attribute this to the change of attitude of the teachers to the children's English, from one of exasperation at what appeared to be a random bunch of errors, to one of acceptance of Aboriginal English as a language with its own rules.

When AbE is compared with SE, we see a number of differences. AbE probably has a more limited vocabulary (although it does have some words not used in SE), lacks some complex verb phrases present in SE, used subsidiary clauses less, and a more limited range of conjunctions. Based, no doubt, on these differences, and observations of researchers such as Bernstein, Bereiter and Engelmann on the communicativeness of lower class and coloured children, educators and the general public, as a recent writer pointed out (Fisher 1977:18), favour a deficit model for these dialects, whereas linguists lean heavily on the difference side. As the linguistic evidence for Alice Springs AbE at first glance favours the deficit model, it is up to the linguist to present a case against the deficit model. How the linguist is going to convince educators and the general public to accept this, or how society is to be changed so that linguistic difference is not a handicap to some groups is another matter.

Firstly let us consider the matter of vocabulary. I am sure other linguists have had, as I have, the experience of endeavouring to communicate an idea in a language they are just learning. Even with only the basic grammar, and a limited vocabulary, ideas can be conveyed and often conveyed quite well. A shortfall in vocabulary of the type existing in AbE when compared with that of the average SE speaker is no great handicap.

In verb phrases, Alice Springs Aboriginal children's English lacks some of the more complex phrases which at least some eight and a half year-old Brisbane white children use. Most phrases which are lacking from the AbE data involve the auxiliary **have**. **Have** is only used in the AbE data as an auxiliary with **got** and **had**, and reduced to **-a** in other cases, e.g.:

(She) might 'ave 'ad a fright.
I've got a little orange television.
I 'ave got a click stick.
Jenny's got a -.
... one girl has got her hand over 'er face.
Some of them a dropped out.
It must-a fell off.

AbE also uses the phrase **have to**:

It has to have water.
Y'afta put ət on 'ere.
You don' 'ave-to.
You afta have real pointy stick to make fire.

In addition to all uses of verb phrases occurring in AbE, eight and a half year-old SE uses both **have** and **had** with verb participles, e.g.:

have been/gone/given (etc.)
haven't ...ed
haven't never used
I thought you'd gone
If she'd gone, ...

The eight and a half year-old SE data also has, in addition to these:

could (ha)ve had
might have been
should have
would have been terrible
would have been mucking up
will have (to be)
may

The SE sample also has the negative forms hasn't (AbE data includes 'aven'(t)), hadn't, mightn't and mustn't. Must only occurs once in the AbE data, in the combination must-a quoted above.

May and might differ little in most English usage today, so the absence of may is no loss. Regarding have, not all languages have a perfect tense, and we do not regard such languages as inadequate. There are other ways of indicating completed action if required.

Of twenty-four conjunctions, including relative conjunctions, used by children in the eight and a half year-old Brisbane white children's sample, the Alice Springs AbE sample lacks ten. Conjunctions used in both are: and, as, because, but, if, or, so, than, till/until, how, that, what, where, while/whilst. Conjunctions used only in the white sample are: except, instead, since, though, unless, whatever, whenever (not in Brisbane sample, but used by one white six year-old in Alice Springs, a Brisbane child), which, who.

Where SE uses which or who as conjunctions, AbE gets by with no overt conjunction, or with that, following patterns of relative clauses in some Aboriginal languages, and the meaning is quite clear. Circumlocutions with what or when can cover whatever and whenever. Instead can be handled by a circumlocution. Since can be replaced by because or after depending on meaning. Though can be deleted from one clause and but prefixed to the associated clause, e.g.:

Though he came I didn't see him.
He came but I didn't see him.

Except and unless can be replaced by other conjunctions and a negative particle, e.g.:

You'll miss the bus unless you hurry.
You'll miss the bus if you don't hurry.
We saw everyone except Bill.
We didn't see Bill, but we did see all the others.

Hence I would suggest the absence of such conjunctions causes no great problems in communication. Problems can arise of course, when AbE speakers, unfamiliar with these alternative ways of expressing certain sentences in SE, come up against words they do not know.

Teachers, oddly to the linguist, are most prone to cite the absence of the copula in equational clauses (e.g., 'E big one.) or in the present continuous tense (I goin' now) as the most compelling evidence of language deficit, whereas there is no shred of meaning difference between the SE and non-standard forms in such phrases, and therefore such forms are no evidence at all for a language deficit. In any case,

as I have shown above, these forms are optional contractions of standard forms for Aboriginal speakers, and are therefore no evidence of differing basic forms of English.

Further detail on Alice Springs Aboriginal English may be obtained from reports I prepared for Traeger Park Primary School, and are obtainable from the school.

My own impression in interaction with the children was that their language was a full and flexible one, well able to be a vehicle for complex thought and reasoning. I do not feel the differences between AbE and SE are of themselves handicapping to Aboriginal children. Any language handicap suffered by the children would be due to the interaction between AbE and SE and the relative values placed on these dialects by the dominant white society. Fortunately teachers at Traeger Park School had a generally accepting attitude towards the different dialect of the children, and a creative way of introducing children to the skills of reading and writing, which lessened potential problems faced by these children. However, they would be the first to admit they do not have the full answer, and perhaps that they were not asking the right question. The problem, if problem we must call it, that these children face, is more a sociological one than a linguistic one.

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C-54:733-748. Pacific Linguistics, The Australian National University, 1979. DOI:*10.15144/PL-C54.733*
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