

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE AMERICAN ENGLISH: SLANG EXPRESSIONS

FIKRI MURTADHA¹, MEISURI², MASITOWARNI SIREGAR³

¹²³UNIVERSITAS NEGERI MEDAN

Abstract

This study deals with the differences between Black English and White American English based on the slang expressions as found in 10 songs by black and white rappers taken from YouTube videos. The analysis shows that the 5 songs by white rappers contain 394 sentences as compared with those of black rappers which is 493 sentences. The slang expressions are identified based on the existing theory and then they are categorized into the semantic change and morphological process or formation of the expressions. It was found that there were more slang expressions in the Black English (39.95%) as compared with that of the White English (25.88%). There are more morphological processes in the black American English (6 of 8 types) compared with those of white American English (4 out of 8 types). The missing processes in black American English are borrowing and compounding whereas in the white American English are acronym, borrowing, backformation and conversion. The major or dominant processes in white American English are clipping (43.24%) and invention (41.44%) whereas in the black American English are clipping (30.02%) and invention (22.31%). At first sight it is difficult to understand the contents of the songs without referring to the explanations on the background and cultural values of the singers. The slang expressions which include a word, a phrase or a sentence contain the themes about sex, drugs and racialism among the black people in the United States. It is suggested that students who wanted to broaden their knowledge about English and its varieties should learn more about Black English.

Keywords: *morphological process; rappers; semantic changes; slang expression*

INTRODUCTION

Mastering English has a specific connotation for students who study the language for an international communication. It implies that a student especially at the English Department should understand English with its entire existence as used by native speakers or English-speaking people around the world.

The challenges and difficulties are abundant. A student must realize that English as it is known today has changed and developed from time to time. It is known that there is no “single English” in the sense there is only one variety of English around the world. The student must accept the fact English as perceived before has taken new forms called varieties. The English

variety enriches the standard form of English taught at schools and universities. English can now be seen from its real use and practice in the daily life of the speakers who are free to choose a variety that satisfies them according to situations of communication. Varieties of English are present in the daily international communication.

In fact, the speakers of English who are scattered around the world apparently speak different varieties of English (Baugh, 2000:25). According to the statistics of language, there are varieties of English such as Australian English, British English, American English, African English, Indian English, and Canadian English only to mention the major ones (Holmes, 1994:23). Each variety has its distinctive features which become the differences between one language and another. The differences make the speakers realize that there are unique properties of the chosen language. For instance, American English and British English can be differentiated from their vocabulary range and grammatical structures. The word “biscuit” (a small, light roll that is eaten as part of a meal) in British English is called “cookie” in American English. The range of differences can be as big as a glossary that can be accessed in the internet compilation. The differences in the areas of vocabulary, syntax or grammar and pronunciation must be accepted as the reality rather than an opposition to the other languages. The phrase “caught on to the trend” means “followed the latest development” (taken from a white song), and the word “gentrified” refers to someone “unaccustomed to frank discussions, particularly a man who is made uncomfortable by mild hostility”. The sentence “I didn’t do shit” means “I didn’t do anything wrong” (taken from a black song) and the sentence “smoke any motherfucker who sweats me” means “to gun down someone who is a moron, or a backstabber”.

The cited slang expressions above show the rich and productive vocabulary of the Black English both at the lexical and sentential levels. It is a common sense to say that slang expressions can be found in various types of reading materials. Even songs, for instance, contain many slang expressions which attract the attention of young lovers. The sentence “She is my candy girl” (She is my sweet heart or lover) shows the change of meaning of the original word (denotation) to a connotation.

In the United States, African English which is popularly called Black English (BE) is regarded as a variety of Standard English (SE). American people, of whom the majority are the white people, have to accept the fact that this variety cannot be ignored anymore because it has spread out throughout the country. Many of the white people or commonly called the White Anglo-Saxon People (WASP) wage protests against the use of BE at schools and universities because they say that this language variety shows ignorance of the grammatical rules as in SE (Allen, 1983:25). The white people have considered BE to represent a lack of intelligence on

the part of the speakers. Actually, they dislike the emerging differences particularly in the area of vocabulary which is overwhelmed with slang expressions. Their reason for rejecting the BE is not logical because BE can express meanings as used in SE. In other words, BE should be regarded as a common variety that can fulfill the role and functions of a language. There have been debates and arguments about the existence of BE for the international communication. According to sociolinguists, BE has contributed a lot to the development of English vocabulary around the world.

The knowledge about the African American English or Black English and realization that it is also an important variety of English should be provided to reach the required level of English mastery. The students must be exposed to the real-world practice of the language for the enrichment and enlightenment of English development. Language is not a static process. Its vocabulary develops from time to time. People who know English may choose one variety that brings excitement to their mind.

It is unreasonable to avoid the exposure to the BE when movies, films, dances, musical performances contain the use of BE as spoken by black Americans who have influenced the cultural and political situations in the world (Pasteur and Toldson, 1982:23). The idea that African American English is the SE with mistakes or errors must be rejected. The BE has its own vocabulary development which cannot be directly compared with those of the SE imposed by the white people in the United States. The vocabulary arises from the fact that black Americans can create new words or expressions which contain extra meanings. The meaning of a word is determined by its context and use. The word *ship*, for instance, is a slang expression which means a relationship in its particular context. But this word is used as a verb.

Those who use or practice BE actually know the rapid development of slang expressions which enrich the vocabulary of SE. New words can be created according to the situations of communication. Even better is that the same words from the SE can be interpreted differently. The enrichment of the vocabulary is a linguistic feature of BE that leads to a linguistic discussion on language change and choice. Sources of words such as mass media like newspapers, journals and tabloids (written) as well as electronic media like televisions, radios and smart phones (spoken) contain the rich slang expressions.

It is not true that those who use the BE as a means of communication are low-educated people. In fact, many highly-educated people like novelists, poets, writers and journalists often use BE as a way of enhancing the SE so that the meanings are varied according to their cultural situations. Therefore, sociolinguists state that BE can become a dialect of SE. It means that black Americans understand the SE and white people also understand BE equally well. Now when people have a choice, they may use the variety for fun. Therefore, the idea that BE

symbolizes the low education, lack of morality and harmony and ignorance of good rules of English is not true. A speaker who understands the SE is free to choose the nonstandard or substandard English like BE according to the situations of communication which are appropriate for the speakers. It is evident from the shows on television that black American athletes, boxers, swimmers, dancers and movie stars use slang expressions without any negative presumption about the role and status of BE as a variety of SE.

Black English

Dillard (1972: 10) mentions that Black English is much discussed in sociolinguistics. It is related to a variety of language. The term “Black English” (BE) has been popular among speakers of English around the world. It refers to a certain dialect or variety of English that has a long historical background. In the United States, according to many linguists, this is also called African American English (AAE), or more popularly Ebonics. Black English is actually a diverse language practiced by different ethnic groups. Such a situation leads to a controversy whether it can be considered an American English dialect.

The Black English is spoken by African-Americans in the U.S. which differs systematically from “Standard English” (SE). This term replaces the earlier “Non-Standard Negro English”, or “Black English Vernacular” to emphasize that there is considerable linguistic variation within all racial groups in the U.S. This language has a consistent syntax. Common prejudice has it that black English is necessarily inferior to white, but this view has no linguistic validity (Dillard 1973:5).

The Black English is regarded as an ethnolect of English spoken by a certain percentage of the African American community (estimates vary between 40% and 70%), particularly working class urban communities and to some extent in bidialectal urban middle class communities. Much Black English grammar, phonology and vocabulary is like Standard English, but there are a few salient differences.

The differences of grammar between BE and SE can be seen from parts of speech such as

1) Verb

a) In BE the stem of many verbs is different from SE:

Not fill, but full: He fullin' de tank

Not leave, but lef He lef town

Not heat, but hot Told to heat the beans, he ate them!

Not ask, but aks He aks me the way

b) Optional Past-Tense Marking

In all languages verbs can be marked for either tense or aspect. Tense expresses distinctions of the position in time or duration of the action or state that the verb denotes: most familiarly, past, present, or future. Aspect expresses distinctions concerning the nature of the action that the verb denotes as to its beginning, duration, completion or repetition, without reference to its position in time.

In Standard English (SE), marking of verb tense is obligatory, while marking of verb aspect is optional. In Black English (BE), the reverse is true: marking of tense is optional, marking of aspect is obligatory. Action in the past may be represented by the base form of the verb.

SE: I fed the cat and washed the dishes and swept the floor.

In BE the following may be either present or past tense:

I feed the cat and wash the dishes and sweep the floor.

When tense marking does occur, it is non-redundant. In SE every verb in a sequence must be marked as either present or past; in Black English only one of the verbs need be marked (though more than one may be). So an alternative acceptable past-tense form would be:

I fed the cat and wash the dishes and sweep the floor

It is assumed, reasonably, that past-tense marking on one of the verbs is sufficient. The number of verbs marked is free:

The boy carried the dog dish in the house and put some food in it and brings it out and called his dog...

Or the past occurrence of these events may be marked by non-verb lexical items:

Yesterday, I feed the cat and wash the dishes and sweep the floor.

So ...he go yesterday... is grammatical.

c) Obligatory Aspect Marking

There is no use of the forms of the verb be in the present tense as a copula or 'linking' verb:

They real fine

If you interested

Instead the verb be is used to marks aspect as habitual or continuous, but without changing its grammatical form:

He be goin' marks aspect as continuous so that absence of be indicates discontinuous or XX

He goin' (may be either present or past event)

So in BE there is :

He be waitin' for me every night when I come home

And: He waitin' for me right now

But not: *He be waitn' for me right now

or: *He waitn' for me every night

Compare the insult:

He workin' when de boss come in (He works just/only when the boss comes in) with the complement.

He be workin' when de boss come in (He's typically working when the boss comes in)

Or:

You makin' sense, but you don't be makin' sense!

(You make sense right now, but generally you don't make sense)

One piece of evidence for this distinction is the fact that these two forms are negated differently:

He goin' ->

*He don' goi

He be goin' ->

He don' be goin'

*He ain' be goin'

d) Auxiliary Verb Forms

BE does not use auxiliary have/has (unless borrowing them from Standard English to sound more acceptable). Instead, been and done serve something close to the perfective function of have in SE (expressing an action as complete or implying the notion of completion, conclusion, or result):

I done go immediate present

I done went immediate perfective in past time

I done gone quasi-adjectival structure

I been done gone

I done been gone

And is can be used for this function too:

The frogs is all died

Is is also used in question forms:

SE

Have you seen him?

Have they gone there?

BE

Is you see(n) him?

Is they gone there?

And is also serves to provide emphasis:

BE emphatic: I is seen him.

The auxiliary do is often found with double negatives at the beginning of a sentence:

Won't nobody do nothing about that.

The origins of Black English are unclear. One account is that its origins lie in a creole English used by the first African Americans in America. A creole is a pidgin that has become the native language of its speakers. A pidgin is a language with no native speakers, formed as a means of communication between people with different languages, drawing features from both but dispensing with strange or difficult features. Pidgin and creole languages typically do not differentiate between masculine and feminine in their pronoun systems.

Slang Expressions

The term “slang” is now popular in sociolinguistics. It refers to the creation of a word, a phrase or a sentence with new different meanings to show the speakers’ creativity in using a language. As language changes and develops from time to time, speakers of the language are challenged and motivated to express themselves by using new expressions for their social identity and solidarity.

There are different definitions of slang depending on how they are perceived by sociolinguists or linguists in general. In Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (1993), slang is very informal language that includes new and sometimes not polite words and meanings, is often used among particular groups of people, and is usually not used in serious speech or writing.

There are four elements of definition considered here: 1) slang contains informal language which means that it basically expresses ideas based on what is prescribed rather than described in grammar, 2) slang creates new and not polite words and meanings, which means that there can be more words available in the present vocabulary but the meanings are considered impolite, 3) slang is used among a particular group of people, which means that a certain group of people having a distinctive characteristics in color, profession, ideology and other social factors will create new slang expressions, and 4) slang is not used in serious speech or writing, which means that slang expressions are not the main points to be considered.

In the area of particular group, even children can also create slang expressions. In other words, slang is another area of vocabulary which reflects a person’s age. Current slang is the linguistic prerogative of young people and generally sounds odd in the mouths of an older person. It signals membership of a particular group – the young. In New Zealand young people currently use the terms wicked, choice and rad (from radical) to describe something they approve (Holmes, 1994).

Slang expressions show members of group membership. They are solidarity markers. New York gang members, for instance, delete the –ed which signals past tense at the ends of the words much more often than adults from the same social group. They more often say miss for missed (in utterances like he miss the buss yesterday and pass for passed (it pass him). And they also use more multiple negation than adults in the same social class (Holmes, 1994).

In the area of politeness, slang expressions contain meanings which are against the normal interpretation of ethical conduct. Generally speaking, politeness involves taking account of the feelings of others. A polite person makes others feel comfortable. Being linguistically polite involves speaking to people appropriately in the light of their relationship to you. Inappropriate linguistic choices may be considered rude. Using an imperative such as stop talking or shut the door to a superior at work is likely to earn the office junior a reprimand.

According to Linda and Wareing (1999:104), there is a very complex relationship between physical, mental and social factors in determining a person's use of language and how others perceive and react to that language.

Slang expressions are a choice in using a language. Speakers or users of language have many possible lexical items available for their daily communication. As is assumed that language can change and develop, the choice can be given to the usage of slang expressions depending on the physical factors (old, young), mental factors (educated, non-educated) and social factors (rich, poor, famous, etc.). It is clear that slang expressions provide a linguistic style of communication in which the people are free to choose whatever words, phrases or sentences they like to use to express their intended meanings.

The previous definition is more aptly described by the following sociolinguists. Dumas and Lighter (1978: 14–16), cited in Eble (1996: 12), outline four criteria for deciding whether a linguistic item constitutes slang. Their view is that a linguistic item will constitute slang if it fits two of the four criteria below:

- 1) Its presence will markedly lower, at least for the moment, the dignity of formal or serious speech or writing;
- 2) Its use implies the user's special familiarity either with the referent or with the less status or less responsible class of people who have such special familiarity and use the term;
- 3) It is a tabooed term in ordinary discourse with persons of higher social status or greater responsibility;
- 4) It is used in place of the well-known conventional synonym.

The foregoing suggests that Dumas and Lighter (1978) are inclined to defining slang in terms of how they deviate from societal norms and attitudes.

Further, Ellis (2002) defines slang as " a variety of language used in certain contexts by

means of which people express their sense of belonging to a particular group within the community which is not specific to any geographic location."

Eble (1996: 11) also defines slang " as an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large".

Both Ellis and Eble focus on the social functions of slang, though the latter underscores one other important issue about slang terms, their short-lived nature. She observes that the vocabulary of college students depicts "the ephemeral and innovative character of slang".

Martiello (2005: 15), on the other hand, defines slang by distinguishing the general from the specific. While general slang terms are used deliberately by speakers to break with the standard usage, and therefore are not group restricted, specific slang terms are used by people of common age and experience such as college students. They are therefore in-group markers.

The definition adopted in this study is in line with that of Ellis and Eble. They discuss slang from the social function perspective as "the informal and highly expressive products of users' creativity which are used to describe their cultural, academic or social lives". Eble (1996: 26) observes that that new slang words and expressions usually arise productively with speakers drawing on the resources of the language, phonological, morphological and cultural, to express new meanings.

Formation of Slang Expressions

Zapata (2007:1) describes that slang expressions are created following a morphological process. As in English word formation in general, there are certain ways of forming new slang expressions such as:

1). Acronym is the process whereby a new word is formed from the initial letters of the constituent words of a phrase or sentence. For example, from the initial letters of the words of the phrase North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the word NATO \ "neIt`U\ is formed. Similarly, from the initial letters of the constituent words of the phrase unidentified flying object, the word UFO \ ju...ef "U\ (or\ " ju...fU\) is formed.

2) Borrowing is the process whereby new words are formed by adopting words from other languages together with the concepts or ideas they stand for. E.g., tango, mango, taco, burrito from Spanish; fiancé, very (adapted from Old French *verai*), garage from French; pizza, mafia from Italian; and so on.

3) Back-formation is the process by which new words are formed by the deletion of a supposed affix from an already existing word. For example, the verb *speddle*, *edit*, *hawk*, *enthuse*, *stoke*, *swindle*, *televise*, *donate*, *sculpt*, *buttle* have been created from the pre-existing

nouns peddler, editor, hawker, enthusiasm, stoker, swindler, television, donation, sculptor and butler, respectively. The nouns have been thought to be derivatives of verbs on the analogy of cases such as revision, creation, formation, transmission, to name a few, which are true derivatives from the verbs revise, create, form, transmit, respectively.

4) Clipping is the processes whereby new words are formed by shortening other words; i.e., by eliminating the initial part, the last part, or both parts, of those words. E.g., phone from (tele)phone, plane from (air)plane, ad (advert (BrE)) from ad(vertisement), exam from exam(ination), flu from (in)flu(enza), fridge(esp. BrE) from refrigerator.

5) Compounding consists in the combination of two or more (usually free) roots to form a new word. For example, the word blackboard, heartfelt, brother-in-law are compound words; they are made up of the roots (at the same time words themselves) black and board, heart and felt, brother, in and law, respectively.

6) Blending is the process whereby new words are formed by combining parts of two words, usually the beginning of one word and the end of another. For example, smog (smoke + fog), brunch (breakfast + lunch), heliport (helicopter + airport), motel (motor + hotel), FORTRAN (formula translation), etc. Notice that enough of each word is normally retained so that the complex whole remains fairly readily analyzable.

7) Word coinage (or invention) is the process whereby new words are created outright, either deliberately or accidentally, to fit some purpose. Usually, words are coined to express new ideas, processes, products, etc. in the language. For example, brand names such as Xerox, Kodak, Exxon, Kleenex, Nylon, Dacron, etc.; pooh, snob, nerd, blurb, googol, etc.

8) Functional shift (conversion or zero derivation) is the process by which new words are created by using a word in new functions (i.e., by shifting, changing or converting its original grammatical class to another class), without any change in its form. For example, when the word water is used in the following sentence Give me some water, please it is used as a noun, which is probably its original (and more common) use. But when water is used in the sentence The children water the plants every morning, it is used in a new syntactic function, namely, as a verb, and no change in spelling or pronunciation has been made. In other words, the grammatical category of the word water has shifted from noun to verb. Zapata (2007).

FINDINGS

The data were collected from 10 popular songs written by black (5 songs) and white (5 songs) writers downloaded from the internet. The songs are assumed to contain slang expressions formed or created by the song writers in the internet. Dumas and Ligher's criteria were applied here to identify and categorize the slang expressions for the formation and

semantic change by black and white writers. Zapata's criteria are used to determine the morphological process (formation) of the slang expressions.

There were more sentences in the black American English (493 sentences) as compared with those of the white American English (394 sentences).

There was more slang expressions used in black American English (39.95%) as compared with those of the white American English (25.88%).

There were more morphological processes in the black American English (6 of 8 types) compared with those of white American English (4 out of 8 types). This missing processes in black American English are borrowing and compounding whereas in the white American English are acronym, borrowing, backformation and conversion.

The major or dominant processes in white American English were clipping (43.24%) and invention (41.44%) whereas in the black American English are clipping (30.02%) and invention (22.31%)

In all the 5 songs by the white rappers, there were 51 expressions found whereas in the 5 songs by the black rappers there are 109 expressions or semantic changes. This means that black rappers are more productive or creative than the white rappers in using the Black English.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the findings about the differences between black and white American English, the following suggestions are offered to the students of English Department and people in general who want to improve their conversational skills or communicative competence.

Theoretically, listen to and watch films or videos containing slang expressions which can enrich the vocabulary that is applicable to the real world.

Practically, compare the given meanings of the slang expressions with those of the standard English to see the richness of the vocabulary that all leads to development of English around the world.

Practice the language with those who are interested in multicultural values of different people including colored people.

REFERENCES

- Alimi, M and Arua E. (2008): "Gender and Student Slang in the University of Botswana". In: Arua, Arua E./Bagwasi, Mompoloki M./Sebina, Tiro/Seboni, Barolong (eds).
- Allen, Irving L. (1983): *The Language of Ethnic Conflict. Social Organization and Lexical Culture*. New York.

- Anshen, F. (1969). "Speech variation among Negroes in a small Southern Community". Ph.D. dissertation, New York University.
- Ayers, E. L. (1992). *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: W.H. Freeman.
- Baugh, J. (2000). *Beyond Ebonics: The Linguistic Legacy of American Slavery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Balwin, J. (1979). If Black English isn't a language, then, tell me what is?, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*: Los Angeles, California
- Dillard, J. L. (1973/1972). *Black English: Its history and usage in the United States*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Eble, Connie C. (1984): "Slang: Deviation or Norm?" In: Manning, Alan/Martin, Pierre M./McCalla, Kim (eds.): *The Tenth LACUS Forum, 1983*. Columbia, S.C.: 409–416.
- Eckert, P. (1997). "Age as a sociolinguistic variable". In Florian Coulmas, ed. *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Ellis, R. (2002). *The Place of Grammar Instruction in the Second/Foreign Language Curriculum*. Routledge: London
- Gay, L. R. (1987). *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Application*. London: Merrill
- Holmes, J *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. (1994). Longman: London
- Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*. (1993). Longman: London.
- Markus, H. & Paula N. (1986). "Possible selves". *American Psychologist*
- Martiello, R. (2005). *The Creation of Students' Academic Slang Expressions in the University of Botswana*. Gaborone, Botswana
- McCumber. (2001). vmccumber@ alumni.uvic. ca. University of Victoria, New Zealand.
- Millar. (2007). *From Slang to Acceptability*. Research Gate: Chicago, Illinois
- Muhartoyo. (2014). *The Use of English Slang in Informal Communication Among 8th Semester Students of English Department in Binus University*. A Thesis: Kemanggisan-Palmerah, Jakarta in *Humaniora*, Vol. 5 No. 1, 2014
- Pasteur, A. B and Toldson, I.L (1982) *Roots of Soul*. Doubleday, Garden City, New York
- Rickford, J. R. & Russell, J. R. (2000). *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Smitherman, G. (2000). *Talkin that Talk: Language, Culture and Education*

Tony, T. (2005) "Classifying Campus Slang

www.kcl.ac.uk/content/1/c6/03/08/16/Classifying%20Campus%20Slang.doc

(accessed April 29, 2006).

Trudgill, P. (1998). Introduction to Sociolinguistics. Routledge: London

Zapata. (2007) Types of Words and Word Formation Processes in English. Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia.