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978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description
Maciej Widawski
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1 Foundations

Because this book is essentially descriptive, little space has been devoted to the presentation of the linguistic and philosophical theories underlying slang, AAVE slang in particular. Some fundamental theoretical considerations can be brought down to a few main ideas which are briefly presented below and featured throughout the book. This introductory chapter provides information on two practical matters directly linked with linguistic description: it explains the terminology used throughout the book and outlines the methodology employed in the study.

The most fundamental theoretical assumption of this book is that it is non-theoretical. Instead, it is descriptive in nature and the approach advocated here is essentially that of traditional descriptive linguistics. Such an approach involves the analysis of a database of thousands of lexical items in search of patterns of form, meaning, theme and function. Rather than looking at what is theoretically feasible in a language, descriptive linguists study the actual language used in natural situations in an attempt to show how empirical investigations of linguistic data can shed new light on previously unanswerable research questions. Although the reader will find numerous theoretical implications throughout the book, the main attitude is descriptive and empirical rather than prescriptive and theoretical; the focus is on observation of language in use leading to theory, rather than vice versa. Moreover, there is no special concentration on any particular linguistic theory. Nevertheless, the book does have certain fundamental theoretical preconceptions, and these are briefly explained below.

Language is considered here not as some autonomous, abstract system, but as being closely connected to its coiners and users. Such a view stems directly from sociolinguistics, a discipline of linguistics concerned with the study of the relationships between language and society. Developed in the late 1960s, sociolinguistics was a reaction to the autonomous linguistics represented by Noam Chomsky and his followers who studied language as an idealized and self-sufficient system without any connection to social context in order to find a basic universal grammatical structure. In sociolinguistics, language is viewed as a social phenomenon, analyzable *only* in a social context; what is more,

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language is not considered to be monolithic, but rather composed of varieties, of which none is linguistically superior to another.

Consequently, all forms and usages of language are considered to be worthy material for linguistic inquiry. It is not the monopoly of learned authorities whose opinions dictate which forms of language should be used and which should be avoided. Instead, language should be objectively analyzed without passing any evaluative judgments. Such a view is derived from descriptive linguistics, a discipline concerned with the analysis of language as it really is and not as it should be. Descriptive linguists insist that the use of language should be described rather than prescribed: no part of language should be excluded from analysis just because it is considered ungrammatical or non-standard. That being said, all language forms and usages – be they standard, non-standard, colloquial or regional – deserve scholarly attention.

1.1 Terminology

It is important to explain the major terminology used throughout this book. The most fundamental term and the object of this study is "African American slang," featured in the title of this book. As has been mentioned before, it is understood as a subset of the larger vocabulary of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), while concurrently making up a part of the even larger lexicon of American slang. The terms "African American" and "slang" have both generated various definitions and synonyms, often discordant or confusing, so it is crucial to define these terms and their analogues precisely.

1.1.1 African American

"African American" is a fairly broad and general premodifier used in the context of the speech of African American people, its alternative and more precise term being "African American Vernacular" (AAV). According to Baugh (in Mesthrie 2001: 709), "African American" suggests a direct relationship to the linguistic legacy of slavery in the United States: in that, the term refers exclusively to the speech of the descendants of African slaves rather than the speech of recent African immigrants to the United States. The addition of "vernacular" suggests that it is used by ordinary, working-class speakers rather than by all African Americans; *vernacular* will appear with the same additional meaning in other terms discussed below. The term is a part of numerous compound phrases such as the one featured in title of this book: in this sense, "African American slang" means slang coined and used by African Americans in the United States.

However, when used alone, "African American" (or "African American Vernacular") is somewhat unclear due to its debatable origins. Briefly put,

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some scholars, the so-called "Anglicists," consider it to be a variety of English rather than a language in its own right. They argue that it developed through the contact of black slaves with the non-standard varieties of British English spoken by the white settlers and slave-owners in North America. Other scholars, the so-called "Creolists," maintain that it is a language in its own right rather than a variety of English. They argue that it developed as blacks speaking various African languages came into contact under conditions of slavery on the coast of west Africa, in the Caribbean and in the southern United States. There are other theories concerning the origin of African American Vernacular – such as the one proposed by "Neo-Anglicists," who admit some creolized elements while maintaining a basically Anglicist position – but they are beyond the scope of this work. Still, as observed by Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006: 224), the status of the term will probably continue to be debatable "due to limitations of data and historical time-depth involved."

There have been other terms in use as well, some of which caught on, others of which have faded into obscurity. Scholars such as Smitherman (2000a: 1) and Green (2002: 6) list several such terms, the most prevalent and in current use include: African American Vernacular English, Afro-American Vernacular English, Black English Vernacular, Ebonics, as well as African American Language, Black Language and Black Talk. The following are occasionally encountered as well: Black Dialect, Black Accent, Ghetto Speech, Jive Talk and Hip-Hop Talk. Most of these terms are used more or less interchangeably, but their meanings do not always overlap. It is thus necessary to introduce appropriate terminological distinctions.

African American Vernacular English (alternatively termed African American English, AAVE or AAE) is a fairly recent term from the late 1980s, currently used most widely among linguists (Rickford 1999: xxi). It is also the broadest and most general term. Baugh (in McArthur 1996: 133) defines it as a variety of "English used by a majority of US citizens of Black African background." As any variety of English, it has specific phonological, lexical and syntactical components; although distinct from standard American English, it is rule-governed and characterized by logical and structural integrity. However, AAVE is not homogeneous, but then again, neither is the speech of white Americans. Moreover, not all African Americans speak it: there may be those whose speech does not differ in any special way from general American English, just as there may be those who can shift from one variety of English to the other, depending on the context. Note that when the nominal element "English" is dropped, the term may be used in another meaning, referring to African American speech considered as a language separate from English, although derived from it in the process of decreolization.

Afro-American Vernacular English (alternatively termed Afro-American English) is the synonymous predecessor of AAVE, used especially often in

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the 1960s and 1970s. While it may still be occasionally encountered, it is considered dated and is perceptibly less used nowadays by African Americans who seem to favor the modifier "African" over "Afro-." Note that "Afro-" itself was preceded by several other terms including "Black" (still used, especially outside North America), "Negro" (once a standard term, now dated and used only in historical contexts), and "colored" (also considered dated).

Black English Vernacular (alternatively Black English or BEV), a term coined by Labov in 1970s, has been used as another popular synonym for AAVE. Labov (1972: xiii) defines it as a general cover term for "the whole range of language forms used by black people in the United States." While the definition is straightforward, the term itself may be vague when taken out of context: it fails to capture the reference to America and may theoretically refer to the English language used by any black person in any country, for instance by English-speaking Nigerians or English-speaking British people of African descent. Moreover, as pointed out by Crystal (2005: 306), this term might suggest that all African Americans use the same variety. Also, the very adjective "black," at least in the United States, has recently been replaced by the more recent expression "African American"; the same observation is applicable to similar terms discussed below. Note again, that just as with AAVE, when the nominal element "English" is dropped, the term may refer to African American speech considered as a language separate from English.

Ebonics in another term for the speech of African Americans. Rickford (1999: xxi) considers it "very similar if not identical to AAVE" but not widely used by linguists. A blend of "ebony" and "phonics," it was coined in 1973 by African American psychologist Robert Williams (Williams 1975) in order to "throw off the pejorative stereotypes of terms such as substandard, nonstandard or dialect, applied to the speech of African Americans" (Williams 2008: 80). The term originally was broader and extended to West African and Caribbean speech varieties and occasionally has also been used to refer to the entire field of study of African American speech patterns. Today, much like AAVE, Ebonics has two diametrically different meanings, reflecting its fiery political history. It can be understood as a non-standard (or substandard) variety of English used by African Americans. Such a meaning is often assigned by mainstream linguists who consider Ebonics to be just another variety of English. However, Ebonics can also be understood in yet another way: as a language in its own right rather than a variant of English. This meaning was promoted in 1996 by California's Oakland School Board in a failed attempt to level the educational opportunities for African American children. It was a dramatic moment in the history of African American English that showed how much disdain the general public had for this kind of speech. The term is favored especially by African American scholars who highlight its distinctness. Moreover, since the term originally had an international

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orientation, Smitherman (2000b: 20) proposes the term "US Ebonics," which is a helpful alternative to AAVE to maintain the international orientation of Williams's original definition of Ebonics while at the same time concentrating its focus on the United States in particular. Interestingly, Ebonics is sometimes mistakenly equated with slang: as noted by Wolfram (1999: 67), "in [the] Ebonics debate of 1997, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) was often inaccurately called slang and broken English." Adams (2009: 76) added: "many opponents of the [Oakland] proposal caricatured AAVE as slang and in doing so meant to stigmatize it."

1.1.2 Related terms

African English (alternatively termed African English Vernacular) is occasionally encountered as being synonymous with African American. However, its meaning is fundamentally different. As observed by Bokamba and Todd (in McArthur 1992: 20), it principally refers to the English language as used in Africa, for instance in Ghana or Uganda, rather than to AAVE. In other words, when used as a synonym for AAVE, it is a misnomer.

African American Language (alternatively termed African American Vernacular) is another term used for the speech of African Americans. However, it is not a synonym for AAVE and refers to the speech used by African Americans considered as a language distinct from English rather than as one of its varieties. Its synonymous predecessor, Afro-American Language (alternatively termed Afro-American Vernacular), was used especially often in the 1960s and 1970s but is rarely encountered nowadays.

Black Language (alternatively termed Black Vernacular) is yet another term sporadically encountered in the context of the speech of African Americans. Again, this is a rather imprecise expression since it may theoretically refer to any language used by black people, as for instance Yoruba, Swahili or Xhosa that are used in Africa and have little to do with the kind of English language used by African Americans in the United States.

Black Talk is a popular and catchy term listed by Smitherman (2000a: 1) for African American speech. Still, it is rather imprecise because it may refer to any language used by black-complexioned people, whether speaking English or not. On the other hand, when used in an African American context, it may serve as a neat and serviceable umbrella term for any speech used by African Americans, and to some extent, it is similar in scope to AAVE.

Black Dialect is another term sporadically encountered for the variety of English used by African Americans. This is, however, a misnomer. Dialect principally refers to a variety of language which is regionally distinctive, while the speech of African Americans is not essentially regional, being rather uniform throughout the United States. Although there are some regional

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varieties, they were more pronounced in the past; today, as noted by Major (1994: xxxi), they are less potent due to massive development in communication, increased transportation, and travel opportunities. Moreover, as Wolfram (1999: 2–3) pointed out, "language specialists often object to the popular usage of 'dialect' because of the different possible interpretations the term can have and because of the negative sense it may carry; dialect is sometimes used to refer to a particular social or geographical variety of English that is not the standard one." More importantly, however, the speech of African Americans is more social and ethnic in nature than it is regional, so more appropriate terms might include "social dialect" (or "sociolect") and "ethnic dialect" (or "ethnolect"), referring to varieties of a language used by certain social and ethnic groups and serving as a distinguishing mark of sociocultural identity.

Black Accent, used even more sporadically, is another term for the speech of African Americans. This is because the term "accent" is even narrower than "dialect" and refers solely to phonological characteristics of a regional variety of language. In other words, "Black Accent" pertains to African American pronunciation and cannot account for the entirety of African American speech, including lexicon and syntax. Moreover, note again that the speech of African Americans is more social and ethnic in nature rather than regional, so the term is a misnomer.

Ghetto Speech (alternatively called Ghetto Talk) is another term proposed for African American speech. The term was suggested by Smitherman (2000a: 1) as nearly synonymous with the present-day urbanized speech of African Americans. However, the term has an understandably narrow application: its first element suggests that it refers to the speech of ghetto communities, excluding African Americans who do not live in ghettos; moreover, the term "ghetto" may not necessarily refer to African American ghettos, but may also be used in the context of Hispanic ghettos, for instance.

Jive Talk (alternatively called Jive Speech) is also sometimes encountered. The term contains the slang word *jive* – which is one of the rare expressions traceable back to Africa, meaning "deception" – and has very limited applications. McArthur (1992: 548) describes it somewhat vaguely as "the slang or jargon associated with the earlier 20th century with such African American forms of music as jive ('a type of swing or jazz')," slang and jargon being treated as the same type of language. He also adds the second meaning of the term: "in the later 20th century, an informal term for flattering, deceptive, exaggerated, meaningless talk, especially among black Americans; double talk." Consequently, the term can hardly function as a synonym for African American speech as a whole.

Last but not least, there is Hip-Hop Talk (alternatively termed Hip-Hop Speech). It is sometimes equated with the speech of African Americans. This is

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understandable in light of the global popularity of hip-hop as a quintessentially African American phenomenon, and indeed the linguistic contribution of hip-hop to current African American speech is immense; as evident in this book, it is even more visible in slang. Alim (2006: 2–3) calls this type of language a "Hip-Hop Nation Language" or "HHNL" and says that "it lends itself to a holistic treatment of all elements of Black Language." Alim is right in stressing the significance of the special relationship between hip-hop and the speech of African Americans. However, the term "Hip-Hop Talk" cannot account for the entirety of African American speech. Identifying this term with AAVE may seem an exaggeration: for instance, there have been other important lexical contributions to African American speech such as those from blues and jazz. Moreover, while hip-hop is essentially an African American phenomenon, it is created by members of other ethnic groups as well. Finally, not all African Americans create or listen to hip-hop, which has acquired an international status.

1.1.3 Slang

Lexicographer John Ayto (1998: v) aptly calls slang "*lexis in extremis*." While slang in itself is extreme, it also tends to generate extreme attitudes. Most people, consciously or not, use it because of its expressiveness, brevity or humor. Many fiercely detest slang because of its crudeness and vulgarity, although they themselves may inadvertently use it. Few are fascinated by its linguistic and cultural richness, though they may not necessarily use it. As it happens, very few professional linguists study slang as their main academic field. Instead, slang is mostly described by amateurs who often lack the necessary knowledge to adequately analyze it. As a result, slang continues to be misunderstood and is perceived as a mere sensational or vulgar deviation from standard language. No wonder it has such a poor reputation. As observed by Lighter (1994: xi), "the public employs the term ['slang'] as a simple synonym for a subjectively 'bad' English." Interestingly, such an understanding of the term slang is important for the understanding of the negative associations some people may have with the term "African American slang."

Slang is considered difficult to define and characterize. This is largely because of its fleeting character, alleged vagueness, and change of meaning over time. As a result, definitions of slang abound and, to quote Chapman (1986: x): "like proverbial blind men describing an elephant, all correctly, none sufficiently, we tend to stress one aspect or another of slang." Accordingly, some scholars, such as Thorne (1990: iii), focus on the stylistic dimension of slang, especially noting its high degree of informality and its colloquial character. Others, such as Chapman (1986: xii-xiv), focus on its psychological element, especially the application of slang to express emotions.

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Others, such as Eble (1996: 11), emphasize the social element of slang, especially its function as a marker of group identification. Others, such as Dumas and Lighter (1978: 5–17), stress the rhetorical aspects of slang, especially highlighting its deliberate use for desired stylistic effects. Finally, scholars such as Coleman (2012: 26–116) stress the developmental aspects of slang and are focused on the "natural history" of slang from its creation and development to its metamorphosis and spreading into wider use.

In an attempt to formulate a more holistic definition, one can integrate all of the above aspects and define slang as follows:

> Slang is a highly informal and unconventional type of vocabulary. It is perceived as deeply expressive, attractively catchy, and deliberately undignified. It consists of standard expressions modified in some way or appended with new meanings, and sometimes of entirely novel expressions. Slang is coined chiefly by members of social, occupational or ethnic groups which are typically separate from mainstream society, yet it is often adopted by larger social segments. It is employed in place of standard expressions to convey some extra information of a psychological, social or rhetorical nature. It thus provides alternative, highly informal synonyms for referents already named in the language, but sometimes gives names for referents for which there are no standard expressions, or which have yet to be named. (Adapted from Widawski and Kowalczyk 2012: 18)

This definition is important especially in the context of African American slang. Aside from defining the type, formation and functions of slang, it also describes the coiners and users of slang: "members of social, occupational or ethnic groups which are typically separate from mainstream society." The definition also mentions the dissemination of slang among larger segments of society. Such is the nature of any type of slang, but, as will be demonstrated in this book, it is especially applicable to the African American variant.

1.1.4 Related terms

A good notion of what slang is can be derived from juxtaposing it with similar subsets of the lexicon often confused with slang. These include non-standard, colloquialism, jargon, vulgarism, taboo, euphemism, idiom, neologism and dialect. These terms are loosely used as synonyms for slang, and though they share certain characteristics with slang, their respective semantic scopes are different. Let us discuss them below.

Slang should be distinguished from non-standard or substandard language. These two terms include expressions which, unless used for stylistic effect, are excluded from standard English. Their connotations are rather negative. Such terms are typically used in an educational context for expressions which have become markers of illiteracy or ignorance. McWhorter (2003: 17) links them with the faulty usage of children and newcomers to the language. Simply put,

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they are ungrammatical, while their users are considered too uneducated or incapable of using the corresponding standard forms. Examples include: *ain't* ("be not" or "have not"), *them* ("the"), *irregardless* ("regardless") or *bestest* ("best"). While these expressions are non-standard, they are not slang.

"Colloquial" and "informal" are terms often equated with slang. These two terms denote expressions more common in conversation than in formal writing, usually conveying the feel of casual naturalness. The same can also be said of slang, which is colloquial in itself and belongs to the spoken part of language. Still, not all colloquial expressions are slang; for instance, *shut up* ("be quiet") and *be crazy about* ("be very enthusiastic about") are colloquial but not slang. Lighter (1994: xv) defines colloquialism as "an expression more typical of the unstilted voice of daily conversation, and of a writing intended to convey such a voice, than it is of formal, carefully edited prose," and contrasts it with slang which "carries a greater sense of opposition to form than does the merely colloquial." Slang, then, is manifestly divergent and its deliberately undignified tone is the main difference between itself and colloquialism.

Jargon, or the highly technical terminology typical of specific occupations, is another subset of vocabulary often mistaken for slang. While much slang also originates inside groups united by their vocations, the two terms are fundamentally different. Jargon is a precise and professional nomenclature developed among specialists chiefly to facilitate cooperation. Slang, on the other hand, is a non-technical and lighthearted vocabulary developed among colleagues chiefly for expressiveness or exclusivity. Examples of jargon include words like *emesis* ("vomiting"), *thoracotomy* ("a surgical incision made in the chest wall") or *endoscope* ("a miniature camera on a long thin tube inserted into the body during medical exams"), all taken from the medical profession. Such expressions are not slang.

Vulgarism has also created much misunderstanding with regard to slang. Naturally, all vulgarisms by definition are slang and such expressions as *dick* ("penis"), *piss* ("urine"), *shit* ("excrement") and *tits* ("breasts") are indeed vulgar. However, not all slang is vulgarism and such expressions as *ammo* ("ammunition"), *comfy* ("comfortable"), *dork* ("idiot"), *hottie* ("sexually attractive person") or *weed* ("marijuana") are not vulgar in the least. Moreover, the term "vulgar" should also be distinguished from "offensive": the former is largely used in the context of sex and scatology; the latter involves subjects considered to be social taboos. While all vulgar expressions are inherently offensive, there are slang expressions which are offensive because of violating social taboos but are not necessarily vulgar, for instance *gook* ("person from Eastern Asia"), *greaseball* ("Italian") or *lezzie* ("lesbian"). Finally, one can distinguish among the various levels of vulgarity or offensiveness. Slang dictionaries – for instance Widawski (1998), Kipfer and Chapman (2007) or Widawski and Kowalczyk (2011) – sometimes differentiate between

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expressions considered to be extremely vulgar and offensive, for instance *fuck* ("have sex") or *cunt* ("contemptible or despicable woman") and expressions that are less so, such as *screw* ("have sex") or *bitch* ("contemptible or despicable woman") marking them appropriately. Sometimes more elaborate classifications are employed, for instance in Lighter (1994 and 1997) or Spears (2000).

Taboo is sometimes confused with slang as well. It refers to an expression or subject that is forbidden or disapproved of because it is considered socially unacceptable. In English, taboo subjects involve sex, scatology, religion or race, while examples of taboo expressions include *cornholing* ("sodomy"), *ragging* ("menstruation"), *Jesus Freaking Christ* ("I am surprised or annoyed") or *kike* ("Jew"). Interestingly, as observed by Jay (1992: 223–230), it is now socially more reprehensible in the United States to use taboo expressions referring to race than religion, sex or scatology. A notable example is the linguistic history of the slang synonyms for the standard expression "African American": *nigger*, *negro*, *colored* and *black*, all of which have gradually become taboo to one degree or another. On the other hand, via the process of reappropriation, such expressions tend to lose their negative connotation when used by the members of racial groups to which they refer, especially if in self-derision, self-mockery or rough humor.

Euphemism is also frequently linked with slang. Labeled the "deodorant of the language" (Dickson 1990: xi-xvi), euphemism involves the substitution of an unacceptable, taboo expression with one that is milder or more socially acceptable. For instance: *B.S.* replaces *bullshit* ("nonsense"), *darned* replaces *damned* ("cursed"), *while S.O.B.* replaces *son of a bitch* ("contemptible or despicable person"). Put differently, reluctance to use taboo expressions produces euphemisms. However, not all euphemisms are slang, and they may also be found in standard or even literary language, for instance, *All-Merciful* ("God"), *terminate* ("kill"), *sleep with* ("have sex with") and *relieve oneself* ("urinate") are all euphemisms and have little to do with slang.

Idiom is erroneously equated with slang, too. However, the relation between these two terms is easy to explain. Idiom is a phrase, the meaning of which cannot be inferred from the meanings of its individual elements, for instance: *chip off the old block* ("someone who resembles his or her father"), *tie down* ("restrict") or *let down* ("disappoint"). In this sense, many slang expressions are idioms: *armpit of the world* ("a very undesirable place"), *change the channel* ("shift the topic of conversation"), *in deep shit* ("in big trouble") or *miss the boat* ("lose an opportunity"), among others. However, in order for idioms to be considered slang, they would have to be socially and stylistically lower than standard English. The difference, then, lies in their social and stylistic acceptability rather than in phrase structure itself. Moreover, although numerous slang expressions happen to be idioms, slang is not restricted to the

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