

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 163 511

CS 204 588

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 TITLE Language and Stylistic Influences of the Black Folk Tradition of Black Literature.
 PUB DATE Nov 78
 NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (68th, Kansas City, Missouri, November 23-25, 1978) ; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Black Culture; Black Dialects; *Black Literature; Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; *Folk Culture; Higher Education; Language Enrichment; *Language Styles; *Language Usage; Literature Appreciation; Persuasive Discourse; Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

Because the style and language of the black folk tradition have contributed significantly to the development of the English language, an analysis of black persuasive techniques and black communication systems can enhance the teaching of composition, rhetoric, and literature for both black and white students. Some of the persuasive techniques of the black folk tradition include punning, language improvisation, indirection (a technique of sending messages through innuendo or suggestion), metaphorical image making, bragging, exaggerated language, and the use of words or phrases for sound effects. Forms of communication that enrich black language range from "Call and Response," involving a spontaneous and nonverbal interaction between the speaker's calls and the listener's answers (found in spirituals, work songs, and sermons), to sequencing of narratives or storytelling that is structured to explain, persuade, influence, or entertain (illustrated in black folk stories and toasts). Another communication system, semantic signaling by way of tones, consists of using vocal inflections and voice rhythms to convey meaning and involves a type of talk-singing. (MAI)

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LANGUAGE AND STYLISTIC INFLUENCES OF THE BLACK FOLK TRADITION OF BLACK LITERATURE

by Edward Anderson

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Instruction and teaching of rhetoric, English composition as well as literature could be more effective and could be enhanced if black language and stylistic influences of the black folk tradition of black literature were recognized and used in the classroom. The black language and stylistic influences of the black folk tradition of black literature are used widely as communicative aspects of our advertisements, commercials, political rallies, entertainment world (dramatic, comical, musical, etc.), religious world, psycho-cultural world and in some cases in our educational setting. However, teachers and students need to know the nature of and the effective use of the language and the style that has been and still is used in the black folk tradition of black literature. These teachers and students need to recognize and to use the influences of the black folk tradition language and style as these have influenced the linguistic usage by both blacks as well as whites who often take on many black language communication usage in cross-cultural communication processes. The black language forms have great relevance for our educational environment.

The black language part of the black folk tradition makes reference to the words used in the tradition, and the black stylistic part of the tradition makes reference to how the words are used in the black folk tradition. This information should be known by teachers in order that they can instruct all their students in producing oral and written compositions, in improving students' reading skills, and in analyzing and interpreting black literature and much mainstream literature.

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Elements of the black dialect have been and are still used extensively in the black folk tradition and are even being carried over into the compositions of our students since they use many of these expressions legitimately almost daily. Take note of the language of black folk tales, black spirituals, black verbal and rhetorical strategies. Language and stylistic elements go to make up the unique black dialect used in the black folk tradition of black American literature. This black dialect has a heritage and a legitimate place in the black folk tradition and many of the expressions should be recognized for their value in students' persuasive language productions.

When black people were first brought from the West Coast of Africa to American soil, they shared common cultural patterns which were rich in tradition and folklore. Their lack of a common language which came about since they spoke many different dialects as well as their fate as slaves did not keep them from expressing their emotions, sensations, rhythms, and imagination. They revealed their African literary heritage through a native gift to produce folk literature such as poetry, rhythmic songs, wise sayings, and through oral folk stories with a use of vivid imagery, figurative and metaphorical language, double-edged vocabulary and sentence structure. The unique folk tradition of black American literature included those literary types that are basically oral, such as black folk tales, black folk-songs (i.e., spirituals, blues, ballads), black sermons, black jokes and black verbal and rhetorical strategies, such as rapping, shucking, jiving, running it down, signification or signifying and sounding.

Almost all racial and ethnic groups have produced anonymous music and literature. These folk musical and literary forms are usually produced spontaneously and handed down orally from one generation to the next. Hence, in the transitional state, the literature or music may gain or lose parts of its content or substance. These anonymous productions may vary from place to place. Many versions of a particular incident (or oral story or literary form) may arise about the same time in various neighboring localities and clans. Lack of written literary form results in different versions of a particular incident, story, or literary form. Black folk literature had its origins in this same process and sprang basically from African and black American folklore, legends, customs, and traditions. When such folk materials were recorded, they were then preserved, thus preventing change.

Although it is worth mentioning the importance of some outstanding black folk tradition writers of black literature--Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, James Weldon Johnson, Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee), Nikki Giovanni, and Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones), it is worth taking note of Houston Baker's assertion that "to mention other black writers who have employed aspects of the black folklore tradition would be to mention almost every writer in the black American literary tradition."¹

Aside from this background material, the instructors and the students first need to know that there is the black vocabulary or black language part of the black folk tradition of black American literature which

¹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., Black Literature in America (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1971), p. 20.



came about mainly from a West African background. Black vocabulary of the black folk tradition often is called slang as it is used in the mainstream sense, but it is a part of the black man's ethnical language and cultural historical background. An examination or look at such works as Clarence Major's Dictionary of Afro-American Slang, the Dictionary of Americanisms, Lorenzo D. Turner's Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect, and the Dictionary of American English still will reveal a wealth of black American vocabulary words previously and presently in mainstream use throughout America. Some black vocabulary words came directly from African origin, others from inflated word vocabulary origins, and still others from African loan-translated words. Such words as "elephant," "gumbo," "banjo," "goober," "banana," "sorcery," "juke" as in juke-box, "tater," "cola" as in coca-cola, "oasis," and "turnip" came directly from African origin.

The black folk oral tradition has produced the following black African loan-translated words such as "skin" (give me some skin), "dig," "okay," and "mean" (taken just the opposite of the mainstream English usage). The black music world has contributed much to the lexicography of black English usage. From this black form of culture we get such words as "gig," "cooking," "changes" (going through changes), "hip," and "jazz."

Groups like the Jackson Five and the Supremes give a clean all-American image of black vocabulary usage which may legitimately be seen and used in the classroom. The Beatles are also indebted to black music for much of their vocabulary. From the black church and religious world we have borrowed such words as "shout," "soul," "Sister," "Brother," "Well," and "all right." Blacks, hence, have always used appropriate English for their own purposes and for survival reasons. Beginning with the colonial

period of American Negro slavery and on down to today, blacks have adopted some European forms, but revised them into totally unique expressions. Hence, black American's songs, poetry, folk tales, literary, verbal and rhetorical forms have double, hidden and some not so hidden meanings. Black Americans in early history and on down to today have devised a system of vocabulary communicative usage that could not and still in many cases can not be deciphered by the mainstream culture. This fact must be recognized by mainstream instructors and taken into account as these instructors seek to evaluate the work produced by black students.

It is worth noting by instructors and students that many black vocabulary words get into usage by the American mainstream dominant culture and, hence, they (these black words) enrich the general vocabulary of all Americans. Examples of this process may be seen as the mainstream culture takes on many of the black derived words previously mentioned and uses such black vocabulary words as "cool," "hip," "jive," "jazz," "uptight," and "rap." Yet black vocabulary is in a constant flux of change. Often when blacks desire to continue their use of the "coded" vocabulary and language with figurative, usage and rhetorical power, they change the original usage they (blacks) had originally assigned to the word. Such a case is the change of "hip" to the new black use of the meaning of the word "together." Black vocabulary is definitely full of images and metaphors, often with two levels of meanings, one Black and one White.

The black style and the black language of the black folk tradition of black literature come from the sacred and the secular combination. The instructors and the students must be able to recognize this in the productions of this folk work. It is evident from the African heritage that the spoken or oral word has the greatest value as may be seen in the black oral tradition of this black literature. Thus, the greatest performance of black language can be seen in the black sermon; in telling jokes, narrations, or myths; in folk saying and proverbs; in rapping in the barbershop, beauty shop, street corner, and signifying in general. The street corner black rapper (giving an outstanding flashy, exaggerative, dramatic and spectacular speech) can be found in Richard Wright's novel Black Boy who used it for survival reasons.

Although the secular style is used on the street and the sacred style is used in the church, there is no distinct separation between them. These two forms overlap when the preacher often uses similar type secular raps. This fact is evidenced by readings by black culture poets such as Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee) or Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones) before a black audience. In black music the two types overlap--black blues singers and black religious song singers, artists and performers move from one world to the other. It must be noted that the black folk tradition language and style were and are used by Rap Brown, Malcolm X, Martin L. King, Jr., Jesse Jackson, Benjamin Hooks and Andrew Young. Their speeches and writing show evidence of the movement from the sacred to the secular combination with influences of black language and style of the black folk tradition of black American literature.

The instructors and students of composition, rhetoric and literature should recognize that the black language and the black style that make up the sacred and the secular folk tradition of black literature can be seen in many elements or qualities of expression of the persuasive techniques of the black folk tradition of the black literature. The value of the recognition of this fact by the writer and the reader and especially by the instructor can go far in adding the dynamic utilization of this important material for classroom edification.

The first of these persuasive techniques of the black folk tradition of black literature is punning or playing on words and is often used by blacks in Playing the Dozens (black verbal game in which someone's mother is put down in a sexual context), in sermons, in political type rallies and in street corner raps. The next persuasive technique is the spontaneity of black folk expression. It is freedom to improvise by taking advantage of anything that comes into the language situation. Third, blacks use a persuasive technique known as indirection in which the communication maker has part by the power of innuendo or suggestion. For example, Malcolm X once started a speech by saying: "Mr. Moderator, Brother Lomax, brothers and sisters and enemies: I just can't believe everyone in here is a friend and I don't want to leave anyone out." Malcolm X is sending a hidden message to his enemies and is also putting them down. Image-making is another quality of this persuasive black language and style. It is an important criteria of black speech in which there is a use of metaphorical images and other kinds of imagistic language. Martin L. King, Jr. used many of these forms of metaphorical language in his "Letter from Birmingham." Many black)

ministers use metaphors and images in their sermons. Many black spirituals use images and metaphors to portray dual pictures and figures of the Other-Worldliness and the Here-and Now-World of slavery and black American conditions since the days of slavery.

The bragger technique is the fifth persuasive device used by the black rapper or user of the black language and the black style. He boasts a great deal. "Stag-O-Lee" which is taken from black blues and is often heard in the Toast form (long epic-like poem) was one of the greatest black boasters in referring to physical badness and coolness and one who can do the undoable. He was so bad that flies would not fly around him or fly around his head in the summertime and even white people were said to be afraid of him. (See Julius Lester's Black Folk Tales, a book which gives an updated version of this and many other old black folk tales in prose form.) Exaggerated language is also a black-persuasive device which is used when rappers (the black talkers or black writers) use talk with uncommon words and rarely used expressions. Martin L. King, Jr. once called a matter "incandescently clear." Persuasive tonal semantics finally expresses verbal power which can be achieved through the use of words or phrases carefully chosen for sound effects. What is important is for the rapper to make words sound good although the words may or may not make sense. Muhammad Ali often ^{uses} words in this black tradition with his taunting rhythm that predicts his opponents' defeats. Instructors should be made aware of the validity of the above stated verbal strategies used for persuasive effects, and they should take them into consideration as valid products of a rich black folk tradition of black literature that has rhetorical power.



Other ways that instructors and students need to know how and that black express themselves persuasively by using the black folk tradition of black literature are through the use of Call and Response (African derived), Sequencing of Narratives, Semantic Signaling by Way of Tones and Signifying or Sounding. In each of these forms there is the combination of the black secular (non-religious) and the sacred (religious) forms of expression and the dualism to achieve harmony and balance which is African derived.

In Call and Response black communication system there is a spontaneous and non-verbal interaction between the speaker's or writer's statements or "calls" which are emphasized or punctuated by the listener's or reader's answers or "responses." This form of expression is found in black spirituals, black blues, black work songs, black sermons (the preacher is responded to by the congregation), new black poetry and poetry reading sessions and political rallies and similar type gatherings. Many students' classroom work contains this communication process for emphasis in their oral and written composition. The Call-Response device is evident in the black work song "Many Thousand Gone" and "Foller de Drinkin' Gou'd" Richard Wright used this technique in the funeral sermons in his novel The Long Dream. In the novel The Invisible Man Ralph Ellison used the Call-Response process in its secular context. He used this form to tell the story of the Haitian general Toussaint L'Ouverture who led a successful slave revolt in 1791.

In Sequencing of Narrative one sees the story-telling that is so evident among Africans and Black Americans. It consists of slave and plantation-type folk tales (Brer Rabbit, John Cycle stories, hant tales, ghost tales, witchcraft tales, conjuration tales, preacher tales, etc.) in which incidents and events are presented in a black rhetorical form used to explain a point, to persuade believers of opposing views, to win friends, to

influence people or simply to entertain. For example, Charless Chesnutt, an early black American writer, presented the black folk narrative form in his "The Gophered Grapevine" and many other of his tales in his The Conjure Woman. In "The Gophered Grapevine" there is a character Uncle Julius, an ex-slave, who tries through a conjuration witty story to fool a white Northern couple into not buying a vineyard which has made him prosperous. Many of the black tales pinpoint the underlining ^{small} animals (or black persons) who are supposedly weak and who outsmart the large sized animals or enemies, usually the white representatives. In America today there is a black yarn spinner just like the ancient African counterpart. Some present ^{day} stories are tall tales, stories about God and Biblical figures, historical heroes and events in real life. Some black blues (secular) or black spirituals (sacred) present this Sequencing of Narrative. The present day type of trickster tales are the black Toasts which present the poet and the hero in a fearless state and tell the tale in epic form which shouts a "toast" to the bad (or terrible or good or excellent) character in pinpointing the hero. Some of these Toasts are "Signifying Monkey," "Stagolee," "Shine," "Sinking of the Titanic" and "Dolemite." Noted black poetress Nikki Giovanni in her "Ego Tripping" presents an outstanding Toast, thus elevating the Toasts above the barbershop, pool halls, street corner, and prison, where they are most often heard.

Julius Lester re-set the poetic "Stagolee" toast in his book Black Folk Tales, and it has the flavor of a legitimate form of black folk tradition prose. These forms of narration include characterization, plot, details, often related digressions, and outstanding verbosity which is effectively used to tell the story. Often figurative language, images, or symbols are used in this type of narration.

Also Signifying and the mildly termed Sounding are persuasive black verbal strategies that may effectively ^{be} used in the communication classroom. They refer to insulting someone, and they involve boasts, implying, begging, or inciting someone through the use of gestures in verbal play. Signifying refers to talking with great inuendo, to carp, to needle, to lie, and to cajole. It means the ability to talk around the subject while never quite coming to the point. It also means making fun of a person or a situation. Signifying is characterized by indirection, metaphorical-imagistic, humorous and ironical techniques and uses playing on words, rhythmic fluency and sound. It can be a one-liner or a series of loosely related statements or a long connected story. "Goodnight/ Sleep tight/ Don't let the bed bugs bite" is an example of a black folk rhyme song using the form of Signifying. Malcolm X on Martin L. King, Jr.'s non-violent revolution (referring to the common practice of singing "We Shall Overcome" at a Civil Rights protest gathering in the 1960's) said, "In a revolution you swinging, not singing." Signifying can be found also in Lawd Today by Richard Wright.

Semantic Signaling by Way of Tones (African derived) is another one of the devices of the black folk tradition of black literature that may surface in the composition classroom. It consists of a use of vocal inflections and voice rhythms to portray meaning in the communication system. It shows the use of the songified pattern and the musical quality. It was used by such people as Malcolm X (oral and written speeches), Jesse Jackson (oral and written speeches), Martin L. King, Jr. (oral and written speeches) and Richard Pryor. Sound is of utmost importance in the meaning of the black stylistic expression. The interaction between what is said, how it is said, who says it, to whom it is said, and the socio-cultural context in which it is said affects the listener or the reader. Hence, tone serves as a register of meaning in Black English and

may be seen in repetition and alliteration, play on words, rhyme, talk-singing and intonation. Talk-singing may be seen in contemporary black poetry in an incorporation of musical lyric and lines to be sung within the structure of a poem. Imamu Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) poem "The Nation Is Like Ourselves" is an example here. Haki Madhubuti's (Don Lee) poem "Don't Cry, Soream" is an example of how a poem is to be read and sung at the same time. Madhubuti's repetition of "change" throughout his poem "Poem to Complement Other Poems" shows how the poet seeks to get the blacks to change their reality and perception and gain a new state on consciousness. Use of stress and pitch in principal words in the black stylistic ways shows black intonation in black folk literature. Rhyme also remains important although the free verse (used by Giovanni and Madhubuti) is used in the black folk tradition and is more akin to prose writing.

Instructors may draw upon the black devices and techniques shown here for their discussions and for application in their composition classes in getting students to write more persuasively and in literature classes in getting students to analyze and adequately interpret literary works. It is evident that black students need to be made more aware of multi-ethnic studies, such as the black materials presented here, but it is also evident that white mainstream culture students and other minorities and instructors need to know more about the non-mainstream culture in order to prevent their receiving a distorted picture of the real American world. Hence, this does not mean giving white students black studies for the sake of black power or cultural enrichment, but it instead means that there are some fundamental cultural language linguistic differences that must be understood and that may be adequately used in composition, rhetoric and literature classes.

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