

ANDREA ANUSHKO, Master Of Arts, May, 2006

Thesis Committee: Susan Sonnenschein (Chair), Linda Baker, Charissa Cheah,
Thomas Robinson

Nonliteral Language Comprehension In African American And European American Children: Who Can Bust A Grape In A Fruit Fight?

Much of the way we communicate with others requires that we understand what is called nonliteral language. In order to comprehend the sarcastic exclamation "What a beautiful day!" uttered during a stormy afternoon, one must look below the surface to a nonliteral or inferential meaning. Understanding nonliteral language plays an increasingly important role in school because much of the language used in all but the most basic texts includes language such as metaphor, irony, and sarcasm. However, we do not know much about group-based differences in children's understanding of these forms of language nor how they develop competencies with them. This study was one of the first to empirically explore how African American and European American children understand nonliteral language and how their preferences for media in our popular culture may foster such an understanding.

Observations of how children are socialized to language at home suggest that many African American children, in contrast to their European American peers, are expected to use words nonliterally and inferentially at a very early age. Such experiences may result in an advantage for African American children when they are asked to comprehend nonliteral language. In addition to conversations with family and peers, children are exposed to language through listening to music and watching television. Rap music, once addressed primarily to African American audiences, is now widely listened to by audiences from other ethnic backgrounds. This form of musical expression capitalizes on the use of nonliteral language and as a result, anyone with experience with such media may show increased competencies understanding nonliteral language. Television programs that use sarcasm and irony to create the dynamic relationship between the characters may also have the same type of influence as music on nonliteral language comprehension.

Third and fifth grade African American and European American children listened to short stories containing either sarcastic or literal utterances and then answered questions about the stories. In order to evaluate preference for media, children were presented with checklists containing the names of popular singers, songs, television programs and cartoons and asked to check off the items they liked to listen to or watch. These items were previously rated by UMBC undergraduates for the amount of nonliteral language they contained.

Consistent with predictions, children comprehended literal stories better than nonliteral ones, and older children comprehended nonliteral stories better than younger children did. Of particular interest were results comparing African American and European American children's comprehension. European American children received higher comprehension scores on literal stories than African American

children; in contrast, African American children received slightly higher scores than European American children on nonliteral stories.

Children preferred media containing high amounts of nonliteral language to media containing mainly literal language. Consistent with predictions and the observations of ethnographers, African American children displayed greater preference for nonliteral media than European American children; however European American children also reported a considerable amount of exposure to and preference for such media.

There was a moderate relation between preference and exposure to nonliteral media and comprehension of nonliteral stories for both African American and European American children. Thus, socialization and exposure to nonliteral media aids children in detecting and comprehending nonliteral language in story texts.

Findings from this study are relevant for broadening our understanding of how popular cultural can inform children's language development and how language socialization influences children's interpretation of and responses to story situations. For example, although African American children scored significantly lower than European American children on questions tapping literal comprehension of stories, their lower scores may not be a result of lesser understanding, but rather a matter of response type. African American children often responded to questions by expanding upon the story and drawing inferences not explicitly suggested in the story.

These findings may be used by teachers to draw a parallel between the home environment and that of the school. For instance teachers can use information about the music and TV children are already familiar with to show how nonliteral language use in song lyrics is akin to the language of poetry. This approach may help peak children's interest in subject matter that they otherwise may not have enjoyed. Acknowledging the different types of responses African American children provide to literal stories and expanding the criteria for a correct response to include elaborated reasons or reasons by way of analogy helps broaden the perspective and understanding of both the teacher and student. In addition, providing teachers with information about children's understanding of nonliteral language will help them choose manageable and challenging texts for their students.