

Lexical Creation in African American Slang

Abstract

Lexical creation is an important part of African American slang and involves such mechanisms as coinage, onomatopoeia, reduplication, and phoneticism. They are enormously productive and account for numerous slang expressions. Their productivity testifies to great linguistic creativity of African Americans; moreover, as in the case of phoneticism, it shows that lexical creation can be used consciously for sociocultural reasons stemming from the African American experience. This paper presents these processes in detail. Partially drawing from the book *African American: A Linguistic Description* (Widawski, forthcoming) and an earlier publication on African American lexicon (Widawski & Kowalczyk 2012), the presentation is based on lexical material from a sizable database of citations from contemporary African American sources collected through extensive fieldwork in the United States in recent years.

Keywords: AfricanAmerican English, slang, sociolinguistics, word-formation, morphology, coinage.

1. Introduction

Lexical creation can be understood as the process of inventing entirely new expressions, and is usually contrasted with expressions created by morphological processes such as compounding, affixation or derivation. Lexical creation principally involves such mechanisms as coinage, onomatopoeia, reduplication, and phoneticism. While they are rarely used in standard English, they are conspicuous in African American slang which abounds in numerous expressions formed in this way. This paper presents these mechanisms in detail, and thus falls within the broad spectrum of descriptive studies of African American lexicon (for instance, see Baugh 1983; Major 1994; Rickford 1999; Smitherman 2000, 2006).

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The term *slang* is often misunderstood or misinterpreted, so it would be sensible to start with its definition. Broadly speaking, it's a very informal type of vocabulary. More precisely, it is

a highly informal and unconventional type of vocabulary; it is perceived as expressive, catchy, and undignified; it consists of standard expressions modified in some way or appended with new, often figurative, 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 things 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 & Kowalczyk 2012: 18)

All this can be said about the slang used and coined by African Americans.

The term *African American* also requires a definition. Broadly speaking, it is a very general and neutral term for the speech of African Americans who live in or come from the United States of America. More specifically, as observed by Baugh (in Mesthrie 2001: 709), it refers to the speech of the descendants of African slaves rather than the speech of recent immigrants to the United States, and it is the legacy of slavery and its specific historical context that adds to the sociolinguistic meaning of the term. Moreover, *African American* is often appended with the qualifier *Vernacular*, and this addition signals that this kind of speech is used by common working-class speakers rather than by the aggregate of African American population.

To summarize, the term *African American Slang* can be understood as a highly informal type of vocabulary created and used by African Americans in the United States; it is conditioned by a specific historical, social, cultural and ethnic context resulting from the aggregate of sociolinguistic experience of African Americans in this country.

2. Coinage

The most obvious but at the same time the most infrequent process of lexical creation is coinage. In standard English, there are very few new words coined *ex nihilo*, or from nothing, among which one can list *googol*, *nylon*, or *quark* (see Steinmetz & Kipfer 2006: 166–169). This can be explained by the fact that most words are produced in conformity with the usual standard but fairly productive wordbuilding (or morphological) mechanisms rather than by coinage.

Generally speaking, creating entirely new words from scratch is also relatively rare in African American slang. This is because most of slang used by African Americans recycles existing words which beget new meanings, often through metaphorization or through semantic shifting. However, there is at least a handful of slang expressions which seem to have been created “out of nothing,” although

they belong more to the sphere of linguistic mystery since it is impossible to establish their etymology definitely. Consider the following expressions:

*Lesson One: How to smoke **dank** [= marijuana] and be cool at the same time* – YouTube, 2013

*She was hanging around with some **fays** [= white persons]* – University of California Berkeley Student, 2013

*Gimme some space to **luficate** [= beat, strike or hit] you so bad, homie!* – Hip Hop Indo, 2010

*I figure they probably need to make a bit more **skrilla** [= money] before they address that* – Yelp, 2013

*Michelle drinks **yack** [= brandy or cognac] out the bottle in a brown paper bag* – Twitter, 2013

However, creating can also involve a new combination of two or more existing words, or a combination of a word and an affix, for example *infotainment*, *rockumentary*, *speed-dating*, *staycation*, or *upload*. By this rationale, numerous African American slang expressions are products of such neological creation. They may be composed of existing and well known words or affixes, but their particular combination creates the effect of lexical novelty and freshness. Note that the elements used to form such combinations may themselves be either slangy, standard or both. Here is a handful of relevant examples from African American slang:

*The Wu-Tang leader faces off with the Black Keys in a restaurant to determine who really is the **baddest** [= best]* – *Rolling Stone*, 2012

*Living with the sibling and her **crumb-snatcher** [= baby or a little child] isn't fun* – Twitter, 2013

*I loved that he called Tucker Carlson a **fatherfucker** [= contemptible or despicable man]* – Jezebel, 2009

*To **overstand** [= understand fully and completely] the pathology that's destroying the planet, you must see this documentary* – Twitter, 2013

*After me there will be no more like me, you **underdig** [= understand or comprehend] what I'm sayin?* – Black Planet, 2008

African American slang abounds in such neological creations. This can be explained by a vibrant tradition of creative wordplay and lexical experimentation rooted in African American culture, in recent times demonstrated by hip-hop culture and rap lyrics. The citational corroboration yields the following:

*That girls is **blackalicious** [= excellent or admirable, especially if connected with African Americans] with them pretty eyes and thick thighs* – *Urban Dictionary*, 2013

*I need to stop being your **frienemy** [= someone who pretends to be one's friend but who is not, especially because of their jealousy]* – *30 Rock*, NBC-TV series, 2008

*Yo, much love to everyone in **Illadelphia** [= Philadelphia, Pennsylvania]!* – Play Cloths, 2010

*She had a hoe with her named Bama, a big bad **mama-jamma** [= sexually attractive woman]* – Snoop Dogg, 1996

*I will not waste your time with such **shiznit** [= nonsense] in the future!* – Word Press, 2013

3. Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is another mechanism of lexical creation. It involves the production of new words from natural sounds, or their visual change to suggest a certain sound, as in *boom*, *buzz* or *ding-dong*. Onomatopoeia is not very productive in English. Although there are a few dozen onomatopoeic

expressions, their usage is rather restricted to exclamations, and used in comic books or in advertising (McArthur 1992: 729).

While onomatopoeic expressions are also relatively infrequent in African American slang, their manner of associating sound and meaning in a fairly succinct way makes them fairly useful. Consider the following selection:

*Nice **bling** [= piece of jewelry, especially a ring] for your woman? Read on at Purist Pro!* – Twitter, 2013

*Hey, is this Jody? The Jody that got my **boo** [= girlfriend] pregnant?* – *Baby Boy*, film, 2001

*I haven't even done the **boom-boom** [= sexual intercourse] with him yet!* – Watt Pad, 2013

*The motherfucker a loud and smelly **poot** [= expulsion of intestinal gas through anus]* – University of California Berkeley Student, 2013

*I love all the **razzmatazz** [= noisy activity intended to attract attention or impress], pumped up egos and superhero names* – Twitter, 2012

4. Reduplication

While reduplication may be understood as a special case of compounding, it is closely linked with sound symbolism and neologism, and thus also falls within the spectrum of lexical creation. Reduplication involves the repetition of a word or its part, or the repetition of a particular sound, especially vowel, to achieve the desired effect of syncopated rhythm and catchiness.

African American slang abounds in expressions formed by means of reduplication. This may be linked with African Americans' predilection for rhyming, so often employed in hip-hop and rap music. The rhyming quality of reduplication signals verbal vividness, forcefulness, and quite often, humor.

Reduplication falls into two main categories. The first category is exact reduplications. They involve precise repetition of the whole word in its exact form. Possibly for this reason, they are relatively rare. On the other hand, because of their rhythmic qualities, they are extremely popular and frequently used by African Americans, especially in hip-hop culture. Consider the following expressions:

*White man gonna try to keep a black man down from birth. But **bo-bo** [= white person], he couldn't do it to this black man* – George Pelecanos, 2002

*They were so caught up in fighting that we had to stay in a **mo-mo** [= motel]* – YouTube, 2013

*If you hear someone yell 'the **po-po** [= police]'s comin', run!!!!* – *Urban Dictionary*, 2013

*We made a stop on the **way-way** [= freeway] from Bakersfield to San Francisco* – University of California Berkeley Student, 2013

*I said '**Whoa whoa** [= wait or slow down]. Don't point it at me!'* – Myrtle Beach Sun News, 2011

The second category is non-exact reduplications. These involve only partial repetition, typically with the beginning of the reduplicated element being altered. Non-exact reduplication is more common than the previous category, and it accounts for numerous slang expressions in African American slang. Here is a selection of representative citational examples:

*I hope we get to see this **mama-jamma** [= sexually attractive woman] this weekend!* – Facebook, 2013

*This **mo-fo** [= contemptible or despicable man] just jacked my rap name!* – Twitter, 2013

*I hate to use the words, but it seems like a bunch of **mumbo-jumbo** [= meaningless or deceptive talk, especially jargon] – News, ABC-TV program, 2013*

*Sometimes it's valuable to look beyond the **razzle-dazzle** [= noisy confusion or chaos, especially if deliberate] – Huffington Post, 2013*

*Underneath all the **razzmatazz** [= noisy activity intended to attract attention or impress], there is very little beauty – New York Magazine, 1989*

5. Phoneticism

Phoneticism entails deliberate misspelling of an expression. While it does not per se involve creation of new words, it accounts for dozens of new variant forms and is closely linked with neologization and lexical creation. The motivation behind manipulation of spelling is chiefly the jocular effect, and, as observed by Coleman (2012: 40), phoneticism features especially strongly in advertising as well as in text messaging on social networking sites, as evidenced by such expressions as *Blu-Tack*, *Froot Loops* or *M8*. Moreover, it can be used to imitate someone's speech, especially an accent, usually in order to mock or ridicule it, for instance *Pahk yoah cah in Havahd Yahd*, meant to represent Boston accent. Note that the results of phoneticism are always perceived as informal or colloquial because they break the orthographical conventions of standard language.

Phoneticism is one of the most salient features of African American slang, where it is used extensively. This can be explained by the traditional interest in wordplay and lexical experimentation among African Americans, in recent times visible in hip-hop and rap lyrics. Moreover, the deliberate breaking of orthographical conventions suggests independence from and rebellion against the white majority, and so in African American slang phoneticism is employed to signal an important sociolinguistic message: to make a political point. Here is a short selection from the long list of examples:

*Ryan, let me **ax** [= ask] you a question. You gonna keep it going for no-shave November? – Facebook, 2013*

*He's a **badd** [= tough, bold, and severe] man. And that's badd with two D's! – Detroit Free Press, 2010*

*I just learned that Denise is a real **biatch** [= contemptible or despicable woman] – Facebook, 2013*

*That new track that DJ Kush laid down is **da bomb** [= something excellent or admirable]! – Urban Dictionary, 2013*

*People are mean. It's a **fack** [= fact] of life, period! – University of California Berkeley Student, 2013*

*Let me get the whole Hilfiger hookup, huh? Definitely, **mos def** [= definitely] – Bamboozled, film, 2000*

*Justin Bieber is **phat** [= excellent or admirable]: perfect, hot, awesome, tempting! – Facebook, 2013*

*Go call the **PO-lice** [= police], go call the Govah-bah! Or better yet, go call the govahn-ment! – Twitter, 2013*

*He a brutal, jagged edged, totally **ruffneck** [= street tough guy or thug] – Snoop Dogg, 1993*

*She is not a **yeller** [= light-skinned African American, especially a sexually attractive young woman] – New York Times, 2000*

Phoneticism is also frequently employed to represent peculiar African American speech patterns such as monophthongization, postvocalic r-dropping, and consonant-cluster reductions. In most cases, phoneticisms function as variant forms of existing slang expressions, but they may also function on their own, as entirely new lexical items. There are hundreds of African American slang expressions created in this way. Here is a selection from a long list of examples:

*I'mah so sick and tired of the **Big Foe** [= urban police detectives, especially brutal and arrogant] startin' mess* – Heather Buchanan, 2007

*Man, it's a **black thang** [= any sociocultural practice, behavior or attitude characteristic of African Americans], you wouldn't understand* – *Urban Dictionary*, 2013

*The music sounds **butta** [= excellent or admirable] as ever, nice to see you're doing shows man!* – My Space, 2009

*Trayvon Martin was a **gangsta** [= member of a criminal gang]. How do we know?* – *Digital Journal*, 2013

*Don't be a **hata** [= envious person who is trying to prevent someone from doing something successful or funny], be a *motivata!** – Pinterest, 2013

*What if she's a **hoe** [= prostitute or promiscuous woman] and she can't help it?* – Yahoo Answers, 2013

*These stupid **niggaz** [= fellow African Americans] wanna be *American Idols** – Public Enemy, 2006

*Hey, what part of **No Coast** [= Midwestern USA] are you guys from?* – Slumz Boxden, 2009

*When will my **sistas** [= African American women] learn that the opportunities that are open to our brothers are open to us as well?* – *Ebony*, 2009

*It's only cause she's a sexy **yella** [= light-skinned African American, especially a sexually attractive young woman]* – Twitter, 2009

Phoneticism may also be linked with cryptic function. Such use is very rare, but slang may be occasionally created from various cryptic devices to serve as a kind of a code (see Coleman 2012: 96–99). These include reordering of syllables in the word, often accompanied by the addition of affixes, or attaching meaningless sounds or letters at the beginning or end of a word, or specifically, before or after each syllable.

The infix *-izz-* (or *-iz-*) serves such function. Although it is no longer in vogue, a decade ago it was probably the most widely used phoneticism used in the cryptic function, enormously productive in African American slang and peculiar to rap and hip-hop parlance. While carrying no meaning, it was – beside its jocular and rhythmic value – often applied to hide the meaning of an expression, and thus applied in the cryptic function. Here is the relevant citational corroboration:

*Jordan, do you have any plans? We should all go get a **drizzink** [= drink]* – Twitter, 2013

*Actually, call me by my rap name. We're in my **hizzouse** [= house], so it's cool* – Tumblr, 2013

*That lousy motherfucker got out of **jizzail** [= jail]* – University of California Berkeley Student, 2013

*Don't forget to wear something warm. It's gonna be **kizzold** [= cold]* – Uptown MPLS, 2006

*They are trying. But they won't get **shizzit** [= absolutely nothing (from 'shit')]*! – Twitter, 2013

Another widely known device used in phoneticism used in the cryptic function is the suffix *-izzle* (or *-izle*). Much like the above *-izz-* infix, it is no longer in vogue but has nevertheless been employed to create numerous expressions characteristic of rap and hip-hop culture. Again, while carrying almost no meaning, it was popular because of its cryptic, but also jocular qualities. Consider the following examples:

*The chick needed some **fizzle** [= sex or the sex act] – University of California Berkeley Student, 2013*
*If you need to process it, that's what we're here for, my **nizzle** [= fellow African American] – Facebook, 2011*
*'Consider this an invitation for to my gangster nation.' 'For **rizzle** [= real]?' – Urban Dictionary, 2013*
*Oh, we could take their paychecks for **shizzle** [= certain]! – Salt Lake City Weekly, 2010*

6. Summary

Lexical creation is an important part of African American slang. It involves such mechanisms as coinage, onomatopoeia, reduplication, and phoneticism. While they are fairly rare in standard English, they are frequent in African American slang, where numerous slang expressions have been created in this way. Their popularity and productivity, especially in hip-hop slang, attests to the great lexical creativity of African Americans. It also shows – as in the case of phoneticism – that lexical creation can be used consciously for sociocultural reasons stemming from the African American experience.

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