LITERARY USE OF DIALECT: CASE OF WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

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ABSTRACT

There seems to be consensus that representation of naturally occurring speech varieties in literature has always been of perennial interest to many writers who endeavor to infuse flavor to their works by dint of multifarious dialectal idiosyncrasies. This idea is broadly reverberated in literature, inasmuch as authors often tend to render their works, in letter and spirit, realistic through endowing their characters with speech, which arguably, fits into their social environment. Hence, this paper offers a ready laboratory specimen for investigating different linguistic features of vernacular African American English (AAE) used by Walker as her characters' talk in *The Color Purple* (1982). In pursuit of this stated intent, the present paper attempts to conduct a rigorous analysis that accounts for Walker's linguistic choices, particularly, at the phonological and grammatical levels. Correspondingly, a corpus-based approach is used to analyze dialectal data used by dialect characters in specific patches of dialogues by means of computer-aided analysis. Therefore, this paper intends to extract and analyze a large corpus of attested dialect data from a computer database "AntConc" which will enable us to conduct an analysis based on objective criteria and also account for the purposes that made Walker cling on to the use of literary dialect in her masterpiece *The Color Purple*. Accordingly, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: Why do authors tend to use literary dialect in their writings? And what are the linguistic features of vernacular AAE in the characters' speech in the Color Purple?

Keywords: Dialect data, literary dialect, the Color Purple, vernacular AAE, Walker.

INTRODUCTION

It is blatantly apparent that language plays a paramount role in whetting the readers' appetite for literary texts. Admittedly, authors usually opt for the use of dialects, which can be beautifully woven within literary texts, so that to evoke a vibrant linguistic mélange that accounts for certain social boundaries existing within the novel. Along this line of thought, the present study opens the door to a fresh look at dialect use in literature by means of analyzing the varied dialectal variables used purposefully by Walker so that to enable her make a vivid and subtle characterization.

Literary Dialect

A literary dialect refers to a specific local or social variety chosen by an author as the language of his text for the purpose of reproducing certain forms of speech (Sternglass, 1975), because the characters' speech in literary dialogues helps, for the most part, in the manifestation of many aspects of their social profile such as "sex, age, education, geographic region, and general social status" (Walpole, 1974, p. 191). Moreover, Zanger (1966) defines literary dialect as "the attempt to indicate on the printed page, through spellings and mis-spellings, elisions, apostrophes, syntactical shifts, signals, etc., the speech of an ethnic,

regional or social group" (p.40). Therefore, literary dialect furnishes literature with a stamp of authenticity because authors typically delineate naturally occurring language varieties associated with particular groups; this asserts that literary dialects constitute the raw material of literary texts through which authors can represent their works of fiction in a local color.

In fact, it was during the 1880s that the use of non-standard varieties as a literary language had a great popularity because it satisfied the literary requirements of authors (Kersten, 2000). Therefore, Ives (1950) (as cited in Sternglass, 1975) points out that authors purposely render their characters speech which deviates from the standard in different linguistic levels in order to give their works an artistic touch:

> The dialect characters are made to speak a language that has unconventional features of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Pronunciation features are suggested by systematic variations from the conventional orthography, or "phonetic" respelling; grammatical forms that are used do not appear in the textbooks —except as awful warnings; and words are employed that are not commonly found in abridged dictionaries […] the author is an artist, not a linguist or a sociologist, and his purpose is literary rather than scientific (p. 201-202)

According to Mair (1992), "the least remarkable use of nonstandard language is certainly direct quotations of characters' speech. Here, dialect serves to create an atmosphere of realism and as a very efficient means of characterization" (p. 106). Besides, Billups (1923) sums up the function of literary dialect, the latter is used by authors to portray certain dimensions related to their characters:

> Holding in view the purpose of dialect, that is, characterization, we may set forth as a first principle that dialect must be representative, with no strained effort to reproduce the minute variations from standard English. The writer should constantly hold the reader in mind knowing that if this dialect fails to interest the reader, his work is all in vain (p. 106)

Leech and Short (2007) elaborate on certain "*syntactic anomalities*" which refer to particular deviations that occur on the syntactic level resulting in aberrational structures which "if they are not entirely ungrammatical, would nevertheless be regarded as awkward and unacceptable in written composition" (p. 130). Hence, Ellis (1994) speaks of the non subject-verb agreement occurring in non-standard English in that literary dialects of the nineteenth century are characterized by the addition of "-s" to verbs with first person subjects for instance in "I knows" and "boys know" (p. 131-132).

Therefore, in quest of a more fully authentic characterization, writers tend to reflect in speech their characters' social and ethnic affiliations because standard varieties usually carry prestige while non-standard varieties or untutored speech delineates the character's low social echelon and educational level. Correspondingly, Alice Walker is among the most popular writers who is well famed for the literary renderings of black folk dialect in her works, notably, the Color Purple so that to manifest that language can be an indicator of people's socio-cultural background.

DIALECT USE IN THE COLOR PURPLE

Walker is regarded as one of America's most popular and eminent writers whose fictional narratives and characters express a variety of her personal traumatic experiences. She

emerged as a brilliant writer due to the different socio-economic problems of her time which preoccupied her and due to the cruelty that black women endured (Hajare, 2015).

Walker has shown an interest in language that is very apparent in her genius linguistic playfulness touched very saliently and vividly in her work the Color Purple which she chose to write in dialect, that is, Vernacular black dialect. In fact, Walker depends on language so that to individualize her characters in that different characters' linguistic behavior is closely linked to their educational level and the social echelons to which they belong. Therefore, Edwards and Jacobsen (1987) come to find out:

> The social position of standard speakers is reflected in the evaluations of their speech. Likewise, the fact that nonstandard speakers are less socially dominant — usually being members of the lower classes, less well educated, and so forth — gives rise to lower ratings of their speech along prestige and competence lines (p. 371)

In fact, dialect characters' speech is characterized by many sub-standard features such as spelling and grammatical errors, lack of agreement between subject and verb, contractions, etc. Therefore, within the framework of an in-depth text-centered analysis, the speeches of different dialect characters supply the voice sample for this study from which we extract different types of linguistic corpora and analyze the many phonological and grammatical anomalities that allow us to see the sub-standard versions of different standard variables.

DIALECT ANALYSIS

This study rests upon data collected from the speeches of dialect characters in their spoken exchange in the Color Purple. In fact, Vernacular AAE is mainly represented by Celie who speaks her folk black dialect and reports other characters' talk mainly Shug Avery, Alphonso and Nettie. Correspondingly, the analysis is based heavily on extracting different linguistic features of black dialect at the phonological and grammatical levels. For this reason, the analysis relies on studying corpora of data by means of computational methods of analysis so that to investigate dialectal variables which supply linguistic evidence for this study. Lindquist (2009) explains "the major advantages of corpora over manual investigations are speed and reliability: by using a corpus, the linguist can investigate more materials and get more exact calculations of frequencies" (p. 05).

The Color Purple contains large corpora and needs a computer database to collect data and carry out the analysis. Therefore, it is important to use concordance "AntConc" so that to quantitatively investigate the number of occurrences of each variant and then indicate the main deviant forms as compared to the standard variables. Besides, examples of selected concordance lines for specific dialectal constructions from the novel will be extracted so that to examine their occurrence in specific contexts.

Phonological Data: Phonological data extracted from the characters' talk in the Color Purple are related to the distinctive ways these characters pronounce different variables.

Table 1. Phonological Data of Vernacular AAE in the Color Purple.

Feature	Number of Occurrences	Examples	Standard Feature
-Final unstressed /n/ for /ŋ/ in present participle	2	Cryin lookin	Crying looking
-Other alternation of final unstressed /n/ for /ŋ/	**7**	somethin	something
-The Reduction of final consonant cluster	25	Fine Kine An Never mine	Find Kind And Never mind
-Vowel Deletion	46	gon	gone
-Merger of /ɛ/ and /ɪ/	150	git	get
-Deletion of initial or medial unstressed syllable	204	Bout Spect Spose Cept Tween Sides nother	About Expect Supposed Except Between Besides another
	Total Number of Occurrences: 434		

Analyzing "AntConc" output at the phonological level yields the following results: apparently, there are six dialectal variants that are considered for analysis in dialect characters' speech and that lend themselves to frequency counts; one of these features that is found more dispersed over the corpus is the deletion of initial or medial unstressed syllable in words, with the highest number of occurrences 204 in total as in the examples shown in Table 1 above. Hence, these words exercise reduction and seem to be articulated improperly. Other deviant forms also impose themselves at this level including the alternation that frequently occurs to the verb "get" mostly in Celie's speech and which alternates to "git" with 150 numbers of frequency occurrences. Still, among the features investigated by concordance "AntConc" in dialect characters' speech, Celie, in particular, is the vowel deletion as it occurs in "gon" in this corpus with 46 number of occurrences and it should be pointed out that the standard version "gone" occurs 26 times which means that the substandard "gon" occurs in the corpus more than its standard counterpart.

Further analysis of the data reveals that certain words in Vernacular AAE exercise final consonant cluster reduction such as "find, kind, and" which are reduced to "fine, kine, an" respectively and occur 25 times in total. Other transformations occur at this level, for instance, the alternation of final /n/ to /ŋ/ as well as the transformation of final unstressed /n/ into /ŋ/ in present participle as in the examples provided in Table 1.

Table 2. Deviant Vernacular AAE Pronouns used by Celie in the Color Purple.

Character	Dialect Pronouns	Number of Occurrences	Pronouns in Standard
Celie	'em Us Ma Yourn Dis Dat	49 393 23 2 3 1	Them We My Yours This that

Table 2 provides list of the pronouns that exercised deviations in Celie's speech with their number of occurrences. The first thing noticed is that "us" is incorrectly used as a personal pronoun instead of object pronoun in most instances in the corpus particularly in Celie's speech and it is selected to be examined in concordance lines. The contracted form "'em" of the object pronoun "them" occurs 49 times. Whereas, other pronouns exercise transformations and occur with relative frequency of occurrences as shown in Table 2.

Figure 1. Examples of Selected Concordance Lines for "us" in the Color Purple.

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1 feather.Don't nobody come see us. She got sicker an sicker.
Finally
2 But he got so many of us. All needing somethin. My little sister

3 could figure out a way for us to run away. Us both be
4 way for us to run away. Us both be hitting Nettie's school-
5 school-books pretty hard, cause us know we got to be smart
6 understand.I don't neither. All us notice is I'm all the
7 me and my daddy. Like more us then us is ourself. She be
8 my daddy. Like more us then us is ourself. She be tagging long
9 I thank you kindly, she say.Us sit looking at all the folks
10 a fool fer? Nettie here with us. She run way from home. She
11 her handwriting, and try to git us to think. Most days I feel
12 I want dat. Our Mama let us have it. He don't say
13 say one night in bed, Well,us done help Nettie all we can.
14 hate to leave me is all. Us fall on each other neck When
15 little red in it too. But us look an look and no purple.
16 say, You do? He say, Yeah. Us plan to marry. Marry, I say.
17 to him neither. Well, what she say? Us ain't never spoke. He duck
18 three hours by time he come. Us don't say nothing to each
19 out in the field all day. Us sweat, chopping and plowing. I'm
20 smart too though, I think. Sometime us can git her away from her
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Examining the concordance for "us", we find out that there is a marked inconsistency in the use of the object pronoun "us" by Celie in the Color Purple because she improperly uses it as a personal pronoun in most instances, unlike her educated sister Nettie who uses it correctly as an object pronoun. That is, if you look at the actual concordance lines, you will find out that Nettie uses "us" as an object pronoun 85 times out of the total 393 number of occurrences, which means about 21.62%. Celie, however, uses "us" as a personal pronoun about 245 times out of the total number of its occurrences and this means 62.34%. Whereas, the remaining 63 occurrences of "us" in the corpus are used by other characters constituting about 16.03%. Therefore, according to the findings, Celie is unable to differentiate between

certain personal and object pronouns due to her low educational level. Whereas, Nettie's good educational background helped her to use the pronouns more correctly.

Table 3. Deviant Spellings used by Celie in the Color Purple

Character	Deviant Spellings	Number of occurrences	Spelling in Standard
Celie	Two Berkulosis Teef Fust Gal Ma'am Tho Naw rassle	1 13 1 4 16 4 48 1	Tuberculosis Teeth First Girl Madam Though No wrestle

Table 3 shows the most noticeable misspellings that occur in Celie's speech along with their number of occurrences. Some exercise changes at the level of vowels and consonants such as the transformation of the consonant sound /ɵ/ into /f/ as in "teef" and the vowel transformation in words as "girl" which changes into "gal", and the diphthong shift as in "no" which alternates to "naw". Other dialectal forms exercise contraction and reduction as in "ma'am and tho".

Grammatical Data
Grammatical data analysis is based on examining the anomalous grammatical constructions produced by dialect characters when communicating with each other and investigating the main deviations that occur at this level as compared to the standard grammatical structures.

Table 4. Grammatical Data of Vernacular AAE in the Color Purple.

Feature	Number of Occurrences	Examples
-Simple past *done*	44	I done learned a few things
-Double Negation	47	I don't say nothing I don't bleed no more
-Subject-verb non-concord	33	I wants, I loves, I feels, I sleeps, he come
-Ain't is the negative form in past contexts	104	She ain't smart either
-*been* as the perfective	107	It been five years
-*ed* for past participle of irregular verbs	6	They throwed the rest.
-unconjugated auxiliary verb /be/	284	I be the one to cook
-Auxiliary and copula deletion	18	He a fine looking man She a good wife
-Possessive "they"	5	They legs, they minds, they wives, they attention, they bodies
-*s* for irregular plural nouns	22	Mens, womens
-s absence for 3rd person singular	674	He do it to me anyway She do more than that He say I winked at a boy She don't look at him
-/kilt/ as past simple of *kill*	6	She was kilt by her boyfriend
-/ast/ as past simple of *ask*	249	She ast me who is my husband
-/shet/ as past simple of *shut*	2	I shet the window
-The use of /us/ instead of /we/ as personal pronoun	393	Us both be hitting Nettie's schoolbooks
	Total Number of Occurrences: 1994	

After observing "AntConc" output at this level, we find out that dialect characters produce several deviant grammatical constructions with high number of frequency occurrences. One of the features investigated in the Color Purple is the use of "done" as the simple past of the verb "to do" with 44 occurrences particularly in Celie's speech. Among the striking dialectal features of Vernacular AAE is double negation, which occurs 47 times in Celie's speech. Many other features occur very often in the corpus data including the lack of concord between subject and verb which features Celie's non-standard language due to her poor educational level.

A particularly interesting observation is that "been" is used as the perfective, that is, instead of "have been" and "had been", Celie uses "been" in perfect tenses as in "I been five years" and it occurs with 107 number of frequencies. Among the features considered for analysis is the use of "ain't" as the negative form in past contexts and occurs in the corpus with 104 number of occurrences. There is a high number of occurrences in which auxiliary verb "be" is used without conjugation 284 times as shown in the example in Table 4. One of the striking features of Vernacular AAE is the auxiliary and copula deletion which characterizes Vernacular AAE from other varieties of the language and table 4 provides some instances of its occurrence.

Other deviant forms include –s addition for irregular plural nouns as in "mens, womens" and the –s absence for third person singular as in "he say I winked at him" and as in the other examples in table 4. Among the dialectal features analyzed by "AntConc" is the use of "they" as the possessive such as in "they legs, they attention" and other instances. Moreover, verbs as "kill, ask, shut" have deviant and ungrammatical past tense form "kilt, ast, shet"; many other features are investigated with their frequency counts in the table 4 above.

DATA INTERPRETATION

Vernacular AAE is a language variety which is masterfully represented in the Color Purple through different characters' talk, mainly, Celie. Hence, a closer look at the phonological and grammatical data, we find that certain linguistic features characterize black dialect such as consonant reductions and deletions at initial, medial and final positions, contractions of different dialectal variables, double negation, the use of "been" as the perfective as well as the use of "ain't" as the negative form in past contexts.

Dialect characters' speech patterns in the Color Purple tell a lot about their social profile as well as personal traits because "a language is not uniform. Instead, it varies, corresponding to socio-cultural characteristics of groups of people such as their cultural background geographical location, social class, gender, or age" (Wolfram et al, 1999, p. 01). Correspondingly, it should be noted that phonological variation that occurs, for instance, at the level of consonants, particularly, in Celie's speech, in which certain consonants are reduced and deleted is closely related to social influences because "consonant differences tend to be significant in marking the social dialects" (Wolfram et al, 1999, p. 44). Celie's language lacks refinement due to her inconsistent spellings and non-standard grammatical structures; her vernacular language suggests the low social status to which she belongs.

In fact, there are many ungrammatical constructions featuring the speech of dialect characters one of which is double negation which suggests that the characters are untutored and having a low level of intelligence because "the use of the so-called double negatives, or two negative forms in a single sentence, is often cited as evidence that a particular language variety is

illogical" (Wolfram et al, 1999, p. 12). Celie seems to have received no formal education, as she is unable to form long sentences or even to differentiate between personal and object pronouns. The use of informal words as well as the –s absence for third person singular are among the characteristics of her untutored speech. Nettie, however, seems to have a more refined language as she has received good schooling because "a striking feature about Nettie's letters is the different language she uses. Whereas, Celie uses the dialect of her closed community, Nettie's language is that of an educated woman. It's a very different, more impersonal language that Celie has to translate into her own language to understand" (Schwartz, 1998, p. 09), this is also evident in her speech which is characterized by less grammatical and spelling mistakes in comparison with the other dialect speaking characters in the novel.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been an attempt to peer into dialect use in the Color Purple. The focus is set on investigating with a quantitative and qualitative linguistic inquiry the different linguistic features of vernacular AAE at the phonological and grammatical levels with examining the purposes of the literary use of dialect as epitomized in Walker's the Color Purple. The study is based on statistical analysis using computational methods so that to count the number of occurrences of each dialectal variable. Therefore, the data collected from the novel has been analyzed and interpreted so that to substantiate that literary dialect can serve different purposes as it can, for instance, mirror different aspects of the characters' social life and thus furnishes literature with a high level of authenticity.

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