

Linguistic Identity and the Role of Ebonics in African American Literary Experience

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Abstract

In time past, Ebonics, like other World Pidgins, was not given research consideration by scholars. However, in recent times there is a plethora of research in the area. Although, research by scholars in the area of its syntax, phonology, semantics and morphology is diverse, our task in this study is to interrogate the role of Ebonics (Black English) in the creation of a racist and feminist society like Walker's and Angelou's societies in *The color purple* and *I know why the caged bird sings*. This article explores not only the linguistic emancipation of Black English but also its role in resisting white power and white cultural ascendancy as well as male dominance in American society in general. The paper analyzes the peculiarities and characteristics of Ebonics in two selected female writings of Alice Walker and Maya Angelou and concludes that the female artists have recreated a new perspective to the definition of the African American Vernacular by innovatively invoking it as a tool for reenacting the Black female story. The study also portends that Walker and Angelou have emphasized their strength as Black people and Black females in a 'New World' rather than looking at the negative side of their dilemma. The focus here is on the language of Walker and Angelou, and how best they mobilize linguistic tools to convey meaning and portray linguistic identity. Convenience was found in a somewhat eclectic approach by borrowing tools from two linguistic theories, M.A.K Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and Noam Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar, though our main theoretical orientation is the Systemic Functional Linguistics.

Keywords: White dominance, eccentricity, Black power, stereotype, Black English

1. Introduction

This paper explores the vibrancy and vivacity of Ebonics as the language of Black Americans. Ebonics as an unintelligent language has been used as an unofficial language in literature and other forms of entertainment. It is unintelligent because it does not have a pattern or structure in syntax and morphological processes. It was first called different names like Spoken soul and Black English and so on. Ebonics is an expressive instrument in American literature, religion, entertainment and everyday life. Spoken soul is a term coined by Claude Brown, author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, for Black talk. This study examines the role of Ebonics vis-à-vis racial and gender identity representation.

2. Theoretical Considerations and Methodology

As a science, linguistics is concerned with developing theories that account for and explain the phenomena of language and language use (McGregor, 2009). Linguistic theories aim at offering a complete account of language structure at all levels. For instance, pragmatics studies the use of language in its social context (p. 3). In fact, for Fowler (1986), Pragmatics deals with the conventional relationships between linguistic constructions and the user and uses of language (p. 4).

Liddicoat & Curnow (2004) explain that, linguistics has increasingly separated itself from a prescriptive view of language which formulates rules for what should be said or written in favour of a descriptive view, which seeks to record the language which people actually use. They add that, descriptive view has led linguists to new insights about language and new ways of talking about and defining units of language (pp. 25-26).

Hence, this work, which analyzes texts from the perspective of linguistics, focuses on the linguistic theories

particularly for its analysis. This is because linguistic theories are much more efficient and objective than the terms of conventional literary criticism. Thus, Fowler claims that, linguistic analysis essentially implies a theory of the nature of language in the process of describing it. For example, the Transformational Generative Grammar is dedicated to accounting for what is universal in a language, while the functional model of grammar like the Systemic Functional Linguistics, allows for individual observations and explanations of the use of language (Fowler, 1986).

The Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) was propounded by Noam Chomsky as a grammar model, to account for the native speaker's ability to produce, identify and interpret correct sentences in his language. This model makes a clear distinction between a Surface-Structure and Deep-Structure and it is relevant in stylistics because the grammar model makes use of the terms, 'ungrammatical' and 'unacceptable'. These terms could be used in stylistics to mean deviance in the use of language.

Acceptability in Chomskyan grammar entails the extent to which a sentence allowed by the rules to be grammatical is considered permissible by speakers and hearers; grammaticality on the other hand is the extent to which a 'string' of language conforms to the set of given rules. It is assumed that a native speaker's grammar generates grammatical strings and that the speaker has the ability to judge a certain string to be either acceptable or not in his language.

Both acceptability and grammaticality are considered as gradient properties by Chomsky and are typically expressed with a combination of '?' for questioning, * for ungrammatical structures, a double ** for strongly ungrammatical forms and # for an acceptable form. This approach is employed in our analysis of texts in this study not to show deviance but the non-conformity of the Black vernacular with its standard counterpart, the American Standard English.

While TGG does not have a social base, its interest is psychological without respect to the sociological context. Although it is not appropriate for the study, insights are drawn from it for our analysis of texts. It is not apt for the study because of its emphasis on grammaticality and ungrammaticality which is not what the study looks out for in the analysis of Black English texts.

The Systemic Functional Grammar, on the other hand, accounts for the sociological issues surrounding the use of language. The Systemic Functional Grammar was promulgated by M.A.K. Halliday who developed his grammar model from his teacher, J. R. Firth (1890-1960). According to Butler (1985), Halliday's work is the most important modern development of the ideas within the so-called 'London School of linguistics, whose founding father was Firth. Firth believes that meanings were 'intimately interlocking not only with an environment of particular sights and sounds, but deeply embedded in the living process of persons maintaining themselves in the society'. Thus, Firth proposed to study language as part of the social process (Firth, 1950, p. 181; 1957a in Butler, 1985, pp. 1-4).

Although Firth's work was insightful in many ways, it lacked coherence in its theoretical framework of interrelated categories. However, Halliday who was trained as a sinologist related his earliest work to Chinese. In addition to setting up the basic framework of what was to become the Scale and Category linguistics, the early work on Chinese affords pointers to areas later developed by Halliday and published in 1950s and early 1960s. In the early 1961, Halliday wrote an article which sets out to what he takes to be the necessary characteristics of general linguistic theory.

So, while TGG accounts for the mentalist context in the use of language, SFG brings out the sociological context in the use of language in the texts and thus relevant to our study. The data are collected from Walker's *The color purple* and Angelou's *I know why the caged bird sings*. Both of which are African American female literatures.

3. Language Situation in *The Color Purple* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Various scholars like, Smitherman, Hecht, Collier and Ribeau who have worked on Ebonics language point out that, the sentence structure and semantics in Black English or Ebonics have been particularly influenced by early African tribal languages, hence the contact-induced grammaticalization.

Thornborrow & Wareing (1998) point out that, the use of linguistics in approaching the study of literary texts is useful to stylistics which is interested in the linguistic properties of literary texts. They add that it has become clear that the kinds of texts which lend themselves to stylistic analysis exceed the boundaries of what is commonly taken to be 'literary' to the explanation of how meaning is created in the text through the writer's linguistic choices and realization, and through the processes of interpretation which is undertaken by the reader upon the actual linguistic structures that are used (p. 5).

Language is the attribute of man that separates him from other animals. This is why Mrs. Flowers in *I know why the caged bird sings* tells Marguerite that, 'language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is

language alone that separates him from the lower animals' (p. 95). The African American Vernacular is one attribute that distinguishes the Blacks from the Whites, apart from their skin colour.

Consequently, we examine the contextual factors such as the cultural and sociolinguistic/historical background of the writers/characters that are in the novels to show how the Black-female story is recreated. So, as we engage critically in the micro/macro-linguistic analyses of texts, we also consider the context of use. For instance, the writers and characters in the novels use linguistic properties in context to reflect other sociological factors which surround their existence. Our analyses therefore are based on the contexts of language use— what Halliday calls the context of situation. The analysis is carried out at the various levels of language in relation to the peculiarities of Black English as pointed out earlier in the study.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 A Lexico-semantic Interpretation of Select Texts

The social approach to the study of texts means that the texts must not just be studied on their own but must also be studied in relation to their interactive processes of lexis and meaning-making of which they are part. This process of meaning-making Fairclough (2005) splits into three parts as:

- i. The meaning-making process based on the production of the text
- ii. The meaning-making process based on the text itself, and
- iii. The meaning-making process based on the reception (or interpretation) of text.

An examination of the sentence types and sentence patterns helps in determining their role in foregrounding the thematic concerns and meaning in *The color purple* and *I know why the caged bird sings*. In every language, the verb plays a prominent role in the meaning and structure of sentences. The verb determines the number of objects and limits of semantic properties of both its subject and object(s). In the placement of thematic roles, the nominal group (subject) of a sentence and the constituents of the verb group are semantically related in various ways to the verb. For example, the verbless sentence below has no meaning outside its context because there is no verb to assign the thematic role to the subject.

(a) //He/ black//= (Tep, p.29),

Expands as: He =subject [NG]/black= complement [AdjG],= statement→ imperative.

NG— He (Pronoun)

[-VG]

AdjG. — black

The verbless sentence in (a) above is also summarized as follows:

Subject (pronoun) = He

No Verb (Process)

C^d [complement direct] = black

The subject, *He* is supposed to be assigned the role of a possessor, but the adjective *black* cannot perform the function of the verb which assigns roles and because there is no verb to assign the thematic role, and adjectives do not assign thematic roles, as they are too weak to do so, there is no thematic role assignment in the structure. Thus, the structure seems ungrammatical. But this can be viewed as one of the peculiarities of Ebonics. Hence, it is not a violation but a feature of Black English. We may as well infer that the structure is borne out of spontaneity. Thus, the context of use makes a big difference to how Ebonics is patterned.

In Standard English, meaning is usually inherent in the combination of all the words in a sentence and any dislocation would warrant a proper attention to the context of use. The sentence (a) above, following the systemic grammar analysis of SPCA element, where the verb is an obligatory element in the clause structure, is ungrammatical. But it is acceptable in Black vernacular even without the verb, although its acceptability does not guaranty its grammaticality. This is one of the characteristics that make Ebonics unique. Thus the sentence is 'a transgression of the norm' other than an adherence to the strict rules of the English grammar. Other instances are:

(b)*How you? (Tep, p.32)

*How you? = question → open interrogative

(c)*He sad, he weak (*Tcp*, p.27)

Subject (pronoun) = He

C^d = sad

Subject (pronoun) = He

C^d = weak

He, as used in the structure (c) above is the *subject* (theme) and the *experiencer* that indicates who the adjectives, *sad* and *weak* (rheme) describe. The structures in (b) and (c) above do not follow our earlier explanation on thematic roles assignment and are only meaningful in their context of use. We have noted that Black English does not adhere to the strict rules of Standard English grammar, thus we can surmise that ‘He black’ means ‘He is black’, ‘He sad, he weak’ means ‘He is sad, he is weak’. So, the socially acceptable linguistic habit of the English type is what we emphasize here. That Black vernacular may not be set out for international intelligibility and international acceptability, but social-group acceptability which is what its purpose is, as an in-group language used for solidarity, resistance and creativity.

Moreover, in Hallidayan approach, there are two parallel and interrelated systems of analysis that are concerned with the structure of the clause. These are the **Information units** which comprise, **Given** and **New**, and the **Thematic structure**, which also involve constituents labeled **Theme** and **Rheme**. Given information means shared or mutual information usually found at the beginning of the clause, while the **New information** is the speaker’s focus or message that has not been shared with the hearer or the reader. Thematic structure like the information unit operates at the level of the clause. Thus, theme is the idea represented by the constituent at the starting point of the clause. That is the point of departure of the message; hence the theme tells the reader what the clause is about. Rheme, on the other hand, means the rest of the message. So, the following analysis portrays the Given/Theme and New/Rheme elements and other constituent features in the texts:

(i) //I /tap /the little ones/on the behind /to make ‘em behave//,but not hard enough /to hurt/// (*Tcp*, p.47).

m m m m m h q

(ii) //Those others,/the strange pale creatures/**that lived in their alien unlife**//weren’t considered folks//

The bold clause in (ii) above is a rankshifted or relative clause which functions as a **postmodifier/qualifier**, qualifying the word, creatures, which is the Head of the sentence. The Table 1 below explains the **rankshifted** clause in (ii) to show how Angelou uses **premodifiers** and deictic to describe the Whites in the novel. The clause is a racism inherent category which tends to describe ‘others’ in an unfriendly or distant manner. The terms *those others*, *the strange pale creatures* suggest some emotional or psychological distance Angelou wants to depict.

Table 1. Racism inherent categorization used by Angelou

Deictic/ premodifier	Thing/ head	Qualifier/ postmodifier
Those others, the strange pale	Creatures	that lived in their alien unlife

S P A

(iii) //They were whitefolks// (*The caged bird*, p.25)

I and *ones* in (i), above are *Given* elements. The reader already knows who is talking (Celie), and who is talked about (*theme*), Albert’s Children. But the *New* information here is what the speaker does to the *theme*, ‘little ones’. Thus, the verb, *tap* is used as the process which indicates where the action takes place. That is, tapping the *little ones*’ back (behind), and then what happens afterwards, ‘not hard enough to hurt’ (*rheme*).

In (ii), *those others* is a *New* information, having *the strange pale creatures* in apposition with it, thereby making it a complex NG in addition with the **that-clause** (a rankshifted clause), which goes on to explain the *New* information on *those others*. This means that, the writer expects the reader to infer from their shared knowledge of the *theme* that is, who the focus for the discourse is, for whom *those others* describes. By doing this, the writer tempts the reader’s patience before unraveling the *rheme* in (iii) above as the *whitefolks*. Moreover, the writer employs *New* information

first as against the Hallidayan description, but goes on to point out that ‘They were *whitefolks*’ in (iii) above.

Language is a means of representing the world, real or imaginary. It encodes human experiences and reality. The language of the novels shows the formative roles in which human experiences are based and at the same time, it functions as part of the reality which it sets out to represent or encode. Looking more closely at the linguistic representation in *The color purple* and *The caged bird*, we examine texts using the terms **Process** and **Participant** to describe events, things and the characters in the texts. Process in systemic linguistics centres on that part of the clause that is realized by the Verbal Group, and can also be regarded as the ‘goings-on’ as represented in the clause. Participants, on the other hand, are the entries involved in the Process. So, in the texts below, we describe the Participants and the Process in the novels to show how different codes interact.

(iv) My little girl/she/look up and [...] sort of frown (*Tcp*, p.22)

(v) I am sure Albert is still the only one to take mail out of the box (*Tcp*, p.112)

(vi) We are coming home before the end of another year (*Tcp*, p.112)

The structure in (iv) uses *she* as a pronoun in opposition to *my little girl*, and the conjunctive clause applies an elliptical subject to avoid the repetition of the pronoun *she*. The underlined words in (iv) and (v) indicate the Participants in the discourse. Nettie being the narrator uses the pronoun *I*, and Albert is the theme for whom *one* refers. So, Albert becomes the Actor, the performer of the action, described by the Process *to take*, a to-infinitive, and our label for *mail* in the clause is the Goal in which the Process, *to take* acts. In (iv), the elliptical subject is the Actor (the performer), *my little girl* and *she*, who performs the action *look* and *frown* all of which are **Material Process**.

The Fig. 2 evaluates the structure of Nettie’s statement in the letter she wrote to her sister, Celie. *We* in (vi) stands for Nettie herself, Celie’s children: Olivia and Adam who were adopted by Samuel and Corrine, a husband and wife who are the Missionaries of the American and African Missionary Society. During their sojourn in Africa, Corrine dies and Nettie becomes Samuel’s wife. Thus, *we* as used in the letter refers to Nettie, Olivia, Adam and Samuel.

Table 2. Actor, Participant, Process, and Goal analysis

We	Are	Coming	Home	before the end of another year
S	Aux	P	C	A
Actor/Participant	Process		Goal	

S A P C
m m h q
(vii) ///All the Ethiopians/ in the bible (sic)/ were/ colored///(*Tcp*,p.125)

S-aux C P C
(viii) ///He/Ø/ your husband, I say. [...] /Got to stay/ with him///(*Tcp*, p.67)

NP VP NP
S P C
m h -agr

(ix) ///White folks/ is/ a miracle of affliction///(*Tcp*, p.103)

The text in (vii) portrays the tensions that emanates from racism. The text is racism inherent and it shows how the Blacks try to negotiate Black identity by finding solace in the fact that Ethiopians in The Bible are Blacks. Nettie, who is so nationalistic like Marguerite in *The caged bird*, is optimistic in her portrayal of the Blacks in The Bible as she posits that ‘All the Ethiopians in the bible were colored’ which means that the Whites should not just think that all the characters of The Holy Bible are Whites. Text (ix) also portrays a racism inherent category in the novels. The text in (viii) has an elliptical Subject, *you*, the Actor; which is not expressed in the conjunctive clause but it is understood to be a carry over, as it were, from the first (main) clause. It is a straightforward case of ellipsis as we know what the referent of the ‘gap’ is, that is *you*. *You*, here refers to Sofia for whom Celie addresses.

Sofia is an obstinate Black woman who emancipates from the old order of the patriarchal system as she opts out of her marriage— that, which the feminists describe as ‘a domestic prison’. She renounces the traditional way of being a Black woman, who gets married, has children and caters for their needs, and who is beaten by the man when she transgresses or misbehaves. She becomes brave as she fights for her survival. In the text in (viii), Celie, who is a docile and unassertive, urges Sofia to stay with her husband, Harpo. She says, ‘He your husband.... [...]Got to stay with him’. Accordingly, the linguistic properties in (vii) above reveal another **racism inherent category** of identity.

4.2 Phonological Representation in the Novels

In this section, we consider aspects of sounds in Black English, examining closely their distinctive nature and how interpretation is derived from the texts in relation to identity. The study explores the phonological representation and the inventory of phonetic segments in Ebonics and then attempts a phonological description of the various features discovered, and how they relate to meaning interpretation in the novels. The features below characterize Ebonics.

4.2.1 Reduction of Word-final Consonants

There is a reduction of the voiced velar plosive, /g/ in most utterances in the texts. This is discovered to be a feature of the spoken language which Walker and Angelou try to portray. Usually, speakers not only in Ebonics, delete this consonant /g/ when it appears word finally. Labov in 1967 in a sociolinguistic test in New York City, claims that speakers are not careful to actualize or articulate the voiced velar plosive /g/ if it appears word finally, especially in informal settings. Thus the examples below portray this deletion:

/g/ deletion in *ing* word finally

(d) It need somethin? (*Tcp*, p.28)

(e) She like a queen to me so I say to Kate, Somethin purple (*Tcp*, p.28)

(f) I hear him mutter somethin to Mr.— sitting on the porch (*Tcp*, p.29)

As we see above, Celie deletes the voiced velar plosive, /g/ in *ing* word finally usually when the word precedes a consonant (not in all cases though), there is inconsistencies in the use of *ing* and the deletion of /g/. But otherwise, /g/ is mostly used when the word following the *ing* word starts with a vowel, then the consonant /g/ is realized and articulated, as in (g):

(g) *Where you all children at while she *singing* all over the place? (*Tcp*, p.34)

The example in (g) above explains the non-deletion of /g/ in *ing* word finally. This (*ing*), preceding a vowel makes it realizable, hence, our inference that /g/ appears mostly when it precedes a vowel. Our next section examines the other phonological aspects of Ebonics and it shows how this variety of English invents sounds in speech to mark its linguistic distinction and/or linguistic disloyalty to the Standard English forms.

4.2.2 The Use of Aphesis, Syncope and Apocope

(A) Aphesis: This is the deletion of an initial letter of a word, that is to say, the loss of an unstressed vowel or consonant at the beginning of a word. This deletion or loss of initial letter in a word is characteristic of spoken words where the speaker rushes over words and thereby deletes some sounds in the initial position. See the examples below:

(h) I ain’t worried ‘bout this fight. (*The caged bird*, p.129)

‘I ain’t worried about this fight’

(i) They *cuse* me of murder. (*Tcp*, p.21)

‘They accuse me of murder’

(j) He pick up a spool and hold it *gainst* the cloth. (*Tcp*, p.23)

‘He picks up a spool and holds it against the cloth’

The loss of an unstressed letter at the beginning of a word, as seen in our examples above, is an attribute in song-texts. Usually, this occurs in songs as a way of bringing in coherence, melody and rhythm. But in this case, Ebonics exhibits this as some form of artistry in wording, more so, as a way of relieving the speaker of unnecessary speech sounds. However, these are inventories in English language (and any other language for that matter) used in informal speech or discourses. Therefore, Walker and Angelou display informality in their use aphesis as it is illustrated above. Other examples from the novels are outlined below:

(k) *That look like it *bout* the right color. (*Tcp*, p.23)

‘That looks like it about the right color’

(l) *Now I see she stumble, *tween* the two men. (*Tcp*, p.50)

‘Now I see she stumbles between the two men’

(m) *You miss ‘em? I ast (*Tcp*, p.54)

‘You miss them? I ask’

(n) *Cep! he don’t never hardly beat them. (*Tcp*, p.30)

‘Except he doesn’t ever or hardly beat(s) them’

The following section presents analysis of the deletion of medial letters in words, which is technically referred to as *syncope*.

(B) Syncope: This is the shortening of a word by the loss of sounds or letters from its middle. Ebonics experiments consonant clustering in syllables in place of a vowel. This is exemplified in the structures in (o) and (p) below:

(o) *But what I’m *sposed* to put on? (*Tcp*, p.11)

‘But what am I supposed to put on?’

(p) *When a woman marry she *pose* to keep a decent house and a clean family. (*Tcp*, p.27)

‘When a woman marries she is supposed to keep a decent house and a clean family’.

Using *sposed* /spəʊzd/ for supposed /sə'pəʊzd/, Ebonics as used by Celie deletes the /ə/ schwa from the unstressed syllable [su/pəʊsd] thereby giving the disyllabic word *supposed* a monosyllabic character. Although, the /ə/ is a lax vowel, it is mostly deleted in Ebonic syllables with consonant clusters. Unlike most African languages that use epenthesis, that is the insertion of a vowel where there are consonant clusters, Ebonics deletes the vowel where possible by creating clusters. Thus, the syllabic structure for the word supposed /sə'pəʊzd/ = CVCVCC becomes *sposed* /'spəʊzd/ = CCVCC, thereby having the consonant clusters at the initial position of the word.

(C) Apocope: This is the loss or omission of one or more sounds from the end of a word. It involves the shortening of words by the loss of sounds at the end of the word. As in:

(q) *All needing *somethin* (*Tcp*, p.14)

‘All needing something’.

(r) *I may have got *somethin* in my eye but I didn’t wink. (*Tcp*, p.15)

‘I may have got something in my eye but I didn’t wink’

These features are typical in the spoken form as we have pointed out before. Thus the authors’ creativity is displayed here, as they present their narrations as though the characters in the novels are present, talking directly to the reader.

4.2.3 Substitution of /t/ for /k/

Examples: The use of ‘ast’ for ‘ask’ as in:

(s) *I ast him what going on (*Tcp*, p.25)

‘She asked him what is going on’

(t) *How many he got? I ast (*Tcp*, p.46)

‘How many has he got? I asked’

(u) *I ast Shug Avery what she want for breakfast (*Tcp*, p.55)

‘I asked Shug Avery what she wants for breakfast’

The three examples in (s), (t) and (u) above illustrate the characteristic way the past tense form –ed is used in English when it is added to a verb. Celie feels that the voiceless velar plosive /k/ can assume the status of its voiced counterpart /g/ such that the ed past form added to the verb gives the phonological output of the voiceless alveolar plosive or stop, /t/. Another example is as follows:

4.2.4 The Replacement of /t/ for v+ed

Some past verbs in Ebonics are represented by the letter *t* at the end of the word rather than the usual +ed affix. See the example below:

(v) *She was *kilt* by her boyfriend coming home from church. (*Tcp*, p.14)

‘She was killed by her boyfriend coming home from church’.

4.2.5 Substitution of /I/ for /e/

Ebonics, as we pointed out earlier, is used for creativity, resistance, solidarity, and so on, but environment, kind of education, commonality, etc also contribute to its use within the Black community. For examples, most Ebonic speakers use ‘git’ for ‘get’ as we can see in the samples texts from the novels:

(w) *You better git on back to the field (*Tcp*, p.34)

(x) *Help me git her in the house, Mr.— say. (*Tcp*, p.49)

(y) *Lynched people don’t git no marker, he say. (*Tcp*, p.167).

The section below analyzes the morphosyntactic structure of Ebonics by presenting different usages and meanings derived from them in the novels.

4.3 Morphosyntactic Analysis of Texts

The structure of words and sentences is described as the micro-linguistic level of language because syntactic and morphological descriptions are the smallest meaningful way of analyzing English structures. Syntactic analysis involves the structure of the whole sentence as a string, while morphological analysis looks at individual word structure. Angelou and Walker employ two forms of English in their texts. Although, Angelou’s text is written in her voice, she uses minimal Black vernacular to illustrate the way other speakers use the language. Walker, on the other hand, deploys the two forms to demonstrate class difference in her text. Thus, Black English is characterized by the following morphosyntactic features:

4.3.1 The Absence of the Verb *to be* [null auxiliary] in Continuous Action

In systemic grammar, the clause other than the marked copular will have an item classified as lexical verb as a constituent; and if the clause is ‘perfect’, it will have an item ‘have’ as a constituent. Also, the systemic grammar rules state that, an auxiliary must precede a lexical verb, and a modal auxiliary must precede a non-modal auxiliary, and that the feature [finite verb] must be conflated with the feature of the first verb (Butler, 1985, p. 114). Thus, in our analysis of Ebonics, it is discovered that there is a consistent feature of *null auxiliary* which suggests that the English language type does not recognize auxiliaries before the lexical verb. See instances below:

(1) *///She/Ø going/ round// trying to sing/// (*Tcp*, p.20)

S P A P
-aux

‘She *is* going round trying to sing’

(2) *///She Ø/ coming//with her orchestra/// (*Tcp*, p.25)

S P C
-aux

‘She *is* coming with her orchestra’

(3) *What Ø we gone do? (*The caged bird*, p.107)

‘What *are* we *going* to do?’

4.3.2 Deletion of the Verb *to be* in the Present Indicative

In these examples, lexical verbs are deleted completely and in this case the verb *to be* is what is deleted. See the following illustrations:

1. *///She Ø glad to go/// (*Tcp*, p.18)

‘She *is* glad to go’

2. *///How Ø you, Sister Flowers?/// (*The caged bird*, p.91)

‘How *are* you Sister Flowers?’

3. *///You Ø still a boy, // buddy/// (*The caged bird*, p.34)

‘You *are* still a boy, buddy’.

4. *///How Ø you?/// (*Tcp*, p.32)

‘How *are* you?’

4.3.3 The Absence of the Auxiliary Verb ‘to have’ in Continuous Tense

Examples:

5. *I *been* chopping (*Tcp*, p.27)

‘I *have* been chopping’.

6. *Us *been* driving all night, she say (*Tcp*, p. 133)

‘We *have* been driving all night, she says’

4.3.4 The Use of Double/Treble Negation

Unlike the Standard English, Ebonics deploys double/treble negation for negative statements. In arithmetic, $- + = -$, $- \times - = +$, $+ \times - = -$, and so on. This mathematical logic is applied in our analysis of the English language, and in Ebonics we find out that the above formulas are not applicable to structures. For example, *don’t* being a verb (do) contracted with a negation (not) becomes a negative verb used together with the pronoun *nothing* (an absolute negator), and an interjection/adverb *no* (another absolute negator), the result is a negative statement. See below:

7. *I *don’t* know *nothing* bout *no* others (*Tcp*, p.73)

‘I don’t know *anything* about $\emptyset$ others’.

8. *But he *ain’t* got *no* customers (*Tcp*, p.23)

‘But he ain’t got $\emptyset$ [any] customers’

Prescriptive manuals are however right to say that the negative concord constructions, as in the structures in (7) and (8), are not Standard English. But for them to have condemned it as illogical is what we debunk in this study. To think that the non-standard varieties or dialects that use negative concord are illogical is to confuse logic and grammar. As we have pointed out before, it is true that two negatives cancel each other out and give a positive/affirmative statement. And in Standard English *I didn’t see nobody* (with stress on nobody) implies that *I did see somebody*. But this is not the case in non-standard varieties. For instance:

Non-standard: I didn’t see nobody $\rightarrow$ I didn’t see anybody.

In this illustration, we have two grammatical negatives, but only one semantic negative (not). However, negative concord as in (7) *I don’t know nothing bout no others* and (8) *But he ain’t got no customers* is not illogical, it just happens to be a feature of Ebonics or other non-standard varieties that is not present in the standard version. See also the following examples:

9. *Lynched people *don’t* git *no* marker, he say. (*Tcp*, p.167)

‘Lynched people don’t get [have] $\emptyset$ [any] marker, he says’

10. *I *don’t* say *nothing*. (*Tcp*, p.[220])

‘I don’t say $\emptyset$ [any] thing’

The deletion symbol ($\emptyset$) used in the standard structures below indicates that the second negation has been removed. For the Standard English, double negatives [$- -$] cancel each other and become [=] positive or affirmative. As in the instances in (a) and (b):

- (a) ‘I haven’t got *no* power’.

This indicates or implies ($\rightarrow$):

- (b) ‘I have got power’.

But the American Standard English portrays the example in (a) as a negative statement which means (c):

- (c) ‘I haven’t got power’ or ‘I have not got power’ and/or I have got no power.

In sum, negative makings in English can be verbal or non-verbal. The verbal negation is marked either by a negative inflection on the verb as in *I didn’t tell him* or by modification of the verb by the separate word *not* as in *I did not tell him*. The verbal negation requires the insertion of the dummy auxiliary *do* under certain conditions, whereas the non-verbal negation never does.

Negators can be absolute, approximate or non-affirmative. Absolute negators are absolutely zero. These are: no, none, nobody, no-one, nothing, nowhere, neither, nor, never, etc., while approximate negators are close to zero but still

have a number of items. They are: few, rarely, scarcely, hardly, etc. and the non-affirmative items do not specify whether the number is few or many. These are indicated by the use of some, any and so on.

Moreover, this practice of double/treble negatives for positive or affirmative statement is not just peculiar to Ebonics alone but also to its host language, the American Standard form. Other forms that employ this strategy are those spoken in such places as North American, Britain, Australasia, Standard French, Polish and Italian (Huddleston and Pullum, 2005, p.154-7). The following section describes the character of *s* reduction in Ebonic verbs.

4.3.5 Reduction of the Third Person Tense by Dropping 's'

The reduction of the third person tense by dropping *s* in Ebonic verbs makes the structures not to conform to the standard form. There is no inflection in the verb and so there is no case assignment, and the verb which should assign a thematic role to the subject is too weak. It therefore violates case filter of the generative grammar. And in systemic grammar also, there is usually a feature checking process that ensures that the feature of the predicator (P) corresponds with its subject (S). That is, there is a Subject-finite agreement, which defines the agreement between the subject and its verb.

But Ebonics does not adhere to these strict rules of the English grammar, therefore; there is no violation as such. This is based on the fact that Ebonics owes no loyalty to any language, although it is influenced by other languages like the African languages and even the American English, standard and colloquial. See the following illustrations from the novels:

11. *They tell me the Good Book sayØ, when I was a child I spake like a child (*The caged bird*, p.34)
'They tell me the Good Book says, when I was a child I spake like a child' (Biblical allusion)
12. *Harpo lookØ at his daddy (*Tcp*, p.33)
'Harpo looks at his daddy'
13. *Everybody sayØ how good I is to Mr. — children (*Tcp*, p.31)
'Everybody says how good *I am* to Mr.—'s children'
14. *He knowØ (*Tcp*, p.32)
'He knows'
15. *She fightØ, she runØ away (*Tcp*, p.22)
'She fights, she runs away'.

Further, Ebonics drops *s* in singular verbs as a way of portraying the non-agreement that exist between subjects and their predicators, and/or its non-conformity to the standard variety. The examples above illustrate our assertion. For instance, Harpo in (12) is a singular subject, a name of a person, which should have a singular verb, but it rather has a plural verb. Everybody in (13) is a singular quantifier which always goes with a singular verb in Standard English but Ebonics do not recognize singular quantifiers or do not mark them for singular verbs. He in (14) and she in (15) are both singular pronouns that should also have singular verbs, but it is the same non-agreement habit that we have pointed out. However, we cannot say that this non-agreement feature is ungrammatical or an error, but a feature that is absent in the Standard English.

4.3.6 The Use of Third Person Plural Form of Pronoun (us) at the Subject Position

This might be a contact-induced grammaticalization, which shows that linguistic forms other than the English language had existed in the speech repertoire of these Blacks before they were deported to the New World, and there is bound to be influences and motivations from those forms as they meet with the new forms. See examples in (16), (17), (18) and (19):

16. *Us try, I say (*Tcp*, p.115)
'We tried, I say'.
17. *What us got to eat (*Tcp*, p.113)
'What have we got to eat'
18. *Us don't git nowhere much (*Tcp*, p.115)
'We don't get anywhere much'
19. *Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more (*Tcp*, p.118)

'We kissed and kissed until we couldn't kiss any more'.

4.3.7 No Concord (subject-finite agreement)

In consonance with our analysis in (E) above, where we pointed out that the Ebonic attribute of dropping *s* in present tense is not a grammatical illogicality but a characteristic feature that is peculiar to non-standard varieties, Ebonic subjects most often do not agree with their verbs. In Standard English, verbs must agree in number and tense with their subjects. Thus, non-adherence becomes a violation of the English language norms. However, since Ebonics is emancipating by claiming to be a language on its right, we can say that it pays no homage or loyalty to the prescriptive rules of the traditional grammar. Thus, the structures below explain: (a) the use of plural subject with a singular verb as in (21) and (23), and (b) the use of first person singular pronoun 'I' with the singular verb 'does' as in (22).

20. *I'd call her Mary if I was you (*The caged bird*, p.104)

'I'd call her Mary if I were you'

21. *Was you scared? (*The caged bird*, p.87)

'Were you scared?'

22. *I try, with the help of the Lord, Sister Flowers, to finish the inside just like I does (*The caged bird*, p.93)

'I try, with the help of the Lord, Sister Flowers, to finish the inside just like I do'

23. *You children is the most ungrateful things I ever did see (*The caged bird*, p.51)

'You children are the most ungrateful things I ever did see'

24. *She ast me where they is. (*Tcp*, p.54)

'She asked me where they were'

Notably, the structures above do not have inflections to case-mark their verbs, and where there is an inflection it is too weak to assign case to the verb. In English, there are usually irregularities so that not every rule is a complete package. For example, 'I does' in (22) and 'was' in (20) and (21) illustrate the inconsistencies in English where a plural verb 'were' can occur with a singular noun/pronoun in one instance and be acceptable, but in another is seen as ungrammatical. For instance:

(i) If John were a doctor, his people would be happy.

(ii) I was late because of the heavy traffic.

(iii) *I were late because of the heavy traffic.

(iv) If I were a man, I would marry ten wives.

The outcome of these inconsistencies is that, the undereducated users of English find it difficult to grapple with all the irregularities found in English language and so they are prone to these challenges illustrated in (i)- (iv). Again, in Ebonics, there are instances of over-generalizing the rules of grammar. One of such is the over-generalization of the past tense markers.

4.3.8 Overgeneralization of the Past Tense Marker

Ebonics uses +ed suffix in irregular verbs such as, *know* and *throw* by simply over-generalizing the +ed rule to exclude +ed infix and zero morpheme. Thus, for users of this form, the past forms of the verbs *know* which is *knew* and *threw* for *throw* become *knowed* and *throwed* respectively. See examples as used by Celie in *The color purple*:

25. *I knowed it was her. (*Tcp*, p.22)

'I knew it was her'.

26. *The man us knowed as Pa is dead. (*Tcp*, p.214)

'The man we knew as Pa is dead'.

27. *Ah, Harpo, say Mary Agnes, sipping some lemonade, I didn't know you knowed history. (*Tcp*, p.250)

Knowed → base + f (suffix) – plural infix= bf.

28. *They throwed out the rest of us, all us who become slaves, for how us act. (*Tcp*, p.239)

29. *Africans throwed out the white Olinka peoples for how they look. (*Tcp*, p.239)

This implies that *throwed* becomes:

Throwed → base + f (suffix) - plural infix = bf

Since in Standard English, most past verbs are indicated by the +ed suffix, Celie uses it on all types of verbs. She over-generalizes, may be owing to her level of education or probably because of a possible transfer of the linguistic rule from another language that had existed in her speech repertoire, as one who is an offspring of slave parents. Other peculiarities are discussed below, for instance, the use of double plural markers in some Ebonic nouns.

4.3.9 The Use of Double Plural Noun Markers

There are instances of overcorrection where the speaker applies both the general plural marker '-s' and the specific plural markers for irregular nouns at the same time. The morphological breakdown of the noun *mens* as used by Celie shows her inability to differentiate between *pluralization* by a *replacive* where the vowel [a] is replaced with [e] as in 'man' [*men*]. See examples below:

Grandchildrens, mens and womens

30. *Sister Henderson sure got some smart *grandchildrens* (*The caged bird*, p.15)

31. *Pretty soon a bunch of white *mens* come walking cross the yard. (*Tcp*, p.19)

32. *Young *womens* no good these day, he say. (*Tcp*, p.40)

33. *I don't even look at *mens*. (*Tcp*, p.15)

34. * Most times *mens* look pretty much alike to me. (*Tcp*, p.23)

35. *You know how long it take some *mens* to notice anything, I say. (*Tcp*, p.241)

See the morphological analysis below:

a. Mens = plural noun + s → base + plural infix + f (suffix) = b(infix)f.

Where the base (root) is represented by b, and f is the suffix -s. Also, using the labeled brackets to represent the morphological experimentation in Ebonics we have such examples as seen below:

[[Man]]_{singular N[-s]}_{N-aff}_{plural N[s]] double plural= mens.}

Instead of:

(1) Men= noun+s (infix, e)- irregular noun → b + infix inflection.

[[Man]]_{singular N[-s]}_{N-aff}_{plural N} = men.

These are double plural noun markings. If Celie had used *mans* rather than *mens*, one would have analyzed it as an error. Coupled with her under-education, she is bound to violate the English language grammatical rules for irregular plurals. But we can deduce from here that it is not an error rather it is what Ebonics offers her. In Angelou's *The caged bird*, Momma also uses double plural nouns marking like Celie in *The color purple* as the examples below testify:

(2) Grandchildrens = plural noun + s → base +suffix +suffix= bff.

[[Grandchild]]_{singular N[s]}_{N-aff}_{plural N[s]] double plural= grandchildren}

Unlike the Standard English form of:

(3) Grandchildren = noun + s (suffix, *ren*)- irregular noun →base +suffix = bf.

[[Grandchild]]_{singular N[s]}_{N-aff}_{plural N}=grandchildren

(Also see Booij, 2005; Carstairs-McCarthy, 2002).

4.3.10 The Use of Double Heads

*He your husband, I say. Got to stay with him. (*Tcp*, p.67)

'He is your husband, I say, you've got to stay with him'

Celie deletes the verb *to be*, the sentence portrays a unique characteristic of Ebonics. Following the endocentricity condition of the generative grammar that states that double heads should not be projected in the same governing category, the structure is thus 'ungrammatical'.

However, since our focus in this analysis is not in the correctness or grammaticality of Ebonics, we therefore accentuate its peculiarities rather than its violations. *He* and *your husband* being a co-reference to the same person

could make the structure ungrammatical, but it could be seen as creative (and providing an emphatic subject in the use of double heads). More so, *your* which is placed alongside the pronoun *He* is in apposition, and so it is a *pronoun in apposition*. As earlier explained, both pronouns refer to the same person. Thus, the subject's function is realized by a pronoun 'he' in addition with another pronoun 'your' as its Head. (Bloor & Bloor, 1995, p. 38)

Also, since there is no verb to assign a thematic role to the subject *He*, we can say that the structure is anomalous and has violated the Theta Criterion of the generative grammar which is that process of assigning thematic roles. Theta Criterion refers to the grammatical activity of spreading information from the verb (V) to its noun phrase (NP) and the prepositional phrase (PP) satellites (Fromkin et al, 2003, p. 195). However, with our analysis so far, it can be inferred that Ebonics does not make use of the verb *to be* as much as the standard variety does so that verblessness does not mean a violation.

The next sentence, 'Got to stay with him' indicates an *empty subject* category of functional grammar. The sentence is without a subject and so it is in the empty subject category of systemic linguistics. It is not a violation but a conscious deletion of the subject (theme) so that the structure becomes a subjectless sentence.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to analyze the linguistic emancipation of Ebonics as an evolving language used in African American literature. We considered Walker's *The color purple* and Angelou's *I know why the caged bird sings*, both of which are African American female literary texts. The paper explored the language of the texts, *The color purple* and *I know why the caged bird sings* in relation to how a world- a just society is recreated and projected by the Black-female writers through language. The article portrays these two women as responsive writers who sought to address the ills of racial oppression, gender inequality, class differentiation, and so on of their time and climes by strongly opposing to the prejudices and biases that set out to define the Black American woman's reality.

With angry reprimand and denunciation, Walker and Angelou try a redress of the Black female story in the United States. Using language (Ebonics), they both portray their noble vision of bringing the woman from the margin to the centre in their novels thereby recreating a new world, a just society, a utopian world for the Black female in Diaspora.

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