

# **The Lexicon Of The African American English In Georgia Doyle Johnson's *Frederick Douglas* And Loraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun***

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## **ABSTRACT**

To comprehend that a language belongs to a dialect, one may examine its lexicon. As it is considered non-standard dialect, the American African English lexicon is assumed to have its own characteristic different from the standard American English. Therefore, to gain a better comprehension of the American African English dialect in the view point of lexicon features, the paper will elaborate Georgia Doyle Johnson's *Frederick Douglas* And Loraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun*.

This paper is descriptive linguistics rather than a stylistic study as it does not focus on literary style. The data taken was classified into linguistic elements and was tested to the theories of informal English in general; African American English in particular and Standard American English rules of pronunciation. The research findings were summarized and discussed to conclude the research.

The result of the research demonstrates that African American English, a variant of informal English, is different from the rules of Standard American English. In terms of lexicon, African American English employs local and rude words. The presence of slang and colloquialisms, taboo words and swearing make it distinctively informal.

**Key words:** lexicon, dialect, the African American English

## **A. Introduction**

Sidnell (2006) describes that in general, African American English (African American Vernacular English) vocabularies are the same as other varieties of English. However, African American English speakers employ some

words which are not found in other varieties and furthermore use some English words in ways that differ from the standard dialects. A number of words used in Standard English may also have their origin in African American English or at least in the West African languages that contributed to the development of African American English. In addition to words with clearly African origins, however, African American English has a separate vocabulary of words which have no Standard English- language equivalent or with strikingly different meanings from their common usage in Standard American English.

## **B. Discussion**

Linguistic elements play an important role in language. By comprehending these features, a language structure can be identified. Therefore, in order to have a more complete discussion, this section will describe one linguistic element that is lexicon.

### **B.1 Lexicon**

African American English employs a high frequency of informal words, as seen below.

#### **B.1.1 *The Use In This World and Around Here as Expletives***

An expletive is a word or phrase that does not contribute any meaning to a sentence but is added only to fill out a sentence. African American English frequently uses *in this world* as an expletive:

*I wouldn't kiss that woman good-by for nothing in this world this way. Not for nothing in this world (ARITS);*

*Baby, don't nothing happen for you in this world 'less you pay somebody off (ARITS);*

*That is just what's wrong with the colored woman in this world (ARITS);*

*I know ain't nothing in this world as busy as you (ARITS);*

*But it's all I got in the world (ARITS);*

*That was the most marvelous things in the world (ARITS).*

African American English also employs *around here* and *'round here* as an expletive, for example:

*You'll be fussing and cussing 'round here like a madman (ARITS);*

*I have never asked anyone around here to do anything for me (ARITS);*

*I don't want nothing but for you to stop acting holy 'round here (ARITS);*

*I just ain't going to have you 'round here reciting the scriptures in the rain—you hear me? (ARITS);*

*I am going to be a doctor and everybody around here better understand that! (ARITS);*

*Oh, ain't we getting ready 'round here, though! (ARITS).*

### B.1.2 The Use of A Bunch Of

Quirk et al (1985:250) state that instead of specific quantities, African American English frequently uses *a bunch of*. *Bunch* is also applied to people, meaning a group. Many examples are found in *A Raisin in the Sun*:

*A bunch of stinking niggers! (ARITS);*

*A bunch of crazy good-for-nothing loudmouths (ARITS);*

*A bunch of hustling people (ARITS).*

### B.1.3 The use of Sure as an Intensifier

Typical intensifiers in informal speech are: *real, plain, awful, mighty, pretty, sure*. The intensifier that emerges frequently in *A Raisin in the Sun* is *sure*. The following are examples.

*He sure was a fine man, all right (ARITS);*

*Yes- and Africa sure is claiming her own tonight (ARITS);*

*But he sure loved his children (ARITS);*

*Yes, he sure could (ARITS);*

*Lord, I sure don't feel like whipping nobody today (ARITS);*

*They said they're sure going to be glad to see you when you get there (ARITS).*

### B.1.4 The High Frequency of Using About

According to Leech and Svartvik (709), the word *about* can be combined with a considerable range of verbs and adjectives in informal conversations. In African American English *about* is used as a subordinator for finite clauses. For instance:

*And what you know about who is just a good-for-nothing loudmouth?*

*All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan.*

In *A Raisin in the Sun* the use of *about* is very high. The examples found are:

*Talk about, mad about, pleasant 'bout, know about, think 'bout, be about,*

In addition to slang, colloquialisms emerge frequently. The following are examples excerpted from A Raisin in the Sun:

*Beneatha*: Bad? Say anything bad to him? No—I told him he was a sweet boy and full of dreams and everything is strictly peachy keen, as the ofay kids say!  
*Peachy keen* means very good.

*Ruth*: Ten twenty. And the mailman going to ring that bell this morning just like he done every morning for the last umpteen years.  
*Umpteen* means innumerable.

*Nut* means silly.

*Beneatha*: You—you are a nut. Thee is mad, boy

*Walter*: Who's a nut?

*Beneatha*: Because you're a nut.

*Walter*: Nobody in this house is ever going to understand me.

One kind of local dialect found is slang, which is prevalent in African American English. Some examples of slang found in *A Raisin in the Sun* follow:

#### B.1.6 Local Dialects: Slang and Colloquialisms

No, I'm just sleepy as the devil (ARTS);

You almost thin as Travis (ARTS);

Well, they look crazy as hell (ARTS);

Just plain as day (ARTS);

That's funny as hell, huh! (ARTS);

Just fresh as salt, this girl! (ARTS);

a simile. Examples are:

According to Crystal (1995:421) the minimal case of figurative language is a local, restricted effect in which special meaning is extracted from the linking of two unlike words. One of ways to achieve this is by using similes. However, in addition to using *like*, African American English speakers also frequently use *as*

#### B.1.5 The Use of Similes

*undersand about, stories about, fussing about, fighting about, sick about, dream about, serious about, worry about, wrong about, question about, upset about, hear about, mean about, excited about, silly about, nothing 'bout, tied up about, ask about, tell about, sorry about, see about, care about, feel about, cry about, figure out 'bout*

Ruth : *Come here. If you don't take this comb and fix this here head, you better!*

**Fix this here head** means arrange the hair.

Ruth : *Get carfare and milk money—and not a single penny for no caps, you hear me?*

**Not a single penny** means don't spend any money.

Mama : *We ain't no business people, Ruth. We jus plain working folks.*

**Folks** means people, usually ordinary.

Mama : *(To Beneatha) Why you got to flit so from one thing to another, baby?*

**Flit** means move quickly from one place to another.

Beneatha : *Brother is a flip—let's face it.*

**Flip** means a flippant person.

Mama : *You must not dislike people 'cause they well off, honey.*

**Well off** means rich.

Ruth : *You got good children. They just a little off sometimes—but they are good.*

**Off** means not good. For example if milk goes off, that means it is sour, not good to drink.

Beneatha : *You mean save them from heathenism—.*

**A heathen** is a person whose morals are disapproved of.

Beneatha : *(Quickly) Oh, no—not ugly (more slowly, apologetically) But it's so hard to manage when it's, well—raw.*

**Raw** means naked, uncovered.

Mama : *(Looking at him as she would Walter). I bet you don't half look after yourself, being away from your mama either. I spec you better come 'round here from time to time to get yourself some decent home-cooked meals....*

**I bet** means I think I'm certain. **Decent** means likeable, satisfactory, in this case means healthy, wholesome.

Ruth : *Now that's truth—it's what ain't been done to it! You expect this boy to go out with you with your head all nappy like that?*

**Nappy** means frizzy, uncombed.

*Lindner* : Well—you see our community is made up of people who've worked hard as the *dickens* for years to build up that little community.

**Dickens** is used here to mean the devil, Satan.

*Ruth* : Lord have mercy, ain't this the *gall*!

**Gall** means impudence.

*Bentha* : (Wearily) Oh, I just mean I couldn't ever really be serious about George. He's—he's so *shallow*.

*Ruth* : **Shallow**—what do you mean he's *shallow*? He's rich.

**Shallow** means not earnest, sound or serious.

*Mama* : Seems like you getting to a place where you always tied up in some kind of *knot* about something.

**Tied up in a knot** means nervous.

*Mama* : ...if we could and how to stay alive and still have a *pinch* of dignity too...

**Pinch** means a little bit—like a pinch of salt.

Additionally, a large variety of colloquialisms in greetings and addressing people are found in African American English, such as the ones seen below:

*Ruth to Walter* : You better get up from there, *man*!

: **Honey**, you never say something new.

*Ruth to Travis* : Get down them steps, *boy*!

: You go on out and play now, *baby*.

*Walter to Beneatha* : You just got your mother's interest at heart, ain't you, *girl*?

*Beneatha to Walter* : **Brother**, where did Ruth go?

*Mama* : Now don't you start, *child*. It's too early in the morning to be talking about money. It ain't *Christian*.

*Ruth to Beneatha* : Well—what other qualities a man got to have to satisfy you, *little girl*?

If the speaker is angry, she/he uses a complete name for emphasis, as follows:

*Ruth to Walter* : **Walter Lee Younger**, get down off that table and stop acting like a fool...

*Mama* : Well—whether they drinks it or not ain't none of my business. ...*(Stopping suddenly and studying her daughter-in-law)* **Ruth Younger**,

*what's the matter with  
you today? You look like you could fall over right there.*

In the time of slavery, which is when A Raisin in the Sun was set, African Americans addressed white people formally when meeting them face-to-face. In private, however, they used colloquialisms among themselves, as in the following examples:

*Mama: Where you been?*

*Walter: Made a call.*

*Mama: To who, son?*

*Walter: To **The Man**.*

*Mama: What man, baby?*

*Walter: **The Man**, Mama. Don't you who **The Man** is?*

*Ruth: Walter Lee?*

*Walter: **The Man**. Like the guys in the streets say—**The Man**. **Captain Boss—Mistuh Charley—Old Cap'n, Please Mr. Bossman...***

*Walter: We's ain't gwine come out deh dirty up yo' white folks neighbourhood...*

*Walter: and these here Chicago peckerwoods is some bad peckerwoods*

*Walter: Cause it sounds respectable to 'em. Something white people get too.*

### **B.1.7 Rude Words**

Rude expressions, such as taboo words and swearing are commonly employed in African American English. Several examples of rude expressions are:

*(Shrugging) How much cleaning can a horse need, for Christ's sake (ARITS);*

*...there simply is no blasted God--(ARITS);*

*Well, for God's sake—if the moving men are here—**LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!** (ARITS);*

*A bunch of stinking Niggers (ARITS):*

*Fagotty—(looking) (ARITS).*

Swear words are used frequently, as seen in the examples below:

***DAMN MY EGGS—DAMN ALL THE EGGS THAT EVER WAS** (ARITS);*

*Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? (ARITS);*

*That's funny as hell, huh! (ARITS);*

*You contented son-of-a-bitch, you happy? (ARITS);*  
*Well, I'll be damned. So, that's what they mean by African Bush (ARITS);*  
*...to say good bye to these goddamned cracking walls! (ARITS);*  
*Then tell me, goddamit... (ARITS).*

### C. Conclusion

The results of the research demonstrate that African American English, a variant of informal English, breaks the rules of Standard American English. In terms of lexicon, African American English employs local and rude words. The presence of slang and colloquialisms, taboo words and swearing make it distinctively informal. Several features of the African American English are characterized by: a) using *as* as a simile, b) *around here* or *'round here*, c) *in this world* as an expletive, d) the non specific quantifier *a bunch of*, e) and the intensifier *sure*.

Additionally, slang and colloquialisms are: *nut, umpteen, fix this here head, not a single penny, folks, flit, well off, off, heathen, decent, nappy, living gall, knot* and *pinch*. A large variety of colloquialisms in greeting and addressing people are informal, for instance: *honey, man, boy, baby, girl, brother, child, and little girl*. It demonstrate that the speakers of the African American English when they talk within their own communities they innovate new words. In this case, words/phrases/usages that are probably the African American origin are *fix this here head, flit about, youngun, spec, dickens, nappy* (for hair or head; the Brits and Aussies use *nappy* to mean diapers!), *conked head, gall* (for emotion) and *peachy keen*. However, it is not always a word or phrase that is unique; it is the way uses them. For example, *gall* is a legitimate word, but their meaning is different from the one in the dictionary. Another example of word *Slap* is a legitimate word too, but the African American people might say *slap upside the head*, which is unique.

The African American English speakers employ polite expressions when they greet people and use *please* when they ask for permission, while to show respect, African American English speakers use titles such as *Miss, Mrs., Mr., Aunt* or *Uncle*. Furthermore, when the speaker is angry, she/he uses a complete name for emphasis.

Finally, African American English frequently uses rude expressions such as taboo words and swearing, for example, *blasted God, for God's sake, for Christ's sake, nigger, fagotty, damn, son-of-a-bitch, the hell, damned, goddamned, and goddamit.*

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