

## **African American Communicative Practices: Performativity, Semantic License, and Augmentation**

[Prepublication version. In *Talkin Black*, edited by John Baugh and H. Samy Alim, pp. 100-111. New York: Columbia Teachers College Press. 2007]

**Arthur K. Spears**  
The City University of New York

### **Introduction**

I am continually impressed when I return to Geneva Smitherman's writings on African American Language (AAL). Most striking is the holism of her oeuvre. Distinguishing her work and making it stand apart is its comprehensiveness in its treatment of a broad range of communicative practices in American black communities. For decades, her oeuvre constituted the most outstanding contribution to the study of black language use, or what we may refer to as black ways of speaking, or black communicative practices. Smitherman's efforts to shed light on issues related to language in the education of black students have had a telling, quantifiable impact. After years of not doing so, I began again to teach a course on AAL around 1990 and used *Talkin and Testifying: The language of Black America*. Reading the book again for my class had a specific impact: I decided that more needed to be done on black communicative practices, that this area was comparatively neglected even though AAL scholars were busily adding to our store of knowledge. The study of black communicative practices is all the more important because what most makes black language highly distinctive within the array of U.S. language communities is its speakers' ways of using the language.

The radical difference between the discursive toolkit of African Americans and other Americans, whites in particular, is revealed by an observation I have made numerous times. Often, at social gatherings of blacks and whites (or other nonblacks), all gathered together begin the evening and continue throughout most of the evening talking together. The talk is effortless and quite natural, in the sense of being unmonitored. There arrives, however, a point late in the evening when many blacks in attendance begin shifting into black ways of speaking while in integrated conversation groups. As this continues, the whites (and other nonblacks) increasingly fall silent, as they are no longer able to fully understand or participate in the conversation that the blacks are carrying on. The nonblacks fall increasingly silent in what must be confusion resulting from listening to remarks in English, the common language, but remarks that cannot be interpreted in terms of meaning, intent, and relevance because those remarks require a different communicative competence. These occurrences are strikingly instructive as to the necessity for distinguishing between linguistic (grammatical) competence and communicative (discourse) competence. They also reinforce the idea that the principal differences between black and other American speech lies in the area of communicative practices. This is one of several important reasons that African-American communicative practices require more attention.

In this chapter, I will make some broad remarks on African-American communicative practices and then on semantic license and augmentation specifically. Augmentation is basically the process of adding sounds and/or words to a word, phrase, or clause in a creative process of making what one is saying more interesting, more entertaining, more in line with performance. Much of the language involved in creative grammatical strategies such as semantic license and augmentation is considered obscene in some milieus. However, these so-called obscene expressions are not generally considered such by the African-American speakers who use them, as I explain below. African Americans live out their lives in the context of two norm sets, the Eurocentric and the African diasporic. These norms sets are not infrequently in conflict, as DuBois ( 1961 [1903]) and other scholars have noted. Often African Americans covertly value Afro-diasporic norms and behaviors while paying lip service to the "rightness" of Eurocentric norms. Increasingly, especially during the last forty years, there has been more sentiment in the black community in favor of black people being themselves, following the standards and norms of black culture rather than worrying about how European Americans see us. Indeed, how black people are seen by the outside community is determined primarily by the requirements of institutional white supremacist racism in the extraction of wealth from people of color and nonelite whites. The sentiment against self-censure is notable in hip-hop culture and its products and in the refusal of many black artists appearing on television and in film to modify their speech and nonverbal communication in deference to white (middle-class) norms. Increasingly also, black standards and norms are infiltrating general American, and to a lesser extent, global popular culture. Thus, norm conflicts that were once severe have now been significantly attenuated, where not erased.

The discussions below are part of my continuing project to describe and theorize black American communicative practices in macro and micro terms. Some of the most interesting and distinctive features of African-American English (AAE) grammar are to be uncovered in the kinds of African-American discourses that are not suitable for drawing rooms where hegemonic, Eurocentric norms prevail, but which are accepted without comment or with the satisfaction of those who have been entertained and enlivened by black talk. Obviously, those who do not wish to be exposed to uncensored language (i.e., so-called obscenity) should not read farther.

It has also been noted by a number of AAL scholars (notably Rickford [1977]) that U.S. black ways of speaking probably connect us more to Caribbean creole languages than does AAL grammar. It also appears that researching black ways of speaking is the aspect of language study that will most help us to understand the nature of African American culture, and not solely its relationship to other cultures of the African diaspora. This is so because in ways of speaking we best see elements of style and more broadly dispositions in self-presentation. For example, we note the remarkable use of **improvisation** in black ways of speaking, a quality that has been often commented on in writing on black music, cuisine, and playing sports.

The term *semantic license* is relatively straightforward. It refers to the freedom AAL speakers exercise in creating **neologisms**, or new words.<sup>1</sup> Words are units that

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<sup>1</sup> *Neologism* is used in practically the sense as Morgan's (2001) *new word*, which she illustrates with new words of rap artists, e.g., those of the artist Aceyalone (1995, *All Balls don't Bounce*, Capitol. 30023 [Cited in Morgan 2001]) such as *arhythamaticulas* and *arhythamatic* (Morgan 2001:201). The term *neologism* is elaborated slightly differently here.

connect meaning with form. The invention of a word or larger constituent—e.g., a phrase or clause--may involve

1. **resemanticized words** - attaching new meanings to pre-existing morphs (i.e., a form without meaning attached) (e.g., *butter* and *phat*, general terms of positive evaluation [the former preceded the latter chronologically])
2. creating **new expressions**
  - a. **nonce expressions** (words or larger constituents), i.e., a new morph and meaning to go with it (e.g., *emuscultation*; see below); these are created for the moment, not used repeatedly, as resemanticized words typically are some constituents that start out as nonce ones go on to become established new expressions (see below). Words such as *emuscultation* can also be labeled as **elegantisms**, forms observed in a number of African and Afro-diasporic speech genres. These forms are words that are seen as more elegant, impressive, and special and are inserted into speech when an ordinary word would be inadequate for the occasion (Smitherman 1977:45, Dillard 1972).
  - b. **established new expressions**, at least for a while, in a community, e.g., *edumacation* 'education', which has been around at least during the twentieth century. Constituents (not always single words) such as these are of interest for this writing because they were once nonce words, showing semantic license, that were adopted into the AAL lexicon, becoming established new expressions. These may become part of the transient lexicon, i.e., slang, or they may become permanent for all practical purposes, as has *edumacation*.<sup>2</sup>

**Augmentation** refers to the expansion of words in the process of inventing words as well as the expansion of phrases and clauses. In the former case segments or syllables are added; and, in the latter, words are added. In cases in which a phrase or clause has been augmented, there may also occur an augmentation of words in those constituents.

Obviously, the augmentation of words involves semantic license, so the two grammatical notions are interconnected. Semantic license, though, does not necessarily involve augmentation since an existing form may be given a new meaning. The augmentation of constituents larger than the word may also involve semantic license because novel forms are being created to express meanings that can be expressed using “plain” morphological and syntactic strategies. I oppose **plain** strategies to those that are creative, in that the latter stretch and play with the morphological and syntactic rules of

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<sup>2</sup> *Edumacation* often occurs in utterances such as *I didn't know you had all that edumacation*, in response to the speaker's learning that an interlocutor has a Ph.D. or some other terminal degree. Years ago, before it was common to encounter blacks with college degrees, it might easily be used by someone without a college education speaking of someone in college or with a college degree. This was the same period during which the expression *college man* was used, indicating that a man had graduated from college. (It's interesting that there was no corresponding term *college woman* that was used with any regularity. No doubt this ties into gender relations at the time: *college man* signaled marriageability based on class status and earning ability, the latter not normally the major factor in a woman's marriageability. Said of a married man, it indicated the social acceptability of the man and his family; a college-educated woman married to a noncollegeman could not confer the corresponding social acceptability on her family.) The use of *edumacation* conveys great admiration, envy, an effort at social equalizing, i.e., bringing down a notch or two the person with the education in that it gently mocks that education, and/or humbling oneself before assumed great accomplishment.

the language. The distinction here is not between established ways of speaking and nonestablished ones since in general creative ways of speaking, for example those showing augmentation, are well established. Syntactic augmentation can be thought of as a process that takes a constituent with plain syntax and applies creativity to augment it. The following examples illustrate the difference:

Get out of bed.

Get your lazy behind<sup>3</sup> out of bed.

The second example incorporates a pseudo-reflexive phrase, *lazy behind*, which fills in for an (optional) understood reflexive, *yourself*, as in *Get yourself out of bed*.

It should be observed that plain and creative aspects of morphology and syntax should perhaps not be distinguished except for discussions of poetics; or, perhaps, the distinction should be thought of as one that involves a continuum rather than an opposition. The latter way of viewing plain vs. creative would allow that performance-related creativity is present to varying degrees in most speech.

The example that follows illustrates semantic license with which a new meaning is attached to a pre-existing morph:

A: [parent] It's time for you guys to go to bed.

B: [child] Aw, we don't want to go to bed now, we're watching...

A: I'm going to watch your behind with this pan if you don't turn off that tv and...

In this example, *watch* is used to signify 'whip,' 'beat,' or any number of other verbs that might express a punitive actions resulting from the child's questioning of orders from the parent. The verbal routine exemplified occurs in the U.S. in non-AAL contexts with other ethnic groups, but semantic license is most extensive in AAL communities. Another example is useful. I recall watching the "Magic Air Show," the name given to a basketball game by several friends, gathered together to watch a big basketball game featuring Michael Jordan ("Air"), the most celebrated basketball player of all times, and Magic Johnson ("Magic"). At one point in the game, one of the men present said something about, "they got that emusculatation." It is ironic that the nonce word is so close to *emasculatation*, which was clearly not at all what the speaker meant. He referred instead to the players' use of the physical prowess their musculature provided to perform amazing feats of physical wizardry on the court. The speaker sought emphasis; he wanted a special word to mark the special occasion and the special, unusual actions he was witnessing. That he laughed along with the others who laughed at his comment indicated his awareness of taking semantic license.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In the community in which I was raised, and in the typical African-American community, *behind* and its equivalents are frequently used in strong directives from adult to children notably and in a range of other settings as well.

<sup>4</sup> However, he was probably not aware of the close-sounding *emasculatation's* existence as a word. Since its meaning is so different from what he intended, practically the opposite, had he been aware of it, he probably would have steered clear of anything sounding like it.

Often, the use of semantic license is similar functionally to the use of **phonetically altered words**. This set of words includes augmented words such as *edumacation* ‘education’ and *yoogly* ‘ugly’, which have phonetic segments that are augmented by extra syllables or more phonetically salient vowels (e.g., tense as opposed to lax), to consider two strategies for augmentation. Phonetically altered words may also involve **diminution**, for instance whereby a diphthong becomes a simple vowel, e.g., [hwaɪt]<sup>5</sup> becoming [hwɪt] *whit* ‘white’, also [wɪt], [wɪt], and [ɹɪt]. These forms are usually used when whites are around and/or when the speakers dramatize their mock fear of whites’ overhearing their remarks. Phonetically altered words are similar to words or multiple-word expressions used in semantic license in that it is a feature of performance in talk; they are also both possible features of improvising speech.

"Black style," "the black aesthetic," and "black performativity" are three terms, among others, that have been used to capture the set of significant themes that are found throughout African-American culture. The study of black ways of speaking can illuminate the broad area that the three terms attempt to capture, and what we may also refer to as black culture generally, outside of language. The threads that run through language use are also seen in these other areas. The various forms of black music—jazz, gospel, and rhythm and blues—have in their original forms made great use of basic black cultural strands such as improvisation and call-response in expressing deep cultural attitudes and stylistic constants.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, recent writings have extended our understanding of black cultural strands to sport, with significant attention paid to the currently pre-eminent black sport, basketball. What has caused the black turn is that black players have not only dominated the game numerically but they have also dominated it stylistically by injecting general black cultural constants into the game—to an extent that these features have become identified with the game and in some cases incorporated into its rules. Writers on basketball seem to agree that it is the injection of the black aesthetic into basketball that has helped it to replace baseball as the quintessential American sport—for after all, any activity that is quintessentially American is significantly black in respect to cultural traits. These strands or features are all connected in such a way that one automatically references several of them in mentioning one.

**Performativity**, for example, is very much in evidence in basketball and in ways of speaking, as well as in musical genres. By *performativity*, I mean the ways in which style and more generally the dramatization of the self for an audience that individuals infuse into their behaviors. Members of other ethnic groups (e.g. American white groups) often see these behaviors as inappropriate forms of attention-grabbing self-expression.

Boyd (1997) gets at the connections among various areas of African-American culture in discussing a “truly disadvantaged Black male aesthetic” that is seen in gangsta rap, as well as other African-American cultural forms:

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<sup>5</sup> International Phonetic Alphabet symbols are used.

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, once these cultural forms are formally institutionalized, e.g., jazz music in university music programs, they may lose some of the traits that tie them into black general culture because they have been divorced from the sociocultural contexts that produced them. They cease to have an organic, dialectic relationship with the society and culture in which they originated.

[basketball is]...in its present form ...an extension of Black popular culture, similar to jazz in an earlier era... (Boyd 1997:106).

Detroit Pistons teams of the late 1980s and early 1990s became highly successful by playing in a *style* that had clearly evolved from the *depths of black culture*... . With a style similar to that of gangsta rap, the Pistons [Detroit's professional basketball team] brought a menacing and aggressive, hard-nosed, no-bend, defense that many criticized for being too violent [emphasis added] (Boyd 1997:110).

This style of basketball recalls the ethic-aesthetic of the gangsta life as it is lived in lower-income black neighborhoods and celebrated in the rap called gangsta. (See also Dyson's [1993] remarks on basketball and the black aesthetic.)

Mentioning gangsta-ism is not to glorify this particular subpattern of black culture, but to note that its performativity, among other features, for example sartorial emphasis, ties it into black culture in general. Boyd's description of basketball above could just as well apply to crap, bridge, whis (I have never heard it pronounced with the final "t"), and poker games in black neighborhoods during the 1950s and 1960s. (This does not mean, of course, that every game of these types then or now is "aggressive, hard-nosed," and "no-bend" any more than it means that every single street-corner basketball game today is such.)

### **Directness: A Principle of African-American Language Use**

The project that Smitherman (1977; 2000, Part Three) has implicitly undertaken in her work on AAL use is a search for widespread features that impart to AAL its distinctiveness. I used the term **principle** (Spears 2001) in discussing AAL to refer to behavior that characterizes much of AAL use, perhaps most, but certainly not all. Smitherman (1977) establishes four AAL speech principles: **signification** (also signifying), **narrative sequencing**, **call-response**, and **tonal semantics**.<sup>7</sup> All of the speech principles Smitherman discusses are interconnected. For example, in narrative sequencing, one may witness call-response, tonal semantics, and signification. The speech principle that I have discussed (Spears 2001), directness,<sup>8</sup> is related to Smitherman's four principles. Thus, tonal semantics may be used in directness, for example, and directness frequently characterizes narrative sequencing and the import (interpretation) of call-response, in song, in church, wherever. Signification, as other African-American speech genres (e.g., reading a person and playing the dozens) is direct by its very nature (Spears 2001).

Direct speech is identified on the basis of form (sounds, words, etc. that are used), content (what is said in terms of its dictionary meaning and in terms of its intended

<sup>7</sup> Tonal semantics refers to the affective/emotive meanings conveyed by the manipulation of the voice's pitch, timber, volume, tempo, and other paralinguistic (not part of language) features. Tonal semantics is witnessed notably in the talk-singing that occurs during the traditional African-American sermon. See Smitherman 1977:134ff. Narrative sequencing refers to the penchant in black discourse for telling a story (real or hypothetical) to make an abstract observation or to make a point (Smitherman 1977: 147ff).

<sup>8</sup> I have been using the term for some time. However, I should note that Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) use the term in referring basically to the same phenomenon, though in a somewhat different sense.

function and actual function, i.e., its perlocutionary force), topic (subject matter that is verbalized), and context of utterance, which is necessary to determine whether directness occurs and, if so, what it means. **Directness** is characterized by some combination of candor, aggressiveness, negative criticism, dysphemism, abuse, conflict, and obscenity, all used often consciously in the creation of interpersonal drama. The deploying of directness is frequently a performance, with an audience and with the nonverbal gesticulations often associated with performance. It is important to note that it is practically impossible to speak of directness without using culturally loaded, biased terms, ones which have the effect of imparting a biased, negative cast to directness. Directness can actually have a number of functions, ranging from positive ones (e.g., compliments) all the way to negative ones (e.g., upbraiding and insults).

Smitherman (1977) and other AAL scholars (e.g., Mitchell-Kernan 1970, Morgan 1998) have discussed what is referred to as **indirection** or indirectness, which should not be taken as the opposite of directness as used herein. Indirection occurs when a speaker makes comments that require knowledge of audience and social setting for their interpretation, which may seem purposefully ambiguous on a more superficial level but which is practically unambiguous given the knowledge that speech event participants have. Indirect speech may be direct if its interpretation is linked, for example, to insult. (See Spears 2001 and Morgan 1998 for a discussion of these and related terms.)

One of the ways that performance is created in the use of directness is by making remarks in a creative way instead of using just a plain statement, in the sense elaborated above. In augmentation, syntax is complexified by adding words to it and putting into it circumlocutions that in many instances involve so-called obscenity.

I write “so-called obscenity” because many expressions that are considered obscene by community outsiders actually are not so considered by insiders. The reason is that obscenity is obscenity as a result of community norms. What is considered obscene in some communities is not necessarily considered obscene in others. For example, the word *bloody*, which is considered a swear word usually in Great Britain and former and current British Commonwealth nations, is not labeled an obscenity in the U.S. Discussions of obscenity typically assume hegemonic language norms to reign across many social contexts in which they are not actually in effect.

The real issue is how we deal with different language norms within different communities, even within the same society. At issue also is the question of power: how do we classify dominant-society censured types of language that are not considered controversial or obscene by those outside the mainstream or those who are members of groups stigmatized by the mainstream? Whose norms are to prevail? The position that I have taken (Spears 1998) is that we have to consider context and interlocutors before labeling expressions as obscene. Thus, for example, if some speakers use *bitch* as a perfectly unremarkable term for ‘female,’ when making positive, neutral, and negative comments about females, or as terms of address for close relatives and friends (as happens in many if not most African-American youth speech contexts), then it is pointless to consider *bitch* obscene in those contexts. In such a case, the word has been **neutralized**: it no longer carries inherently any negative traits associated with obscenity. Once neutralized in some contexts, so-called obscene expressions may become neutralized in all or almost all the full range of speaking contexts in which members of certain social groups find themselves. In other words, they carry such expressions with

them virtually everywhere they go, using them un-selfconsciously and attaching no special significance to them. In these cases, the expressions have been **normalized**. This is what has happened with *nigga*,<sup>9</sup> which has always been neutralized in some speech situations in African-American communities.

The normalization of uncensored expressions is hardly unique to the black community. It occurs with more and more frequency throughout the U.S., Europe, and other areas of the world, though it is perhaps more reported on in its occurrence in the first two areas. It is part of the general postmodern phenomenon whereby language and other behaviors once restricted to a limited set of social settings today may be found across a wide range of social settings.<sup>10</sup> To the opera we may wear jeans and sneakers, formal evening wear, or shorts, the weather permitting. This range of clothing was unheard of fifty years ago. In our newer buildings we see stylistic eclecticism, with remembrances and borrowings from the past mixed in with the new. Nudity, once restricted to the bedroom, if found even there, the locker room, and underground, X-rated films, today occurs in a wide range of social contexts. One important feature of postmodernism is choice—a wider range of possible choices, which leads to the dismantling of boundaries.

We see this process of widening choices and disappearing boundaries, fragmentation and displacement to new settings and configurations in communicative practices also, as increasingly language that was once bounded within specific social settings has now become a possibility for the drawing room—and the classroom. We are seeing "a new way of talkin'," as stated in the traditional African-American gospel song that Smitherman has invoked more than once. As once highly restricted expressions travel to a much broader range of social settings, these expressions often lose their capacity to shock and become ordinary, unremarkable terms. Stated differently, expressions once considered unfit for most social settings may in certain communities come to be used commonly in the full range or almost the full range of social situations. These expressions, as noted above, become *normalized*.

### **Towards a Grammar of Augmentation**

In this section, I present some of the basics of the grammar of augmentation, which comprises a set of grammatical mechanisms through which directness is expressed. Another way of stating this is that much of the directness communicated in African-American discourse is done so through grammatical strategies making use of augmentation. Thus, directness cannot be fully analyzed without considering augmentation.

The word most frequently employed in augments is *ass* and equivalents such as *booty*, *behind* and metonyms such as *asshole* and *butthole*. There are three basic types of

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<sup>9</sup> I spell it *n-i-g-g-a* to distinguish it from *n-i-g-g-e-r*, which is associated with whites and has a different meaning, and as of late, a different referent also since *nigga* is nowadays used by some American English speakers to refer to nonblacks. Note, however, that *nigger* is sometimes pronounced as *nigga* and as *nigra*, by southern whites for example. So, the issue of which of these two etymologically related words is the one that one may hear in a specific speech situation is not always easy to determine. The social settings and participants are key for identification. For further discussion, see Spears 1998 and Kennedy 2002.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent discussion of postmodernism and post-structuralism, see Sarup 1989.

augment: those containing (1) pseudo reflexives, (2) pseudo (nonreflexive) pronouns, and (3) compound *ass*, or discourse *ass* (the term used in Spears 1998).

1. pseudo reflexives, where normally a bodypart word in phrases of varying lengths substitutes for a reflexive pronoun, e.g.,

(1) Get your lazy ass out of bed.

Cf. Get out of bed/ Get yourself out of bed

The body part word used in such expressions depends on the discourse context; the body part word must be relevant in some way to the situation. Thus,

(2) Get your frog eyes out of here—what are you looking at?

Cf. Get (yourself) out of here... .

In the case of ex. 2, the issue is someone's looking where they shouldn't be looking, so it is appropriate to use *eyes* in this sentence.

2. pseudo (nonreflexive) pronouns substitute for a noun or pronoun, e.g.,

(3) His ass gone be sorry

Cf. He gone be sorry.

(4) I saw her ass yesterday.

Cf. I saw her yesterday.

(5) I saw him give it to her ass.

Cf. I saw him give it to her.

(6) I peeped ('saw') her going in the club with his ass.

Cf. I peeped her going in the club with him.

(7) He'll do anything for her ass.

Cf. He'll do anything for her.

These forms also occur in double-object constructions (with a direct and indirect object):

(8) Sheila saw him give her ass that ring.

Cf. Sheila saw him give her that ring.

*Ass* compounds, unlike pseudo reflexives and pseudo pronouns,

a. allow only the word *ass*

b. may have inanimate referents

c. must be followed by a noun (including *self/selves*)

3. *Ass* compounds have a semantically bleached *ass* in them. The *ass* in these expressions does not refer to the anatomy; its meaning is grammatical rather than lexical. It is a discourse marker, an expressive element explicitly marking a discourse as direct and/or heightening the poetic and performance character of what is said.

The following examples illustrate points a-c concerning *ass* compounds:

- (9) Get all that ugly-ass junk out of here.  
Cf. Get all that ugly junk out of here.
- (10)a. \*Get all that ugly-butt junk out of here.  
d. \*Get all that ugly-asshole junk out of here.  
e. \*Get all that ugly-behind junk out of here.  
f. \*Get all that ugly-eyed junk out of here.

Demonstrating point c requires clarifying the distinction between compound *ass* and anatomical *ass*, with which a person's actual buttocks is referred to. Compound *ass* is semantically abstract and thus no longer references the body in any literal way. Indeed, that is one reason why it can be used in referring to inanimate objects, e.g., *Get all that ugly-ass junk off the wall*. It can also be used in cases in which the morpheme(s) with which it is compounded cannot refer to buttocks, e.g.,

- (11) Look at that smart-ass nigga. (=Look at that smart nigga.)

*Smart* is an adjective that cannot refer to buttocks, but in the case of an adjective that could, there can be ambiguity between compound and anatomical *ass*:

- (12) Look at that fat ass idiot.

In ex. 12 I have not inserted a hyphen, which I use herein to indicate that compound *ass* occurs. Ex. 12 could have compound *ass*, indicating that the individual is fat, while expressing nothing concerning the individual's posterior. Alternatively, the sentence could explicitly reference the individual's anatomy. This sentence's ambiguity stems from the fact that *fat* can be used to describe the whole body or the body part in question.

The past tense suffix *-ed* provides another way (in my vernacular) of disambiguating the two *ass* words. Compound *ass* cannot occur with the suffix (ex. 14) while anatomical *ass* expressions can (ex. 17, where the hyphen does not occur):

- (13) Look at that smart-ass idiot.  
(14) \*Look at that smart-assed idiot.

but,

- (15) Look at that fat-ass idiot.  
(16) \*Look at that fat-assed idiot.  
(17) Look at that fat assed idiot. (*fat-assed* would normally be written with a hyphen, but I am using hyphens with compound *ass* only in order to distinguish

expressions with it from those with anatomical *ass*)

In my vernacular, ex. 16 would have to be interpreted as anatomical. Notice that other anatomical expressions usually require the *-ed* suffix:

- (18) a. Look at that cross eyed fool.  
 b. \*Look at that cross eye fool.  
 c. Look at that pigeon toed fool.  
 d. \*Look at that pigeon toe fool.

but, others do not. Observe that there is variation among speakers as to which body part words require the *-ed* suffix.

- (19) a. Look at that big headed fool.  
 b. Look at that big head fool.  
 c. Look at that big leg idiot.  
 d. Look at that big legged idiot.

Point c, that *ass* compounds must be following by a noun, is illustrated below:

- (20) a. \*John is trifling-ass  
 b. \*John is bitch-ass.  
 c. \*John is jive-ass ('insincere')

- (21) a. \*John is a trifling-ass  
 b. \*John is a bitch-ass  
 c. \*John is a jive-ass.

Note that an *ass* compound cannot be grammatical whether it is construed as an adjective, without any determiners as in exx. 20, or as a noun, with a determiner, as exemplified in exx. 21. These examples have an actual adjective in the *ass* compound, but note that in the following examples, *ass* is compounded with a noun, *bitch*. Therefore, the syntactic category (part of speech) of the word in the compound does not affect its grammaticality in cases where there is no noun following the compound.

Ungrammaticality without a following noun is quite independent of the part(s) of speech appearing in the compound.

- (22) a. John is a trifling-ass idiot.  
 b. John is a bitch-ass idiot.  
 c. John is a jive-ass idiot.

- (23) a. \*Look at that trifling-ass.

- b. \*Look at that bitch-ass.
  - c. \*Look at that jive-ass.
- (24) a. Look at that trifling-ass idiot.
- b. Look at that bitch-ass idiot.
  - c. Look at that jive-ass idiot.

All three of the augment types may be self-referential. This is expected because they may be used in making positive remarks or to present a referent positively, as below (whether the overall remark is positive or not):

- (25) You know, I am one fine-ass muthafucka. (*ass* compound)
- (26) You know they gone pick his ass because he's got the qualifications. (pseudo pronoun)
- (27) You need to get your fine ass out of this hole ('dive'). (pseudo reflexive)

### Conclusion

As with some other African-American communicative practices, augmentation is not found only in African-American speech. It is found in the speech of other communities, but not nearly to the same extent nor with the full range of grammatical strategies that are found in AAE. It is well known that style involves not only words and expressions, but also morphology and syntax. Some morphemes and some syntactic constructions are restricted to certain styles of speech, for example, the second subjunctive *were* in the following sentence, as well as the alternative *if/then* construction in which the verb in the hypostasis is inverted with that clause's subject:

- (28) Were I you, I would leave immediately.

We cannot say that augmentation is restricted to directness although it is quite closely associated with directness. Augmentation provides the perfect expressive vehicle for expressing direct content and for displaying creativity, both in the grammatical sense discussed above and in the sense that applies to performativity and improvisation. Augmentation is one of the key resources in AAL that allows speakers to improvise in the production of jazz discourse, the talking equivalent of jazz music.

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