

## ROOTS: A CASE FOR BLACK ENGLISH

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With the failure of the 1960's Civil Rights movement in the United States to fully integrate the Black population into the mainstream of American society<sup>1</sup> came the subsequent «backlash» of the 70's reaffirming the distinctive values of Black culture and priorities epitomized in the now well-known slogan «Black is Beautiful». The movement's principle aim was to destroy the white standard as a measure of Black «inferiority», a posture eagerly taken up by a people long plagued by a national identity complex and which affected almost every area of Black life, in some cases reaching out into the white community as well (cfr. Black style, Afro hairdos and last year's corn rows).

In the midst of all this social reevaluation, J.L. Dillard published his «revolutionary» new linguistic thesis in *Black English*<sup>2</sup> postulating that the language variations found among Black speakers were consistent on a national level and attended to a cultural differentiation heretofore disregarded by modern linguists. Widely acclaimed as a landmark in modern linguistic studies, Dillard's study has shed new light on the problem of «non-standard Negro dialect» and has consequently obliged all parties concerned to take a new look at features of Black English which had generally been regarded solely as the result of inferior social status. More recent Black studies such as Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin' and Testifyin'*<sup>3</sup> defend Black language on historical grounds purporting influences from four different sources: 1) conditions of servitude and oppression, 2) the West African oral tradition, 3) the traditional Black church, and 4) music and «cool talk». Dillard in *All-American English* adds the effects of «maritime pidgin English»<sup>4</sup>.

Whatever the case, analysis of so many varied influences feeding such

a pungent variation of English will of necessity require years of serious thought and investigation since the possibilities are much too vast to be assimilated at one fell swoop. It is possible, however, to investigate what might be considered to be a microcosm of the general problem manifested in the literary production of modern Black authors. The assumption that Black literature is to some extent a faithful register of actual Black language may be taken as valid for two reasons: first, while the literary genres may not adhere to an external or absolute reality with respect to their representation of actual facts, they do establish an internal or subjective reality which relates directly to Black life, since to the contrary, it would be impossible for the reader to achieve any degree of identity with the characters presented by the authors. This implies, therefore, that the language employed by such characters must be coherent with that of modern Black society. On the other hand, since this literature has been written as a representation of this society, its purpose is not expressly linguistic and the conversational language found therein is governed by no other rule than that of normal usage. It is thus reasonable to expect that the current status of Black language will be revealed in its natural state by a conscientious analysis of literary conversational texts, untampered by any linguist's misguided intentions in selecting material to prove one or another current theory.

Although published one year before the appearance of Black linguistic theories, *Roots* by Alex Haley falls neatly into the sphere of pro-Black English arguments. A uniform analysis of all the levels of language, white and black, manifested in the characters of the different social strata present in the book gives evidence of a clear differentiation between the English of white and Black speakers on all planes: morpho-syntactic, phonological, semantic and stylistic.

Limiting our discussion here to morpho-syntax and more specifically to differentiating aspects of the verb, it is possible to establish the levels of language in *Roots* using as a first criteria the social stratification of the United States of the last century, epoch in which the main body of the book unfolds. We must base our analysis in this sense on two main premises: first, that a man's language is taken as being characteristic of his social class and second, that command of the verb forms in any language is indicative of linguistic competence. This latter view is supported by F.R. Palmer who has written in his book, *A Linguistic Study of the English Verb*:

The most difficult part of any language is usually the part that deals with the verb. Learning a language is to a very large degree learning how to operate the verbal forms of that language, and except in the

case of those that are related historically, the patterns and structure of the verb in each language seem to differ very considerably from those in every other language.<sup>5</sup>

Two important factors dealing with language come into play here. First, the implication is, as indeed the practical analysis shows, that correctly handling the verbal forms of any language is duly related to the linguistic education of the speaker. In the book under study, educational opportunities are quite closely related to social stratification, the upper classes having more time and money to spend on the education of their families. It is to be expected, then, that the higher the social strata of the speaker, the more varied the forms of the verbs that he employs.

The second factor here which is pertinent to the analysis at hand is the difference in «patterns and structure of the verb» in languages that are not historically related. Since modern Black English theories purport a strong West African influence, it is only logical to take into consideration aspects of West African morpho-syntax which might govern verb usage in the formation of Black language. In fact, four out of six grammar rules common to West African languages discussed by Geneva Smitherman (see above) deal with variation in verb usage:

- 1) the verb form is the same for all subjects;
- 2) questions are formed without inversion, without auxiliaries;
- 3) there is no tense indicated in the verb;
- 4) the copula verb may be omitted.

Since West African languages tend to emphasize the manner and aspect of the action of the verb rather than its tense, analysis of the verb as is used in Black English would be expected to show a substantial limitation in the use of verb tenses: the more Africanized the English, the less variation of verb tense. The verb in Black English, then, is under severe tension on two fronts. Not only is any kind of education, linguistic or otherwise, denied to the slave class situated at the bottom of the social strata, but the African linguistic tradition wields an important influence on the language as well. This influence would be especially acute among new arrivals to the United States and those slaves restricted to the plantation fields.

In light of all the above, statistical analysis has been effectuated on the verb tenses used in conversational speech taken from *Roots* at eight different levels: four in white English and four in Black English. Standard British English is manifested in the character of Sir Eric Russel, a member of the English nobility; Dr. William Waller («Massa Waller») represents Standard American English as he belongs to the wealthy Southern Aristocracy; Common American English is found in the speech of the

sheriff of Spotsylvania County, Virginia, while Vulgar American is illustrated in the conversation of Tom Lea, a «po' white cracker». (Nomenclature ascribes to classifications defined by Charles C. Fries, in *American English Grammar* 6). Levels of Black English are also distinguished along the lines of social stratification of the 19th Century slave class. Slaves imported directly from Africa to the Southern plantations (represented here by the figures of Kunta Kinte and Pompey) should be expected to be under greater influence from their own native morpho-syntax than native-born Blacks, but even the latter may be linguistically differentiated, just as they were socially during the last century, into two main groups: those who worked in the fields away from much direct influence from white English («the field hands») and the domestic servants who had more immediate contact with their white overlords (represented in this case by «the Fiddler»). As living quarters on most plantations were common to both groups, mutual influence might be expected from the two as shown in «Slave Row».

As practical criteria for analysis, absolute counts of the verbs have been taken in every tense and the percentage of each calculated with respect to the total number of verbs found in a certain text. It must be pointed out, however, that verb tense as considered here is not necessarily based on the correct white standard conjugation. At times, and especially in Black English, tense has been understood by inference from the text at large. This is particularly true with respect to certain Black constructions. For example, *done* plus another verb form may signify either the present perfective or past perfective tenses as categorized by white standard English. Review of the whole sentence in which such forms appear is necessary in order to determine to which category they should be attributed. The same is true with respect to *be* forms. Constructions using «zero-copula» have not been included in the count, but all imperatives have been charted in the present tense. Defective verbs have been analyzed apart. Results have been charted starting with those characters of highest linguistic education. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest decimal.

**TABLE I STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF VERB TENSES USED ON EACH LEVEL OF LANGUAGE**  
**WHITE ENGLISH SPEAKERS ACTIVE VOICE**

CHARACTERS (words)	n° of verbs % of text	PRESENT		PAST		PRESENT PERFECT		PAST PERFECT		FUTURE +		CONDITION. +	
		Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.
Rusel (168)	22 13%	10		4		2						3	
		45.4%		18.2%		9.1%						13.6%	
Waller (384)	65 17%	26	6	3	2	7	2			4	1	3	
		40%	9.2%	4.6%	3.1%	10.8%	3.1%			6.2%	1.5%	4.6%	
Sheriff (417)	54 13%	18	3	5		9				6		4	
		33%	5.5%	9.3%		16.7%				11.1%		7.4%	
Lea (474)	88 18.5%	46	3	24		7						1	
		52.3%	3.4%	27.3%		7.9%						1.1%	

+ Only those verb tenses which appeared at least once in any text have been included in this table.

**TABLE I (Continued)**  
**WHITE ENGLISH SPEAKERS**

CHARACT.	ACTIVE VOICE (cont.)		PASSIVE VOICE				
	PRESENT	DEFECTIVE VERBS CONDITION, PERFECTIVE	PRESENT	PAST	PRESENT PERFECT	PAST PERFECT	DEFECTIVE
Russel	1 4.5%	1 4.5%	1 4.5%				
Waller	1 1.5%	1 1.5%	2 3.1%	1 1.5%	1 1.5%	1 1.5%	
Sheriff	6 11.1%		1 1.9%			1 1.9%	1 1.9%
Lea	4 4.5%			2 2.3%			

TABLE I (Continued)

BLACK ENGLISH SPEAKERS ACTIVE VOICE

CHARACTERS (words)	n° of verbs % of text	PRESENT		PAST		PRESENT PERFECT		PAST PERFECT		FUTURE +		CONDITION. +	
		Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.	Simple	Cont.
Fiddler (462)	72 15.5%	41	7	13	2	5		3				1	
		56.4%	9.7%	18%	2.8%	6.9%		4.2%				1.4%	
Slave Row (460)	71 15.5%	48	6	8	1	3		1				1	
		67.6%	8.4%	11.3%	1.4%	4.2%		1.4%				1.4%	
Field Hands (208)	38 18.2%	25	4	2		3		1					
		65.8%	10.5%	5.2%		7.9%		2.6%					
Africans (696)	116 16.7%	51	1	38	3	13		1				1	
		44%	.9%	32.7%	2.6%	11.2%		.9%				.9%	

**TABLE I (Continued)**  
**BLACK ENGLISH SPEAKERS**

CHARACT.	ACTIVE VOICE (cont.)			PASSIVE VOICE				
	PRESENT	DEFECTIVE VERBS CONDITIONAL/PERFECTIVE	PRESENT	PAST	PRESENT PERFECT	PAST PERFECT	DEFECTIVE	
Fiddler								
Slave Row	1 1.4%	1 1.4%						
Field Hands	3 7.9%							
Africans	2 1.7%	1 .9%	5 4.3%					



## Discussion

Although Sir Eric Russel's intervention in the book is extremely limited (text taken from Chapter 103), composed of only 168 words, it is quite remarkable that in only 22 verbs this Englishman has used 7 different tenses. This indication of a superior handling of verb tense in upper social classes is corroborated by a study of Massa (Master) Waller's conversational speech. In a text (from Chapter 79) of a little over twice the number of words (384) Waller uses 65 verbs distributed among 16 tenses. More specifically this means 2.22 times the words in Russel's text, 2.95 times the number of verbs, and 2.28 times the number of tenses, an appreciable correlation.

The sheriff, however, in an even longer text of 417 words (taken from Chapter 83) uses fewer verbs (54) and divides them among only ten different tenses. But it should be pointed out that of these ten, the five categories corresponding to the present tense (simple and continuous present of the active voice, defective present tense passive and active voice, and simple present passive voice) command 53.4% of the total number of verbs used—a percentage quite comparable to that representative of the present tense verbs of the same categories used by Waller (53.8%) and by Russel (54.4%).

Further down the linguistic scale lies Tom Lea (text from Chapter 108) who in 46 verbs uses only 7 different tenses and almost as many verbs in the simple present tense active voice (52.3 %) as the sheriff, Waller, and Russel use in all the present tenses combined. The combination of those five present tense categories mentioned above give Lea a total of 60.2%—almost 7% over that of the sheriff.

Among Blacks the total percentage of verbs dedicated to the expression of the present continues to rise according to the scale of least linguistic opportunity of English discussed above. The Fiddler (Chapter 77), selected because of his close association with whites, uses 7 tenses and dedicates 66.1% of his verbs to the present, while the percentage of present tenses used on Slave Row (Chapter 79) in general rises to 77.4% (although the number of tenses rises to 9) and the field hands (compiled from Chapters 71, 82, and 83)—furthest away from contact with whites—use fully 84.2% of their verbs in the present tense and only 6 different tenses.

Only in the analysis of the two native Africans do the statistics defy the logical tendency outlined heretofore. Of a text of 696 words (from Chapter 61) in which 116 verbs appear, Kunta and Pompey use 11 different tenses dedicating only 50.9% of the total number of verbs to express action in the present, less than even the highest white cultural level. This variety of verb conjugation must be considered as somewhat

analous since it is precisely in the speech of the two non-native Americans where least proficiency of the verb should be noted. This may be partially explained, however, considering that 1) the text analyzed is more than 230 words longer than any other, 2) at the time of the conversation these two Africans had been living for a very long time in the United States (Pompey for over forty years), 3) Kunta, at least, in his capacity as the massa's driver had been in close contact with whites, and 4) the constructions with zero-copula which would normally be supposed to fall in the present tense category have not been included. Even so, the use of five verbs in the passive voice stands out because the passive has been used by no other Black included in the analysis whatsoever. Indeed, Fries found

**TABLE II**  
**TOTAL PERCENTAGE OF VERBS DEDICATED TO**  
**THE PRESENT TENSE**

	CHARACTER	PERCENTAGE
WHITES	Sir Eric Russel	54.4%
	Dr. William Waller	53.8%
	The Sheriff	53.4%
	Tom Lea	60.2%
BLACKS	The Fiddler	66.1%
	Slave Row	77.4%
	The Field Hands	84.2%
	The Africans	50.9%

no passives at all used in the group he considered «Vulgar», that is, with least proficiency in English. It is more probable, therefore, that the author in this text deviates from his normal stance of reproducing a conversation in language appropriate to its user, preferring to ennoble Kunta and Pompey's speech to give an idea of elegant African language in an English medium. In fact, «use of overelegant vocabulary is prevalent in African discourse and has survived in Black America in the form of exaggerated language or High Talk (also Fine Talk, Fancy Talk.»<sup>7</sup> Stylistically speaking however, the author never really achieves either of his two propositions: the conversation under study uses too many features of Black

English to convey an idea of overly elegant language (in white English) and too few to faithfully reproduce an actual conversation of two native Africans.

Apart from these considerations it is obvious from a glance at Table I that those tenses involving perfective, future or conditional auxiliaries remain basically in the domain of superior command of English. Even the defectives used vary more in the upper classes since that defective in most common use among the inferior strata is mainly «can» (three out of four in Lea's text and all but one — «couldn't», used by the Fiddler in the text from Slave Row — of those used by all Blacks but the Africans). Again this tendency is corroborated by Fries' study which found that the defective «can» is much more frequently found than other defectives in the group he labels «Vulgar».

As is clearly evident by this analysis the proficiency of verb usage corresponds quite directly to opportunities of linguistic education and, with the exception of the African-born slaves, adequately differentiates those levels of language present in *Roots* according to the basic hypothesis of the present paper. It should be pointed out, however, that the analysis of Black conversational texts here has been effectuated according to standard white categorization. It is possible that a completely «Black» analysis of the slaves' texts might have varied the results somewhat. Inclusion of «zero-copula» constructions, for example, most probably would have raised the present tense count to some degree.

Even admitting the hypothetical nature of levels of Black English according to social strata of the 19th Century, the combined analysis of Black speakers as a whole clearly manifests differentiating features of Black English which, at least in the case of limited competence in verbal conjugation, may be heavily influenced by an African heritage on the one hand, and by conditions of social ostracism (hence, limited linguistic opportunities) on the other. Thus, if we admit that literary conversational texts may be a fairly faithful reproduction of language differentiation, Black English seemingly warrants serious consideration as a standard rather than substandard dialect.

<sup>1</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, «The Great Black and White Secret», *Time Magazine*, March 9, 1981, p.49

<sup>2</sup> New York: Random House, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> New York: Random House, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Miami Linguistic Series N° 2, Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press.

<sup>6</sup> New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1940.

<sup>7</sup> Smitherman, p. 46.