

GETTING TO KNOW...

Drs. Harry Seymour, Thomas Roeper, and Jill de Villiers

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The Psychological Corporation is proud and excited to be working with Drs. Harry Seymour and Thomas Roeper from the University of Massachusetts and Dr. Jill de Villiers from Smith College on two assessment instruments, the *Dialect Sensitive Language Screener* (DSLS) and the *Dialect Sensitive Language Test* (DSLTL). These instruments are designed to screen and diagnose language disorders in children who speak dialectal varieties of English.

In 1998, the team led by Dr. Seymour was awarded a \$2.7 million contract by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for a six-year research project to study the speech and language patterns of African American children. The research team includes numerous faculty and graduate students from UMass and Smith College, as well as consultants from around the country and the world.

Clinicians' Forum recently caught up with principal investigator Harry Seymour and his co-collaborators, Tom Roeper and Jill de Villiers, to ask them a few questions about their work.

What attracted you to your general field or specific area of interest?

Seymour: After a stint in the retail business, I realized that the long hours (dawn to midnight) and lack of daylight were not what I wanted. My wife, Charlena, was studying for her master's degree in speech pathology at Ohio State University and one of her books got me interested in the idea of being an itinerant speech therapist. The service role of the profession, as well as the idea of going from school to school in daylight hours, really appealed to me! My interest in child language and African American English (AAE) developed out of my wish to address the educational and communicative needs of African American students.

de Villiers: I was trained in experimental psychology, but found that I did not agree with many of the broad theories. Once I found the field of language acquisition, I found an outlet for my creativity and imagination.

Roeper: I have been working on acquisition theory and experimenting with that (and morphological theory) for the past 30 years. In the late '60s I began to systematically explore the major principles and constructions of English grammar. It was exciting to me then and still is now!

Who influenced your work the most?

Seymour: In the early years, Professor Orlando Taylor of Howard University was an important role model. He was one of the few African American scholars conducting serious research in the area of AAE. In later years, my collaboration with Jill de Villiers and Tom Roeper has dramatically altered the way I think about and study language. Finally, the influence of my students has helped keep me focused on the issue of nonbiased assessment methods.

de Villiers: When I entered graduate school at Harvard, I began working as a research assistant for Roger Brown. He was the most supportive and generous mentor anyone could wish for.

Roeper: Chomsky has been the primary influence on me over the past 25 years. My ongoing collaboration with Harry and Jill, as well as my students, has been an intellectually stimulating and exciting experience for me.



Drs. Thomas Roeper, Jill de Villiers, and Harry Seymour.

How did the three of you get together on the AAE projects?

Seymour: Tom and I have been friends for over 20 years. Our friendship blossomed over intense tennis and racquetball matches that never failed to include lively and equally intense discussions about linguistics. Tom's strong commitment to social justice and equity, as well as his love of linguistics, attracted him to the topic of AAE. With the addition of Jill to our group, we successfully created a very productive (and I think unique) interdisciplinary team, bringing together linguistics, psychology, and communication disorders.

de Villiers: I had collaborated with Tom for 10 years. I was gradually drawn into Harry's area by both its inherent intellectual interest and its ideals of social justice. While I am not an AAE speaker, I grew up in a markedly non-prestige dialect speaking area in the northern part of England.

Roeper: As Harry said, we became friends over racquetball and tennis. After five years of talking about working together, we finally started doing so. Jill and I have been working together for years. Harry is the real leader of the effort, and he is a perfect leader, keeping theoretical, practical, and social factors in balance. He's one of the most respected professors on campus.

What are your favorite things to do away from the job?

Seymour: I love to paint. I'm now working in pastels, but have dabbled in oils, acrylics, and watercolors. I also enjoy fly fishing, tennis, and racquetball.

de Villiers: I am a voracious reader of contemporary fiction and an inventor of vegan edibles.

Roeper: I like sports, politics, and just chatting with my family. I also love to travel.