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African American Vernacular and All That Jazz: Cultural Representation Through Jazz Lyrics

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Abstract

Historically, the jazz space was greatly populated by African Americans and served to uplift their culture and make their accomplishments more mainstream. The origins of jazz song lyrics and their mainstream popularity as early 20th century dance music set the foundations for contemporary vernacular popularized by mediums such as hip hop. This study seeks to address the following research question: How are African American Vernacular English (AAVE) features employed grammatically and semantically (conveying meaning through words) swing era jazz lyrics? This study seeks to identify repeating linguistic patterns across various jazz lyrics to illustrate some of the more common AAVE features of these songs. The *Real Vocal Book* was utilized as a source for these songs, and five particular songs were analyzed and compared to each other, out of a selection of more than 300 songs. Analysis was centered around the common AAVE elements of these five songs, examining their usage within semantic and grammatical context, and where they were placed in the phrase/sentence. The study found that AAVE features such as usage of ain't, negative concord, null copula/sentence fragments, and perfective done were commonly repeated, validating the significant influences of culture on this music genre. Furthermore, more unique and individualistic elements of each song such as the scat vocalization "Doo-ah" were identified and commented upon. Ultimately, this study shed light on the roots of African American and jazz culture through linguistic analysis of the lyrics of classic jazz songbooks.

Keywords: African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Jazz culture, 1920s, Sociolinguistics, Lyrical analysis, Jazz slang

1. Introduction

Teaching song lyrics to learners of English as a second language has been explored as a means to better acclimate into the slang and everyday usage of language: "lyrics…represent authentic language material"(Werner, 2019). Additionally, this educational method is "underexploited" and speculates the cause as the "ungrammatical content" of these songs which marks them with "low culture status" (Werner, 2019). These grammatical features, especially in the song lyrics of R&B and hip-hop, feature "language contact varieties such as Jamaican Creole [language developed in a colonial setting] and...African American English" (Werner, 2019). This paper seeks to explore the usage of specifically African American song lyrics from a historical perspective; this paper explores song lyrics from 1920s jazz music, focusing on AAVE features. This investigation seeks to provide insight into contemporary song lyrics (many of which draw upon jazz music tradition) and explore an area of linguistic investigation which is described as "underexploited" (Werner 2019).

The jazz music of the early 1900s was an art form that uplifted African American expression by bringing it to mainstream consumption: "the language of the jazz world is neither the language of the jazz musician nor the language of the Negro people, but a fusing of the two" (Gold, 1957, p. 276). This language of jazz, and the influence of the African American people, can be seen clearly in the presence of AAVE features in jazz song lyrics.

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Ultimately, this paper seeks to clarify the relationship between AAVE and jazz culture through lyrical analysis, contributing to an underutilized practice of linguistic analysis of songs. Examples of the analysis include "aint," negative concord/double negation (e.g. "my man wouldn't give me no breakfast" (Leonard, 2006)), null copula/sentence fragments (e.g. "she long, lean and lanky"(Leonard, 2009)), and so forth. Other unique phrases from lyrics included scatting vocalizations such as ""Doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah" (Leonard, 2009) or unique metaphors such as "Brother she's a polar bear pajamas" (Leonard, 2009). Some lyrics are clear examples of AAVE, demonstrating the influence of African American culture on these jazz songs, whereas other unique phrases demonstrate unique, separate quirks of jazz culture.

2. Literature Review

Finder (2017) comprehensively reported the thematic elements present in jazz music through "literary analysis" but lacks grammatical and linguistic analysis, focusing more on the meanings of phrases contextualized by social sentiment and philosophy. This study contrasts traditional jazz songs with more contemporary ones, referring to their rhyme scheme and metric; use of imagery, symbolism, and tropes; and main themes. For example, while analyzing "Angel Eyes" (1946), song phrases such as "love is not around" or "my heart is gaining no ground" personify the abstract concept love and refers to the general mood of the song as "disaffiliation, deception, and disappointment" resulting from unrequited love. (Finder, 2017). This study parallels essays analyzing literature, focusing more on theme than grammar. In contrast, "Lyrics and Language Awareness" takes a scientific approach to lyrical analysis, engaging in contemporary pop lyrics. It utilizes a self-compiled corpus of English pop lyrics, analyzing elements such as non-standard phrases (including pronouns, noun phrases, negation, etc.) (Werner, 2019). Thus, the two papers respectively exhibit the richness of culture of the early 1900s and the potential of lyrical analysis; this paper seeks to bridge the gap between the two elements.

In *the Vernacular of the Jazz World,* jazz critic Gold elaborates on the importance of jazz vernacular as a "peculiarly American idiom" and to understand this, "a knowledge of how jazz grew up, who its creators were, and what kind of lives they led" (Gold, 1957, p. 271) is necessary. In short, understanding of jazz linguistic vernacular is an essential step into understanding a unique American cultural phenomenon with deep African roots.

At the roots of the jazz movement, there exists a "picture of a people [African Americans] in rebellion against a dominant majority, but forced to rebel secretly…to express themselves culturally through the medium of jazz" (Gold, 1957, p. 273). Eventually, through developments of civil rights movements and urban relocation, "[The African American] became more urbanized and the life of the streets peppered his language…like most slang, the jazz variety gains sustenance primarily from the uneducated" (Gold, 1957, pp. 273-74). The educated present the institution, the uneducated a more antithetical backstreet existence — which is true of jazz's major development in speakeasies and the backstreets of nightlife Harlem in the early 1900s and during the Harlem Renaissance.

Ultimately, Gold describes: "The language of the jazz world is neither the language of the jazz musician nor the langage of the Negro people, but a fusing of the two" (Gold, 1957, p. 276). However, it's also important to note that jazz vernacular differs from AAVE spoken today — though the two are interrelated in their development. Nonetheless, it's important to understand jazz music and culture's importance and relationship with African Americans in the American canon.

Walt Whiteman, an acclaimed American poet, describes the role of American vernacular as "not an abstract construction of the learned, or dictionary-makers, but it is something arising out of the words, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes of long generations of humanity and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground." Amor Kohli, a professor for the black diaspora studies, relates Whiteman's observation with the origins of jazz culture and that "foremost among its sources is Black vernacular." Whiteman's observation of vernacular as "close to the ground" and of the common people speak to jazz and black origins from institutionally removed linguistic slang. Furthermore, Kohli states that jazz culture is significant and "the influence of which on American speech more broadly cannot be overstated" (Kohli, 2023, p. 145).

Later on in Harlem jazz scenes, with the 1931 hit, "Minnie the Moocher," Calloway, acclaimed musician, and his team "judiciously omitted drug references (vital to decoding "Minnie") from the *Hepster's Dictionary* and later editions." Slyn Shipton explains this as "there were some aspects of jive talk that needed to remain private, in order not to discourage innocent fans and record buyers" (Kohli, 2023, p. 153). Thus, it's important to realize that commercially available jazz

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songs were often censored and did not entirely represent the true depth of culture at the time.

Jazz's roots in African American culture is further described thus: "jazz talk has been highly eclectic, combining black English with the jargons of gambling, prostitution, larceny, music, and dance." However, at the same time, legendary jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong has also stated: "Jazzmen have a language of their own, and I don't think anything could better show how much they are apart from the regular musicians and have their own world that they believe in and that most people have not understood." Indeed, jazz music and tradition are cabalistic and exclusive in nature, although efforts have been made to fuse them. The music itself is a cerebral and complex endeavor not readily accessible to the regular person. It stands to reason that jazz's verbal expression would follow this trend, "verbal expression of his feelings led the jazzman to "the edges of language." This fact, however, is not as well represented in this research paper and its methodology, perhaps for the reasons mentioned previously; the commercial censorship of jazz fails to capture the depth of jazz culture within mainstream jazz song lyrics freely accessible today (Leonard, 1986).

3. Analysis

The song lists for both *The Real Vocal Book – Volume I Low Voice Edition* (Leonard, 2009) and *The Real Vocal Book – Volume I – Second Edition High Voice* (Leonard, 2006) are utilized for this study; these books are regarded as the standard for jazz tunes and contain some of the most relevant and lasting jazz songs. Ten songs were selected from a list of around 300 songs. These songs were chosen because they contained abundant examples of AAVE features; they were selected through an elimination process in which songs with no AAVE features were first eliminated, and those with the most made it to the last round. This process produced the songs that would have the most content to analyse for this study. Additionally, these songs were all written around the 1930s and 1940s — the time period wasn't considered in the selection process, so this commonality may reflect on the prevalence on AAVE vernacular in jazz culture of this tine.

3.1 Usage of Ain't

"Ain't" is an example of reduction that's particularly common in AAVE. Some other examples of this feature are "don't" replacing "didn't" and "weren't" replacing "wasn't." "Ain't" is commonly used to replace "haven't," "didn't," "am not," or "are not" and can be used in "negative inversion" of which here's an example:

"Pilate they remembered as a pretty woods-wild girl *"that couldn't nobody put shoes on."*

In the underlined part, "a negative auxiliary (couldn't) is moved in front of the subject (nobody)" (Sidnell, 2019).

Out of the ten songs, seven of them used "ain't" in their lyrics: Ain't Misbehavin', Caldonia, Ain't that a Kick in the Head, It Don't Mean a Thing, Billie's Blues, Gee Baby Ain't I Good to You, and Is You or Is You Ain't My Baby.

In the song "Ain't Misbehavin'", the phrase "Ain't' Misbehavin" is used numerous times and is an example of reduction. The AAVE phrase "Ain't Misbehavin" may be reconstructed in Standard English as "I am not misbehaving" and "ain't" reduces the "am not;" ain't functions as a type of universal negative that simplifies differences auxiliaries into one. However, the phrase "Ain't Misbehavin" also doesn't include the subject "I Ain't Misbehavin."

"I don't stay out late
Don't care to go
I'm home about eight
Just me and my radio
Ain't misbehavin'
I'm savin' my love for you"
(Leonard, 2009).

The lyrics around "Ain't Misbehavin'" make clear the subject is "I" and so omitting the "I" from "Ain't Misbehavin" almost makes it appear as an afterthought or under-the-breath. This thought is probably implied by the lyrical descriptions, but it's repeated four times as a recurring theme.

Alternatively, the song Caldonia has phrases "ain't had nothing to eat" and "whe ain't no good" which reduce the Standard English "haven't" and "isn't" respectively.

The song "Ain't That a Kick in the Head" has phrases "Ain't That a Kick in the Head," and "Ain't Love a Kick in

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the Head" in which ain't both replaces "isn't" (Leonard, 2006).

The song "Is You Is, or Is You Ain't" has the phrase "Is you ain't my baby" in which "ain't" replaces "aren't"; this phrase in Standard English could be Aren't you my baby" and "ain't" replaces "aren't" (Leonard, 2009).

The song "It Don't Mean a Thing" has the phrase "if it ain't got that swing" which in Standard English is "if it doesn't have that swing" and "ain't" replaces "doesn't" (Leonard, 2009).

The song "Billie's Blues" has the phrases "I ain't good looking" and "And my hair ain't curled" in which "ain't" replaces "am not" and "isn't respectively" (Leonard, 2009).

The song "Gee Baby, Ain't I Good to You" has the phrase "Gee Baby, Ain't I Good to You" in which "ain't" replaces "am I" or "I am" phrased as a question (Leonard, 2009).

3.2 Negative Concord

In AAVE and a few other creoles, negative concord (double negation) is a standard linguistic feature where multiple negatives reinforce the negative meaning rather than canceling each other out. Though not as prevalent as the usage of "ain't," this feature was nevertheless present in a few songs.

For example, in the song "Ain't Misbehavin,'" the phrase "Don't go nowhere" could be interpreted in Standard English as "do go somewhere" as the double negative may logically cancel out. However, in AAVE, sentences can have multiple negatives like "don't" and "nowhere," which could serve to emphasize meaning (Leonard, 2006).

Furthermore, in "Caldonia," the phrase "ain't had nothing to eat" is a double negative because "ain't" acts as "has not" which is a negative in addition to "nothing." The phrase "she ain't no good" has a similar function: "ain't" functions as "is not" creating a double negative with "no." However, the phrase "she isn't no good" is incorrect in Standard English or AAVE. So, this example illustrates that the double negative contains unique combinations of additional AAVE terminology like "ain't" to be grammatically standard (Leonard, 2006).

In "Billie's Blues," the phrase "my man wouldn't give me no breakfast" can be broken down as "would not" and "no" as its negatives (Leonard, 2009).

3.3 Null Copula and Sentence Fragments:

Null copula (zero copula) is a feature of AAVE when a form of the verb "be" (eg. is, are, was, were, etc.) is omitted from its place in the sentence. This rule functions with the pronoun and omission of the action (Parsard, 2017).

In the lyrics of "Caldonia," observe these phrases: "She long, lean and lanky," "she my baby," "she got great big feet," and "What make your big head so hard, ma?".They are both pretty clear examples of null copula in which their action verb (is) is null while the pronoun (she) and the predicate adjective phrase (long, lean, and lanky) remains. The same applies for the phrase "she my baby" in which the action verb(is) is omitted. In the words "she got great big feet," the action verb "has" is omitted. The question "What make your big head so hard, ma?" omits "does" before the word "make." However, this example is unique because make is also an action verb though it can also be interpreted as a variation of the null copula (Leonard, 2006).

In retrospect, null copula was generally pretty rare in the 10 examples examined, though it was numerous in the one song it did appear — where it did exist it was consistent and where it didn't exist it was also consistent; the grammar rule of null copula seemed pretty consistent in the example of "Caldonia."

3.4 Perfective Done

The perfective done is a feature of AAVE, a phrase usually preceding the eventive verb in past tense (eg. - ed suffix). Some examples include "I done pushed it" or "Now I done give you everything I've got to give you." It can also function with the stative verb *known*: "Long as I done known you." It also functions with time adverbs (eg. already in "I done finished that already"). The perfective done doesn't seem to function with negation (Martin, 2018).

In the song "Is you is or is you Ain't my Baby," the phrase "Seems my flame in your heart's done gone out" contains the word "done" in a rule known as the perfective "done." This phrase was the only example of the rule and in the context seemed to imply a lyrical and stylistic choice and a grammatical one. The poetic turn of flame and heart seem to add to the

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coloring of the phrase to which the perfective contributes (Leonard, 2009).

Also, interestingly, the perfective done has been recorded substantially since the 1970s and records before that are more sparse. The song "Is you is or is you ain't my baby" was written in 1947 and may be one of the earlier examples — or at least in commercial entertainment.

3.5 Slang/Other Phrases

This section aims to touch upon thematic elements of the songs' lyrics through unique slang/AAVE influenced phrasing. While the other sections were more focused on the grammatical features (that can be generalized to the AAVE grammatical system), this section looks at the more individual aesthetics of the songs and the unique phrases reflected in them.

In the song, "Ain't Misbehavin'", the phrases "But I'm happy on the shelf" and "I'm through with flirtin'" are introduced. The metaphor "Happy on the shelf" refers to the shelf life of store products and themes of neglect or loneliness juxtaposed because the author is "happy" with this fact. The next phrase usually refers to the person being "through" with a relationship or person — or in this case, an action related to relationships. "Through" is acceptable in both Standard English and AAVE though it's less commonly used compared to other phrases like "I'm done with" or "I'm over" or "I've had enough of" (Leonard, 2006).

In the song, "It Don't Mean a Thing," the lyrics include scatting, a term when jazz vocalists mimic instrument sounds, especially during improvisation solos. The phrase "Doo-ah" is repeated as such: "Doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah, doo-ah." This scatting mimics the rhythm of the melody. This was a unique and prevalent practice unique to jazz, made popular by vocalist and trumpeter Louis Armstrong and is still largely a part of jazz tradition (Leonard, 2009).

In "Caldonia", a phrase that uniquely stood out was "What make your big head so hard, ma?" The former was already discussed in the null copula section but in the context, this phrase is brought up for its semantic content (meaning). This phrase is unique not only for its grammatical rules (make) but for the adjectives "big" and "hard." Though "big" and "hard" can be associated together in some contexts (ie. a big, hard decision). However, in this phrase the relationship between the adjectives isn't clearly defined as big heads aren't necessarily hard and moreover, the hard is likely more metaphorical, referring to perhaps a conservative attitude (Leonard, 2006).

Another phrase in "Caldonia" is "But mama didn't know what Caldonia was putting down." The phrase "putting down" is a part of Standard English in the context of for example a). Physically "putting down" a pen b)."Putting down" or euthanizing a pet c). "Putting down" or writing thoughts in the notes. However, in the context of Caldonia, the phrase "putting down" appears to have a more ambiguous meaning. One could interpret it as "trying to convey" or "contributing" or something of that variety. However, it wouldn't make sense in the conventions of Standard English because it wouldn't make sense that "Mama didn't know" that Caldonia was putting down a pen or a pet or writing notes (Leonard, 2006).

> "She said, "Son, keep away from that woman, she ain't no good
> Don't bother with her"
> But mama didn't know what Caldonia was putting down
> So I'm going down to Caldonia's house" (Leonard, 2006).

It appears that that songwriter romantically desires Caldonia against his mother's wishes and the phrase "putting down" means a semantic variant of "who she really is" or "what she was trying to do."

In the song Hard Hearted Hannah, the creative metaphor "she's a polar bear's pajamas" is brought up. Here it is in context:

> "They call her hardhearted Hannah
> The vamp of Savannah
> The meanest gal in town
> Talk about your cold refrigerating mammas
> Brother she's a polar bear's pajamas" (Leonard, 2006).

Hannah is described as a cold-hearted person or someone who inhibits or creates an air of coldness and meanness around them; the polar bear is a metaphor for this coldness. Cambridge defines Cat's Pajamas as old-fashioned slang for

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being "better than everyone else." The phrase "polar bear pajamas" may be a cold and haughty individual. This phrase does not coincide with Standard English grammar nor seems a reoccurring and standardized element of AAVE. Instead, it's an example of creativity and slang during the jazz era, which held aesthetic similarities to AAVE dialectal rules. (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

In the song "Is you is, or is you ain't," the phrase "is you is, or is you ain't" stands out as an example that clearly defies Standard English subject-verb agreement conventions. As far as online repositories go, it doesn't seem that the phrase "is you is, or is you ain't" fits into standardized rules of AAVE but is rather a unique turn of phrasing perhaps inspired with AAVE morphological aesthetic.

4. Discussion

Within these song lyrics, the consistent and prevalent representation of linguistic features such as "ain't," negative concord, null copula, sentence fragments, and perfective done confirms the prevalence of AAVE features within mainstream songs such as those represented in the real book. In a subtle way, the AAVE features in mainstream songs can be seen as a rebellion against "the dominant majority," by expressing the true roots of the African American experience, represented in the slang developed since the grim annals of slavery to urban relocation and civil right movements (Gold, 1957, p. 273). Furthermore, the presence of AAVE features within jazz lyrics supports the notion that jazz is a "peculiarly American idiom;" America has been home to diverse ethnic groups and cultures, and the linguistic representation of AAVE provides visibility to a widespread yet underrepresented community — African Americans. However, it's worth noting mainstream portrayals of vocal jazz can be censored for altered versions of jazz culture. In this regard, the AAVE features of the lyrics analyzed are the tip of the iceberg of a linguistic portrayal of the jazzman and of the African American experience.

Additionally, the linguistic features discussed above are utilized subjectively, and as Matyiku remarked, "negation…should be consistent across the sentence" (Matyiku, 2011). Though this study focused on the presence of AAVE in song lyrics, future investigations could also consider sentences/phrases that have partially AAVE features and partially standard features. The African American community doesn't exist within a cultural vacuum, and may be examples of linguistic exchange between AAVE and Standard English.

Furthemore, the most common AAVE feature appeared to be "ain't" which replaces another word, whereas less common features such as negative concord or null copula omit or alter parts of the sentence. However, the cause of this difference cannot be validated due to the smaller data pool of this study, but it can be speculated that altering the sentence structure may be a less common practice for spoken lyrics than replacing words because it is less jarring in the way it sounds and reads (the AAVE features deviate less from the structure of Standard English.

The analysis section on slang/other phrases reviewed unique turns of phrases under the lens of their context and meaning, similar to Finder's report on how certain words construct the sentiment and philosophy of a song. In "Ain't Misbehavin," the phrase "But I'm happy on the shelf" has references to a grocery structure and themes of neglect (Leonard, 2006). Thus, this song uses a metaphoric reference to a common phenomenon to set the mood of the song as one of a forsaken love. Other songs utilize this tactic but in varying manners; for example, the word "polar" in "Hard Hearted Hannah" evokes feelings of cold and phrases like "big," "hard," and "putting down" in "Caldonia" evoke feelings of physicality (Leonard, 2006) Similar to Finder's report, thematic elements of the songs of the study are reflected within the word choices of the lyrics — these thematic elements evoke more specific and varied meanings when slang/special wording of the time period is incorporated.

5. Conclusion

While investigating jazz song lyrics, the analysis revealed trends of AAVE grammar, which is unsurprising given the intertwined nature of jazz music and African American culture. Additionally, more eclectic and unconventional turns of phrasing — which may be categorizable as jazz vernacular — were analysed. However, jazz vernacular is difficult to definitively categorize because jazz slang comes from a variety of different cultural influences which is difficult to ascertain in its entirety. In the scope of this paper, I hypothesize how AAVE grammar and other linguistic features create thematic

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and semantic atmosphere of the songs. Analysis of AAVE features showed that ain't as a substitution for another word was more common than insertion/deletion of the sentence structure. Analysis of slang/other unique phrases in lyrics showed that metaphors and adjectives were utilized in unconventional ways to evoke specific emotions and themes. Ultimately, this study focuses on qualitative and precursory exploration and the next step in this research may include analysis with large-scale, quantitative data on the frequency of different AAVE.

For future study, it's worth considering that in the language of jazz vernacular and AAVE of the 1900s there exists a rich and unique culture of nightlife, urbanisation, and a myriad of other prominent factors during this time of American history. Thus, this investigation and further investigations may better uncover a unique facet of the African American experience as well as elaborate on the American canon in general. The ultimate significance of this field of study lies in studying the past to understand the future: the popular hip pop and AAVE trends of today have many of their roots in jazz cultural history and to better understand the American experience, a historical examination may be necessary.

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