Talkin Black Talk

Language, Education, and Social Change

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CHAPTER 7

African American Communicative Practices

Improvisation, Semantic License, and Augmentation

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The radical difference between the discursive tool kit of African Americans and other Americans, Whites in particular, is revealed by an observation I have made numerous times. Often at social gatherings of Blacks and Whites (or other non-Blacks), everyone begins the evening talking together. The talk is effortless, natural, and unmonitored. There arrives, however, a point late in the evening when many of the Black guests in integrated conversation groups begin shifting into Black ways of speaking. As this continues, the Whites (and other non-Blacks) increasingly fall silent, no longer able to fully understand or participate in the conversation that the Blacks are carrying on. Their confusion must result from listening to remarks made in English, the common language, whose meaning, intent, and relevance cannot be interpreted, for the simple reason that those remarks require a different communicative competence. These occurrences are instructive for highlighting the difference between linguistic (grammatical) competence and communicative (discourse) competence. They also reinforce the idea that the principal differences between Black ways of speaking and other forms of [rev.] American speech lie in communicative practices. This is one of several reasons why African American communicative practices require more attention.

African Americans live out their lives in the context of two norm sets, the Eurocentric and the African Diasporic. These norm sets are frequently in conflict, as Du Bois (1961) and other scholars have noted. Often African Americans overtly value African Diasporic norms and behaviors while paying lip service to Eurocentric norms. But increasingly, especially during the past 40 years, there has been more sentiment in the Black community in favor of Black people being themselves, following the standards and norms of Black culture rather than

worrying about how European Americans see us. Indeed, how Black people are seen by the outside community is determined primarily by the requirements of institutional White supremacy in the extraction of wealth from people of color and non-elite Whites. The sentiment against self-censure is notable in Hip Hop Culture and its products, and in the refusal of many Black artists appearing on television and film to modify their speech and nonverbal communication in deference to White (middle-class) norms. Increasingly, Black standards and norms are also infiltrating general American and, to a lesser extent, global popular culture, so that norm conflicts that were once severe have been significantly attenuated, where not erased.

These remarks are part of my continuing project to describe and theorize Black American communicative practices in macro and micro terms. Some of the most interesting and distinctive features of African American Language (AAL) grammar are to be uncovered in the kinds of African American discourses considered unsuitable for drawing rooms where hegemonic, Eurocentric norms prevail, but accepted without comment (even with satisfaction) by those who have been entertained and enlivened by Black talk. Readers who do not wish to be exposed to uncensored language (i.e., so-called obscenity) should read no further.

It has also been noted by a number of AAL scholars (notably Rickford, 1977) that U.S. Black ways of speaking probably connect us more to Caribbean creole languages than does AAL grammar. It also appears that Black ways of speaking, more so than any other aspect of language study, will help us understand the nature of African American culture, above and beyond its relationship to other cultures of the African Diaspora. This is because ways of speaking best illustrate elements of style and, more broadly, dispositions in self-presentation. For example, we note the remarkable use of *improvisation* in Black ways of speaking, a quality often noted in writing on Black music, in cuisine, and in playing sports.

The term *semantic license* is relatively straightforward. It refers to the freedom AAL speakers exercise in creating *neologisms*, or new words.[1] The invention of a word or larger constituent—for example, a phrase or clause—may involve the following:

Improv. /s. lic.

- *resemanticized words:* attaching new meanings to preexisting morphs (e.g., *butter* and *phat*, general terms of positive evaluation)
- *nonce expressions:* new morphs and new meanings to go with them (e.g., *emusculation*; see below). These are created for the moment, not used repeatedly. Some resemanticized words start out as nonce expressions and go on to become established, at least for a while, in a community. For example, *edumacation* ("education") has been around at least during the 20th century. Constituents such as these are of interest because they

have been adopted into the AAL lexicon, becoming established new expressions. They may be part of the transient lexicon (i.e., slang), or they may become permanent for all practical purposes, as has *edumacation*.[2]

Augmentation refers to the expansion of words by means of adding segments or syllables in the process of inventing new words. But augmentation can also refer to the expansion of phrases and clauses through the addition of entire words. In cases where a phrase or clause has been augmented, an augmentation of individual words within those constituents may also occur.

Obviously, the augmentation of words involves semantic license; the two notions are interconnected. Semantic license, though, does not necessarily involve augmentation, since an existing form may be given a new meaning. The augmentation of constituents larger than the word may also involve semantic license, because novel forms are being created to express meanings that could be expressed using "plain" morphological and syntactic strategies. I oppose "plain" strategies to creative strategies that stretch and play with the morphological and syntactic rules of the language. Syntactic augmentation can be thought of as the process of taking a constituent with plain syntax and applying creativity to augment it. The following examples illustrate the difference:

- Get out of bed.
- Get your lazy behind[3] out of bed.

The second example incorporates a pseudoreflexive phrase, *lazy behind*, which fills in for an understood reflexive *yourself*, as in "Get yourself out of bed."

It could be argued that plain and creative aspects of morphology and syntax should not be distinguished except for discussions of poetics; or perhaps the distinction should be thought of as one that involves a continuum, rather than an opposition, allowing that performance-related creativity is present to varying degrees in most speech.

The example that follows illustrates semantic license with which a new meaning is attached to a preexisting morph:

Parent: It's time for you guys to go to bed.
Child: Aw, we don't want to go to bed now, we're watching . . .
Parent: I'm going to watch your behind with this pan if you don't turn off that TV and . . .

In this example, *watch* is used to signify *whip, beat,* or any number of other verbs that might express punitive action resulting from the child's questioning parental

orders. The verbal routine exemplified occurs in the United States in non-AAL contexts with other ethnic groups, but semantic license is most extensive in AAL communities. Another example is useful. I recall watching the "Magic Air Show," the name given by several friends to a basketball game featuring Michael "Air" Jordan, the most celebrated basketball player of all time, and "Magic" Johnson. At one point in the game, one of the men present said something about "they got that emusculation." It is ironic that the nonce word is so close to *emasculation*, which was clearly not what the speaker meant. He referred instead to the feats of physical wizardry the players were able to perform on the court, thanks to their amazing musculature. The speaker sought emphasis: He wanted a special word to mark the special occasion and the special, unusual actions he was witnessing. That he laughed along with the others at his comment indicated his awareness of taking semantic license.[4]

Often, the use of semantic license is functionally similar to the use of *phonetically altered words*. This includes augmented words such as *edumacation* and *yoogly* ("ugly"), which have phonetic segments augmented by extra syllables or more phonetically salient vowels. Phonetically altered words may also involve *diminution*, whereby, for example, a diphthong becomes a monophthong, producing [hwɪt] *whit* ("White"); or, where the initial glide and diphthong following it are changed, producing [çit][5] *ooh-eet* ("White"). These examples are usually used when Whites are around, when speakers dramatize their mock fear of Whites overhearing them, or both. Phonetically altered words are similar to words and phrases used with *semantic license*, in that phonetic alteration is a performative feature of speech.

Black style, the *Black aesthetic*, *Black performativity*—these are three terms, among others, that have been used to capture the most significant, interconnecting themes found throughout African American culture. The study of Black ways of speaking can illuminate the broad area these three terms attempt to capture, and what we may also refer to as Black culture generally, outside of language. Various forms of Black music—jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues—in their original forms made great use of basic Black cultural strands, such as improvisation and call-response, in expressing deep cultural attitudes and stylistic constants.[6]

Indeed, recent writings have extended our understanding of Black cultural strands to sport, especially in regard to the currently preeminent Black sport, basketball. Black players have dominated the game not only numerically, but also stylistically, by injecting general Black cultural constants into it, so much so that these features have become identified with the game and in some cases incorporated into the rules. Writers on basketball seem to agree that the injection of the Black aesthetic into basketball has helped it to replace baseball as the quintessentially American sport. After all, any quintessentially American activity is significantly Black in its

cultural traits. These cultural strands are all connected in such a way that to mention one of them is to mention several more at the same time.

Performativity, for example, is equally evident in basketball, Black ways of speaking, and musical genres. By *performativity,* I mean the stylistic dramatization of the self that individuals infuse into their behaviors. Members of other ethnic groups (e.g., American White groups) often see these behaviors as inappropriate forms of attention-grabbing self-expression.

Boyd (1997) gets at the connections between various areas of African American culture in discussing a "truly disadvantaged Black male aesthetic" in gangsta rap, as well as other African American cultural forms:

[Basketball is] . . . in its present form . . . an extension of Black popular culture, similar to jazz in an earlier era. . . . Detroit Pistons teams of the late 1980s and early 1990s became highly successful by playing in a *style* that had clearly evolved from the *depths of Black culture.* . . . With a style similar to that of gangsta rap, the Pistons [Detroit's professional basketball team] brought a menacing and aggressive, hard-nosed, no-bend, defense that many criticized for being too violent. (pp. 106–110, emphasis added)

This style of basketball recalls the ethic-aesthetic of the gangsta life as it is lived in lower-income Black neighborhoods and celebrated in gangsta rap. (See also Dyson's [1993] remarks on basketball and the Black aesthetic.)

Mentioning gangsta-ism is not to glorify this particular subpattern of Black culture, but to note that its performativity, among other features (sartorial emphasis, for example) ties it to Black culture in general. Boyd's description of basketball could just as well apply to crap and poker games in Black neighborhoods during the 1950s and 1960s.

DIRECTNESS:
A PRINCIPLE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LANGUAGE USE

The project that Smitherman (1977, 2000) has implicitly undertaken in her work on AAL use is a search for widespread features that give AAL its distinctiveness. I used the term *principle* (Spears, 2001) to refer to behavior that characterizes much, but not all, of AAL use. Smitherman (1977) establishes four AAL speech principles: *signification* (also *signifying*), *narrative sequencing, call-response,* and *tonal semantics.* All these are interconnected. For example, in narrative sequencing, one may witness call-response, tonal semantics, and signification. The speech principle that I have discussed (Spears, 2001), *directness,*[7] is related to Smitherman's four principles. Thus, tonal semantics may be used in directness,

and directness frequently characterizes narrative sequencing and call-response. Signification, like other African American speech genres (e.g., reading a person and playing the dozens) is direct by its very nature (Spears, 2001).

Direct speech is identified on the basis of form (sounds, words, etc.); content (literal meaning as well as intended function and actual function, i.e., its perlocutionary force); subject matter; and context of utterance, which is necessary to determine whether directness occurs and, if so, what it means. *Directness* is characterized by some combination of candor, aggressiveness, negative criticism, dysphemism, abuse, conflict, and obscenity, all often used consciously in the creation of interpersonal drama. The use of directness frequently involves a performance, with an audience and with nonverbal gesticulations often associated with performance. It is important to note that it is practically impossible to speak of directness without using culturally loaded, biased language, which may impart a negative cast to directness. Directness can actually have number of functions, ranging from positive (e.g., compliments) to negative (e.g., upbraiding and insults).

Smitherman (1977) and other AAL scholars (e.g., Mitchell-Kernan 1971; Morgan, 1998) have discussed what is referred to as *indirection,* which should not be taken as the opposite of directness. Indirection occurs when a speaker makes comments that require knowledge of audience and social setting for their interpretation, comments that may seem ambiguous on a superficial level but that are practically unambiguous given the knowledge that participants in the speech event have. Indirect speech may be direct if its interpretation is linked, for example, to insult. (See Spears, 2001, and Morgan, 1998, for a discussion of these and related terms.)

Directness can involve performance when remarks are made in a creative way, instead of stated plainly. In augmentation, syntax is complicated by adding words and circumlocutions that in many instances involve so-called obscenity. I write "so-called obscenity," because obscenity is a product of community norms. What is considered obscene in some communities is not necessarily obscene in others. For example, the word *bloody,* considered a swear word in Britain, is not an obscenity in the United States. Discussions of obscenity typically assume that hegemonic language norms reign across many social contexts in which they are actually not in effect.

The real issue is how we deal with different language norms within different communities, even within the same society. Related to this is the issue of power: How do we classify types of language that are censured by mainstream society as controversial or obscene, but that are not seen that way by people who speak those types and others outside the mainstream? Whose norms prevail? The position that I have taken is that we have to consider context and interlocutors before

labeling expressions as obscene. Thus, if someone uses *bitch* as a perfectly neutral, unremarkable term for "female," or as a term of address for close relatives and friends (as happens in many if not most African American youth speech contexts), then it is pointless to consider *bitch* obscene. In such a case, the word has been *neutralized*: It no longer carries any negative traits associated with obscenity. Once neutralized in one context, some so-called obscene expressions may become neutralized in most or all other contexts in which members of certain social groups find themselves. In other words, they carry such expressions with them virtually everywhere they go, using them indifferently and attaching no special significance to them. In these cases, such expressions have been *normalized*. This is what has happened with *nigga*,[8] which has always been neutralized in some speech situations in African American communities.

The normalization of uncensored expressions is hardly unique to the Black community. It occurs with more and more frequency throughout the United States, Europe, and other areas of the world. It is part of the general postmodern phenomenon whereby language and other behaviors once restricted to a limited set of social settings today may be found across a wide range of social contexts.[9] In our newer buildings we see stylistic eclecticism, with remembrances and borrowings from the past mixed with signs of the new. Nudity, once restricted to the bedroom, the locker room, and X-rated films, today occurs in a wide range of social contexts. One important feature of postmodernism is choice—a wider range of possible choices, leading to the dismantling of boundaries.

We see this process of boundary breaking, fragmentation, and displacement in communicative practices as well, as language that was once kept strictly out of the drawing room is now welcomed in—and into the classroom, too. We are seeing "a new way of talkin'," as the traditional African American gospel song puts it. As once restricted expressions travel to a broader range of social settings, these expressions lose their capacity to shock and become ordinary, unremarkable terms. They become *normalized*.

TOWARD A GRAMMAR OF AUGMENTATION

Much of the directness in African American discourse is communicated through grammatical strategies making use of augmentation. In this section, we will examine some of the mechanisms through which directness is expressed, with the aim of outlining what a grammar of augmentation might look like.

The word most frequently employed in augments is *ass* and its equivalents, such as *booty*, *behind*, and metonyms such as *asshole* and *butthole*. There are three basic types of augments: those containing (1) pseudo reflexives; (2) pseudo (nonreflexive) pronouns; and (3) compound *ass*, or discourse *ass* (the term used in Spears, 1998).

1. *Pseudo reflexives*: Normally, a body part word substitutes for a reflexive pronoun.

> 1. Get your lazy ass out of bed.
> Cf. Get out of bed, Get yourself out of bed

The body-part word used in such expressions depends on the discourse context and must be relevant in some way to the situation. Thus,

> 2. Get your frog eyes out of here—what are you looking at?
> Cf. Get (yourself) out of here . . .

In the second example above, the issue is someone's looking where he/she shouldn't, so it is appropriate to use *eyes* in this sentence.

2. *Pseudo (nonrelexive) pronouns*: These substitute for a noun or pronoun.

> 3. His ass gon be sorry.
> Cf. *He gon be sorry.*

> 4. I saw her ass yesterday.
> Cf. *I saw her yesterday.*

> 5. I saw her give it to her ass.
> Cf. *I saw her give it to her.*

> 6. Sheila saw him give her ass that ring.
> Cf. *Sheila saw him give her that ring.*

> 7. He'll do anything for her ass.
> Cf. *He'll do anything for her.*

> 8. I peeped ("saw") her going in the club with his ass.
> Cf. *I peeped her going in the club with him.*

3. *Ass* compounds have a semantically bleached *ass* in them. The *ass* in these expressions does not refer to the anatomy; its meaning is grammatical rather than lexical. It is a discourse marker, an expressive element explicitly marking a discourse as direct or heightening the poetic and performance character of what is said or both. Unlike pseudo reflexives and pseudo pronouns, *ass* compounds (1) allow only the word *ass*, (2) may have inanimate referents, and (3) must be followed by a noun (including *self/selves*). The following examples illustrate these points:

9. Get all that ugly-ass junk out of here.
Cf. *Get all that ugly junk out of here.*

10. a. *Get all that ugly-butt junk out of here.
    b. *Get all that ugly-asshole junk out of here.
    c. *Get all that ugly-behind junk out of here.
    d. *Get all that ugly-eyed junk out of here.

Compound *ass* is semantically abstract and no longer references the body in any literal way. Indeed, that is one reason why it can be used in referring to inanimate objects. It can also be used in cases where the morpheme(s) with which it is compounded cannot refer to buttocks, e.g.,

11. Look at that smart-ass nigga.

Smart is an adjective that cannot refer to buttocks. However, in the case of adjectives that could refer to anatomical *ass*, there can be ambiguity:

12. Look at that fat ass idiot.

In the example above, I have not inserted a hyphen, which would indicate the use of compound *ass*. If compound *ass* were employed, the sentence could indicate that the individual in question is fat, while expressing nothing concerning his or her posterior specifically. Alternatively, the sentence could also explicitly refer to the individual's buttocks (with anatomical *ass*). The ambiguity, of course, stems from the fact that *fat* can describe the whole body or the body part alone.

The past tense suffix *-ed* provides another way (in my vernacular) of disambiguating the two senses of *ass*. Compound *ass* cannot occur with the suffix while anatomical *ass* can:

13. Look at that smart-ass idiot.

14. *Look at that smart-assed idiot.

but,

15. Look at that fat-ass idiot.

16. *Look at that fat-assed idiot.

17. Look at that fat assed idiot.

In my vernacular, Example 16 would have to be interpreted as anatomical. Notice that other anatomical expressions usually require the *-ed* suffix:

18. a. Look at that cross eyed fool.
    b. *Look at that cross eye fool.
    c. Look at that pigeon toed fool.
    d. *Look at that pigeon toe fool.

This is not always the case, however. There is some variation among speakers as to which body part words require the *-ed* suffix.

19. a. Look at that big headed fool.
    b. Look at that big head fool.

Ass compounds must be followed by a noun, as illustrated below:

20. a. *John is trifling-ass.
    b. *John is bitch-ass.
    c. *John is jive-ass ("insincere").

21. a. *John is a trifling-ass
    b. *John is a bitch-ass
    c. *John is a jive-ass.

Note that an *ass* compound cannot be grammatical whether it is construed as an adjective without any determiners (as in Example 20) or as a noun with a determiner (as in Example 21). These examples have an actual adjective in the *ass* compound, but note that in the following examples, *ass* is compounded with a noun, *bitch*. Therefore, the syntactic category (part of speech) of the word in the compound does not affect its grammaticality in cases where no noun follows the compound. Ungrammaticality without a following noun is quite independent of the part(s) of speech appearing in the compound.

22. a. John is a trifling-ass idiot.
    b. John is a bitch-ass idiot.
    c. John is a jive-ass idiot.

23. a. *Look at that trifling-ass.
    b. *Look at that bitch-ass.
    c. *Look at that jive ass.

24. a. Look at that trifling-ass idiot.
    b. Look at that bitch-ass idiot.
    c. Look at that jive-ass idiot.

All three of the augment types may be self-referential. This is expected because they may be used in making positive remarks or in presenting a referent positively (whether the overall remark is positive or not):

25. You know, I am one fine-ass ("good-looking") muthafucka.
    (ass compound)

26. You know they gon pick his ass because he's got the qualifications.
    (pseudo pronoun)

27. You need to get your fine ass out of this hole ("dive"). (pseudo reflexive)

CONCLUSION

As with some other African American communicative practices, augmentation is found in the speech of other communities, but not to the same extent nor with the full range of grammatical strategies found in AAL. It is well known that style involves not only words and expressions, but also morphology and syntax. Some morphemes and syntactic constructions are restricted to certain styles of speech, as illustrated in the following sentence using the second subjunctive *were*, where the verb in the hypostasis is inverted with that clause's subject:

28. Were I you, I would leave immediately.
Cf. If I was you, I would leave immediately.

We cannot say that augmentation is restricted to directness, although the two are closely associated. Augmentation provides the perfect vehicle for expressing direct content and for displaying creativity, both in the grammatical sense and in the performative, improvisatory sense.

NOTES

1. *Neologism* is used in practically the sense as Morgan's (2001) *new word*, which she illustrates with new words of rap artists, (e.g., those of the artist Aceyalone [1995], *All Balls Don't Bounce* [Capitol. 30023], cited in Morgan, 2001) such as *arhythamaticulus*

and *arhythamatic* (Morgan, 2001). The term *neologism* is elaborated slightly differently here.

2. *Edumacation* often occurs in utterances such as *I didn't know you had all that edumacation*, in response to the speaker's learning that an interlocutor has a PhD or some other terminal degree. Years ago, before it was common to encounter Blacks with college degrees, it might easily be used by someone without a college education speaking of someone in college or with a college degree. This was the same period during which the expression *college man* was used, indicating that a man had graduated from college. (It's interesting that there was no corresponding term *college woman* that was used with any regularity. No doubt this ties into gender relations at the time: *College man* signaled marriageability based on class status and earning ability, the latter not normally the major factor in a woman's marriageability. Said of a married man, it indicated the social acceptability of the man and his family; a college-educated woman married to a noncollegeman could not confer the corresponding social acceptability on her family.) The use of *edumacation* conveys great admiration, envy, an effort at social equalizing—i.e., bringing down a notch or two the person with the education in that it gently mocks that education, or humbling oneself before assumed great accomplishment, or both.

3. In the community in which I was raised, and in the typical African American community, *behind* and its equivalents are frequently used in strong directives from adult to children notably and in a range of other settings as well.

4. However, he was probably not aware of the close-sounding *emasculation*'s existence as a word. Since its meaning is so different from what he intended, practically the opposite, had he been aware of it, he probably would have steered clear of anything sounding like it.

5. IPA symbols are used.

6. Sometimes, once these cultural forms are formally institutionalized, e.g., jazz music in university music programs, they may loose some of the traits that tie them into Black general culture because they have been divorced from the sociocultural contexts that produced them. They cease to have an organic, dialectic relationship with the society and culture in which they originated.

7. I have been using the term for some time. However, I should note that Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) use the term in referring basically to the same phenomenon, though in a somewhat different sense.

8. I spell it *n-i-g-g-a* to distinguish it from *n-i-g-g-e-r*, which is associated with Whites and has a different meaning, and, as of late, a different referent also, since *nigga* is nowadays used by some American English speakers to refer to non-Blacks.

9. For an excellent discussion of postmodernism and poststructuralism, see Sarup (1989).