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ABSTRACT

The Standard English Repetition Test (SERT) is an instrument designed to measure the Standard English (SE) performance of young Hawaii Creole English (HCE)-speaking children. HCE is colloquially referred to as "pidgin English." Details of the test's construction are given; test-retest and alternate form reliability and validity studies are presented. The test employs the technique of controlled, elicited imitation, which requires the child to repeat SE sentences spoken to him by an adult examiner. The method is based on the assumption that a child who understands a sentence--who is familiar with its syntax, phonology, and vocabulary--will be likely to repeat the sentence accurately. Correlates of individual differences in SE performance are presented for one sample of HCE-speaking children. Possible uses of the test include further research on the relationship between academic achievement and Standard English proficiency, and developmental studies of HCE speakers as they progress through elementary school. (Author/CTM)

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Technical Report #15

The Standard English Repetition Test (SERT):

A Measure of Standard English Performance for Hawaii Creole

English-Speaking Children

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Abstract

This paper reports on the Standard English Repetition Test, an instrument designed to measure the Standard English (SE) performance of young Hawaii Creole English (HCE)-speaking children. Details of the test's construction are given and illustrations of its uses provided. Test retest and form reliability and validity studies are also presented. The test employs the technique of controlled, elicited imitation, which requires the child to repeat SE sentences spoken to him by an adult examiner. The method is based on the assumption that a child who understands a sentence--who is familiar with its syntax, phonology, and vocabulary--will be likely to repeat the sentence accurately. Correlates of individual differences in SE performance are presented for one sample of HCE-speaking children. A discussion of the uses of the test is presented.

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The Standard English Repetition Test (SERT);
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English-Speaking Children*

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In Hawaii there is a nonprestigious form of communication, Hawaii Creole English (HCE), which is colloquially described as "pidgin English." HCE is better conceptualized as a part of a creole speech continuum (Reinecke, 1933, 1969; Reinecke and Tokimasa, 1934; Day, 1973).¹ Such a continuum is characterized by decreolization, in which a creole, a natural language system formed as a result of languages (including pidgin) being in contact, is in the process of losing its identity as a separate language. A creole speech continuum is composed of a number of linguistic varieties or systems which range in their distinctiveness from the socially dominant standard language.² The standard language acts as the model for decreolization because of various social and economic phenomena beyond the scope of this report.

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1.

DeCamp (1971) first formulated the concept of a creole speech continuum as it is used today, but he referred to it as a post-creole speech continuum, feeling that the creole would no longer be in existence when decreolization began. Bickerton (1973) observed that the use of the term "post" can be misleading since the variety which is the greatest distance, linguistically, from the standard language may be no different from the original creole language.

2.

Standard is used here as a relative term. A linguistic system's status is, of course, determined by society.

In the case of HCE, the model for decreolization was historically and continues to be Standard English (SE) from the mainland United States. For ease of reference, the term Hawaii Creole English is used when referring to the resulting creole speech continuum, recognizing that is only a cover term for a number of varieties of speech. Although HCE continues to be used by persons at many social levels, inability in SE is widely regarded as a principal factor in academic underachievement of Hawaiian-American and other Island children (Gallimore, Boggs, and Jordan, 1974; Tharp and Gallimore, 1974).

In actual fact, however, what are the academic consequences for children who display a lower level of SE usage? Are specific SE instructional programs desirable? Are they effective? To answer these questions and to plan educational programs intelligently, we must be able to calibrate the performance of individual speakers in SE. Only then can the correlates of language performance be established.

This paper reports a simple, economical test instrument designed to measure the SE performance of young children who speak HCE. A preliminary analysis of the correlates of SE performance is also presented. The test is a result of several years of work in the HCE speech community and was developed as part of an educational research and development program (Boggs, 1972; Day, 1973; Gallimore, et al., 1974; Tharp and Gallimore, 1974).

Method

The Standard English Repetition Test (SERT) uses the technique of controlled, elicited imitation; that is, the child is instructed to repeat SE sentences which an adult examiner says to him.³ This method provides a test

³The role of imitation and observational learning in the learning of a language is a matter of dispute (c.f. Zimmerman and Rosenthal, 1974; Chomsky, 1959). This issue is of no concern here since elicited imitation is used in the SERT as a measure of previously acquired structures.

that is simple to administer, score, and interpret. The repetition technique assumes that a child who understands a sentence, and/or who is familiar with its syntax, phonology, and vocabulary, will be more likely to repeat the sentence accurately than one who is not (Slobin and Welsh, 1973).

Labov (Labov, Cohen, Robins, and Lewis, 1968) successfully used repetition tests in work with speakers of Black Vernacular English in Harlem. Black informants had the greatest difficulty repeating SE sentences containing parts of SE grammar which were the most different from Black Vernacular English. Sentence length was less a factor than syntactic differences. Labov concluded that the "limited effect of length confirms the impression that we are dealing with problems of grammatical processing, not simple additive effects of memory" (Labov et al., 1968, p. 315).

Other researchers have used the technique of elicited imitation to test linguistic performance (Baratz, 1969; Rohwer and Ammon, 1971; and Heber, Garber, Harrington, Hoffman, and Falender, 1972). Politzer, Hoover, and Brown (1974) used sentence repetition tests to measure the language ability of children in Black English, both standard and nonstandard. Rohwer and Ammon center their report on the use of elicited imitation for the study of individual syntactic constructions. Heber et al. developed a repetition test to evaluate differential rates of linguistic improvement between an experimental and a control group of children at risk for mental retardation. Only Politzer et al. report reliability and validity measures.

Source and Description of SERT items

As a source of item formation, sentences were adapted from tape recordings of the natural speech of HCE-speaking children, ranging in grade level from kindergarten to eighth. The latter group was included to ensure that there would be items difficult enough to give the test a sufficiently high "ceiling." Each sentence in the initial pool, which consisted of 75 sentences, included

at least one grammatical feature which had been observed to show variation in the speech of these children. Sentences and features of varying difficulty were selected for HCE-speaking children in the five- to six-year age range. The number of items was reduced by discarding items on the basis of low correlations with total score and redundancy.

The SERT in its final version consists of two forms, A and B, each having 15 sentences with 29 features. The two forms differ in vocabulary items but not in grammatical structure. The 29 features test the following grammatical constructions: past tense, present tense, copula, negation, yes-no question formation, passive, indefinite article, indirect question formation, and nominalization.

Some of the SE features used as critical SERT items are similar to those which were included in the repetition test designed by Politzer, et al. (1974) for Black populations. Both instruments have items dealing with the copula, past tense, question formation, and third person singular marking.

Administration Procedures

The test is administered individually by a SE-speaking adult. The session is recorded on tape so that scoring (see below, Scoring Procedures) can be done later. The child is told, "We are going to talk on the tape recorder so we can listen to ourselves talk." To establish verbal response in the presence of the tape recorder before the test begins and to adapt the child to the test situation, he is first shown how to operate the recorder and allowed to manipulate it. The child is instructed to say, "Go!" or his name so he can watch the recording indicator flip back and forth.

Specific test instructions are as follows. "Now I am going to say something. I want you to watch me real close, and see if you can say the same thing I say, just like I say it. Say..." and a practice sentence would follow. Only when the child correctly completes the entire sequence, including at least

one practice sentence, is the first test sentence administered.

Scoring Procedures

Scoring for the SERT is done by assigning responses to one of four categories:

1. Exact SE--exact repetition of the SE feature. For example:

Examiner: I'm not sure where the teacher is.

Subject: I'm not sure where the teacher is.

The two underlined instances of the copula are the SE features being tested in this sentence. The subject repeated the two features exactly as the examiner said them, and thus, the responses would be scored as "exact SE."

2. Other SE--a correct SE repetition but not an exact repetition. The meaning of the sentence is maintained, even though the feature was not repeated in exactly the same form.

Subject: I am not sure where the teacher is.

In this example, there is repetition of the second copula, is, exactly as given, but the first is changed from a contraction, 'm, to a full form, am. This changing the contracted form to the full form would be scored as "other SE."

3. HCE--an equivalent HCE repetition of the SE feature. This is a transformation of a SE feature into a HCE one, which maintains the meaning of the sentence.

Subject: I not sure where the teacher stay.

In this example the subject has repeated the sentence using two HCE features, zero copula and stay, for the two SE features, 'm and is, respectively.

4. A bust--failure to repeat the feature, an inaudible or unintelligible response, or change of the meaning of the sentence.

Subject: I know where the teacher was.

This example illustrates two busts. The first feature is a bust because of

know, which is neither a form of the copula nor a negative construction. The second bust, was, is a form of the copula but the tense has been changed from present to past, which changed the meaning of the sentence; thus it must be scored as a bust.

To obtain a child's performance on the SERT, his replies are totaled in each of the four categories. Since there are 29 features, a subject could possibly score 29 for the first category--Exact SE. To date, however, no HCE-speaking kindergarten child has repeated exactly all the features in SE. In addition to the scores for SE and HCE, a total appropriate score can be obtained by adding together a subject's responses in the three categories--Exact SE, Other SE, and HCE. Exact SE is a measure of the child's SE performance; the total appropriate score is an indication of the child's linguistic ability, regardless of code.

At this stage of our research, we have for project reasons focused on Exact SE scores. The remainder of this report describes our efforts to establish a reliable and valid index of Exact SE production; we report here the full set of scoring categories, but leave to later reports analysis of the alternative categories. However, in a later section of this paper we have included some data on all four scoring categories.

Reliability Studies

1. Item correlations and Internal Consistency. The final item correlations and internal consistency analyses for Forms A and B were conducted on the Exact SE scores of 41 part-Hawaiian kindergarten children whose mean age was 5.5 years.

The internal consistency for Form A was .87 as calculated by the Kuder-Richardson 20, while the item intercorrelations ranged from .12 to .84 with a mean of .45. For Form B the internal consistency was .84, while the item intercorrelations ranged from .04 to .6 with a mean of .45.

2. Test Re-test and Equivalent Form Reliabilities. Test re-test and equivalent form reliabilities were obtained on the same sample of part-Hawaiian kindergarten children on which the internal consistency and item correlations were computed. The two versions of the SERT, Forms A and B, were found equivalent ($r=.86$). Three-day test re-test reliabilities showed the test to be reliable over that time span ($r=.89$).

Validity Studies

1. Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Ability (ITPA) and the SERT.

A study was undertaken to determine the relationship between the SERT and the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Ability (ITPA). The ITPA is a sophisticated, well-standardized test of language development for the two-year to 10 year, three-month age range. It assesses 12 separate components of linguistic ability, suggesting it to be a relevant comparison for the SERT.

The ITPA was given within five months of the SERT administration to a random sample of 27 first graders taken from a HCE-speaking population. A product moment correlation of .726 ($df=25$; $p<.01$) was obtained between the total SE (Exact SE repetition + Other SE) score on the SERT and the total raw scores on the ITPA, indicating a high relationship between the tests. The ITPA and SERT apparently tap a common factor of language ability.

2. Performance Differences on the SERT Between Native SE Speakers and Native HCE Speakers. If this test measures acquired SE features of young children, then native SE-speaking children would perform, on the average, at a higher level than non-native SE speakers.

An Arizona kindergarten class ($N = 30$) consisting of native SE-speaking children, none of whom had a second language, was compared on the SERT with a kindergarten class ($N = 28$) of children randomly sampled from an HCE-speaking community in urban Honolulu. The mean score of the mainland SE group was 23.89 while that of the Hawaii HCE speakers was 9.18. The native SE speakers' scores

were significantly higher than that of the HCE-speaking group ($t = 11.14$; $df = 48$; $p < .002$).

These results confirm the prediction that children who have spoken a variety of SE all of their lives will score higher on a test believed to measure SE performance than a group of the same age children who have grown up in an environment in which HCE is the primary language.

3. Age and Performance on the SERT. Scores should improve with age, assuming constant exposure to SE, which is the instructional language in the schools in Hawaii.

The SERT was administered to a kindergarten class and a first grade class in five schools in Hawaii, located in districts in which HCE is mainly spoken: two urban schools, two suburban, and one rural. Within each school, the scores of the first grade children were compared with the scores of the kindergarten children and, in all cases, the first graders' mean Exact SE score was higher.

First graders had higher scores, ($p < .05$), in the rural and one of the urban schools; in one of the suburban schools the difference approached a conventional level of statistical significance ($p < .10$).

A further comparison was made between the performance of a fourth grade class and a kindergarten class in the same school. The fourth grade class obtained a mean SE score of 22, whereas the kindergarten group only obtained a mean score of 7.823. This difference is highly significant ($t = 8.86$; $df = 37$; $p < .001$).

Finally a group of HCE-speaking kindergarten children were followed longitudinally for 9 months, using alternate forms for retest. They were given the SERT in the fall and spring of their kindergarten year, and again in the fall of their first grade year. These children received no special instruction in SE; however, their teachers spoke exclusively SE. Activities involving SE,

Table 1

Means and t-comparisons on SE performance for kindergarten
and first grade HCE-speaking children in five schools in Hawaii

School Area	Kindergarten		First Grade		t
	N	Mean	N	Mean	
Suburban 1	20	10.75	23	12.87	1.33
Suburban 2	23	9.30	21	12.42	1.96*
Rural	14	6.78	11	11.27	3.25**
Urban 1	17	7.82	21	8.00	.11
Urban 2	23	9.18	26	14.23	2.97**

**p < .05

*p < .10

such as watching Sesame Street on television, were included in the daily program.

During the seven-month period in kindergarten, the Exact SE scores of this group of children increased significantly from a mean of 9.18 to a mean of 13.64 ($t = 10.56$; $df = 54$; $p < .001$).

In sum the findings suggest that the SERT reflects differential child exposure to SE, records the acquisition of SE from the presence of an SE model, and measures increases in SE over age, given fairly constant exposure to SE.

Significant Correlates of SERT Scores for HCE-speaking Children

If we conclude that the SERT measures SE performance, the test can be used to assess the correlates and/or determinants of SE performance.

A preliminary study of some of the correlates of SERT scores was conducted

Table 2

Mean SERT Scores and Scoring Category Percentages
for a Kindergarten Class Tested in Fall and Spring

	N	Mean Exact SE	<u>t</u>	Scoring Category Percent			Total appro.	Buste
				Exact SE	Other SE	HCE trans- formations		
Fall 72	28	9.18 (5.72)*	10.56 $p < .001$	31.7	8.1	34.6	74.4	25.6
Spring 73	28	13.61 (6.62)*		46.9	8.9	30.7	85.6	13.6

Standard Deviation in parentheses

on a sample of 28 HCE-speaking children of kindergarten age. One-quarter of the students come from middle-class families, the remainder from families who receive state financial aid. Many of the ethnic groups found in Hawaii are represented; however, three-quarters of the children have some percentage of Hawaiian ancestry. All were randomly selected.

1. Changes in Exact SE Scores. These children were followed longitudinally for 9 months, as reported above (see Table 2). Although these students performed at a statistically significant higher rate in spring, changes in SE scores over the school year do not correlate with initial scores ($r = .04$; $df = 26$; $p > .05$). That is, the level of performance displayed by students when they enter kindergarten does not predict which children will show increases in SE scores at the end of the school year. In sum, gains in SE performance in spring cannot be attributed to initially higher levels of performance in autumn. Whatever produced an increase in SE scores on the SERT occurred after the child began kindergarten.

The multiple scoring system provides further information on the nature of the changes in SERT scores from fall to spring. Table 2 also shows obtained changes in the four scoring categories--Exact and Other SE, HCE, and busts--for the 28 kindergarten children. The major change from fall to spring was an increase in Exact SE from 31.7 to 46.9 percent. The source of this change was twofold; first, there was a 12 percent reduction in number of busts (from 25.6 to 22.6 percent). The second source of change was a reduction from 34.6 to 30.7 percent in the number of HCE transformations. Also, a trace change in the percentage of Other SE (from 8.1 to 8.9 percent) was recorded. Thus the increase in Exact SE in spring is a result of less inclination to substitute HCE and a reduction in the number of Busts.

The change in number of Busts is uninterpretable since the current scoring procedure cannot distinguish between failed efforts to produce an Exact SE

response and general inability to do repetition tasks. Presumably both factors can have contributed independently to the increase in Exact SE from fall to spring.

More importantly the total appropriate scores in fall and spring--74.4 and 85.6 percent respectively--suggest that HCE-speaking children in general comprehend SE. Except when they fail altogether--a bust--they either give an exact repetition, some other suitable SE form, or transform the SE into HCE. These results are similar to Baratz (1969) who reported that Black Children transform, and thus comprehend, SE sentences in repetition tasks.

2. IQ, Reading Readiness, and SERT Scores. The 28 students were also given the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scales of Intelligence (WPPSI), an individually-administered test yielding IQ scores for Full Scale, Verbal, and Performance, in autumn and in spring. For the autumn administrations of the two tests, the product moment correlations ($df = 26$) are .51 ($p < .01$), .53 ($p < .01$), and .44 ($p < .05$), for the three portions of the WPPSI respectively.

For the spring administrations, posttest scores on the SERT and WPPSI also correlate: .70 ($p < .01$), .76 ($p < .01$), and .43 ($p < .05$) for Full Scale, Verbal, and Performance respectively ($df = 25$). The increased association of SERT and IQ scores in the spring over those in the autumn, suggests that SE performance has an increasing association with cognitive performance after the child has entered school. However, the level of association at entry into kindergarten is also high, confirming the expectation that SE performance is a factor in school-related performance from the beginning.

The 28 HCE-speaking kindergarteners were given the Metropolitan Readiness Test at the beginning and end of kindergarten. There is a high correlation between SE scores on the SERT and the Metropolitan for both administrations respectively: $r_1 = .62$, $df = 24$, $p < .01$; $r_2 = .69$, $df = 26$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

Sentence repetition apparently can serve as a reliable and valid indication of SE performance levels and, considering its economy, is therefore a leading candidate for analysis of education-related linguistic questions.

In the present report we have described only some preliminary results of a larger effort to specify the role of SE performance in minority children's school problems. Specifically, we found significant correlations for HCE-speaking children between Exact SE repetitions and several commonly used tests of intelligence, or school readiness, and of language development.

Current research using the SERT suggests that Exact SE repetitions correlate significantly with reading achievement, another finding consistent with Politzer, Hoover, and Brown (1972) who found a similar relationship for Black populations. At this stage of our investigations, it remains unclear whether the SE and reading correlation is independent of the strong correlation between IQ and reading score; it is possible the SE and reading correlation is an artifact. Efforts to answer this question are in progress.

There are many uses to which the SERT is well suited. Developmental studies of HCE speakers as they move through elementary school; comparison studies using samples from other American communities; further analysis of the substitution or transformation phenomenon; and, finally, for education research. In many communities, it is widely believed that nonstandard varieties of English are implicated in the academic difficulties of minority culture youth. While there have been some noteworthy efforts to document this assumption (c.f. Politzer, Hoover, and Brown, op. cit.), they are mostly of recent origin, and are general, often nonempirical in nature, and limited in scope.

The same state of affairs exists in Hawaii. We constructed the SERT to study the relationship between school achievement and SE performance among HCE-speaking children, and to conduct developmental investigations as well.

The results indicate that language may be implicated in the academic difficulties of HCE-speakers. However, we are convinced that the solution of those school problems depends on precise rather than general descriptions of language/school performance relationships. It seems unlikely the relationships are simple or even similar at all levels and across all instructional areas. The SERT provides one means to specify where the difficulties begin and what areas of classroom learning are affected.

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