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African American Artistry: “Old-time” Homiletical Tasks as Contemporary Speech Acts in Media

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Prominent sociologist Dr. W. E. B. DuBois has stated: “The preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss’, an intriguer, an idealist—all these he is, and ever, too, the center of a group of [people], now twenty, now a thousand in number” (qtd. in Pipes 3). Today’s usage of African American Vernacular English illustrates this influence and points to the essential nature of study of speech act theory in regards to African American Vernacular English. William H. Pipes predicted in the mid-1950s the death of “old-time Negro preaching” due to “education and enlightenment” (157). Ironically, however, it appears that one of the major developments of the technological age—television—has been the actual perpetuator of the tradition: commentators and talk show hosts continue to replace Standard English features with African American Vernacular English (AAVE) at crucial points in their dialogues, to achieve a certain rapport with guests and audiences. Such employment of stylistic features expresses what James Baldwin defines as “the significance of black experience . . . concealed within codes” (qtd. in Smith 117). Though these efforts may be recourses to humor or emotion, an effect unparalleled by Standard English speech acts is achieved when this code-switching occurs, and audiences are often stirred to action due to this “distinctive ethos of artistic sensibility and cultural creativity that is crucial for communicating Afro-American experience, and also for criticizing the depth and authenticity of such communication” (Smith 117).

It is important to note, before further discussion, that television continues to perpetuate common stereotypes that not only socially damage native speakers of this dialect but also linguistically damage the dialect itself. Specifically, television, with its international influence, does little to affect the prestige factor of AAVE. Many television shows incorporate AAVE (sometimes called “jazz speak”) in their dialogues for comic effect and consequently often satirize African Americans. As Kuchman affirms: “By and large, members of minority groups must still confront a public view that sees their distinctive racial, cultural, and linguistic features as a source of public embarrassment” (qtd. in Harper 5).

Oprah Winfrey, an internationally acclaimed award-winning television hostess, confronts these barriers and continues to incorporate AAVE into her conversations with audiences and guests on her show. Moreover, Oprah has transcended many stereotypes in the eyes of fans and critics alike; the key to understanding this transcendence lies in recognizing how she employs AAVE as a sort of modern-day preacher to achieve certain effects with those to whom she is speaking. Although the frequency of her use of AAVE does appear to increase with guests whose speech is dominated by AAVE, something else occurs as well that is unrelated to guests’ ethnicity or dialect. Hymes has said that “content enters analysis first of all perhaps as a question of *topic*, and change of topic” (qtd. in Coulthard 46). A closer look has proven this statement to be true.

Analysis of both the illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts of Oprah's AAVE has shown that her code-switching between Standard English and AAVE achieves topic mitigation, creates an invitation to addressee, and emphasizes emotions and situational experience that are characteristic of "Grand style" African American folk preaching. Due to her particular dialect, examined markers will include elements of grammar and phonology, and most directly, homiletical tasks characteristic of "old-time Negro" preaching.

Review of Literature

"The methods of persuasion of . . . preaching demonstrate that emotional appeal remains dominant" (Pipes 157). Oprah Winfrey's vernacular—stylistically similar to African American folk preaching—relies heavily on emotional appeal to achieve its purposes. Pipes further defines the reasoning behind pathetic, or emotional, appeal.

People listen attentively to a speaker if they feel that his message vitally concerns them. Are the speaker's ideas worthy of their sincere consideration? If they are, the speaker may be assured of their interest and good will. The emotions and the basic beliefs—friendship, duty, honor, fear, shame, emulation, patriotism, compassion, etc.—are the stuff of which pathetic appeal is made. (110)

Coupled with her dialect, a dialect steeped in folk preaching metaphor, Oprah Winfrey's genderlect is also a variable to consider. Wolfram notes that studies on the speech of women show that women focus more on "self, feelings, [and] affiliation with others" (qtd. in Piper 127).

In any case, *homiletical tasks* are the means to Oprah's ends, so to speak. They are specific "illocutionary acts," or acts that are "being performed *in* uttering a sentence by virtue of the illocutionary force associated with the sentence" (Ng 90). Cheryl J. Sanders defines these tasks in relation to folk preaching.

Homiletics is the art of preaching as a subject of theological study. Etymologically speaking, the term *homiletics* translates from the Greek as the "art of conversing" or "a conversation with the crowd." Thus the expression "homiletical tasks," as used here, connotes the particular functions and objectives the preacher undertakes in the course of carrying

on a conversation with the crowd. The homiletical tasks represent what the sermon has been designed to accomplish, which is perhaps the single most critical dimension of preaching. (376)

There are seventeen tasks, according to Sanders; however, for the purposes of this paper we will only consider four: affirming, invitation, story-telling, and testifying.

(1) *Affirming*. Affirming is the task of speaking in positive, encouraging terms to an individual or group, usually with reference to a declaration of belief or commitment in solidarity with others (377).

(2) *Invit[ation]*. The task of invitation differs from exhortation in its sense of urgency; it is an exhortation to immediate response and action (380).

(3) *Story-Telling*. In many sermons, and especially in the sermons that follow the narrative form, stories from the Bible or from human experience are told to make the sermon's message "come alive" (383).

(4) *Testifying*. The task of testifying offers a personal word of witness . . . usually with reference to conversion. Here testifying is distinguished from story-telling in that it is based strictly upon personal experience (385).

As a note, Oprah Winfrey's television shows do not always center around religion. Thus, although she sometimes makes religious references, her speech does not *usually* refer to religious subjects. However, the patterns that dominate her dialogue do still coincide with the homiletical tasks, as this paper will illustrate.

To complete the study of Winfrey's usage of AAVE, I have examined the perlocutionary acts of her speech as well. According to Sik Hung Ng, "the *perlocutionary act*, the third act, is the act of producing effects on the audience by uttering the sentence" (90). It is important to note that "perlocutionary effects are specific to the particular situation and are not achieved invariably by the same utterance or just by making an utterance" (90).

Research Methodology

To analyze the speech act of code-switching between Standard English and AAVE, I viewed eight episodes of *Oprah*. The range of guests on the show included white men and women who used no AAVE to African American men and

women who used little to a great deal of AAVE. The prestige of the guests offered a wide variety too, with guests ranging from an "average" citizen simply telling a story to high-profile artists like Barbara Streisand, Toni Morrison, and Prince.

With each episode, I analyzed the use of the AAVE with which Oprah directly addressed or responded to her guests. I also noted the audiences' and guests' reactions. These I have noted for the sake of brief comment but not for in-depth analysis.

Case Studies

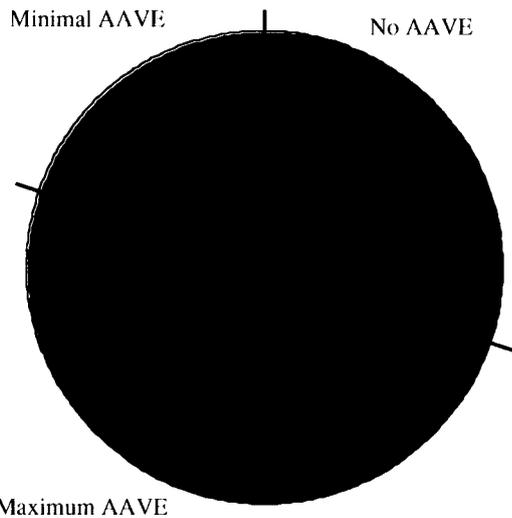
The following charts and pie graph display collected data. The operative definitions for the gray shaded boxes in the chart entitled "Oprah's Use of African American Vernacular English" are the same as those mentioned in the "Review of Literature" section of this paper. The pie graph illustrates the linguistic nature of the guests with whom Oprah speaks and the frequency with which she employs AAVE.

Oprah's Use of African American Vernacular English

Guest(s)	Topic of Discussion	Affirming	Invitation	Story-telling	Testifying	Effect on Audience
Barbara Streisand	Sex	X				humor; audience laughs; Barbara furthers comment.
Barbara Streisand	Clothes		X			Barbara responds, including AAVE markers.
Tom Cruise	Manners			X		humor; story "came alive" for the audience.
Kenneth "Baby Face" Gordon	Music			X		no response from audience.
Dog Trainers	Dogs	X (good job of trainers)		X		audience claps, understands her story.
Toni Morrison	Ms. Morrison's introduction	X (illustrating Morrison's point)		X		agreement.
Toni Morrison	Dinner with Toni Morrison			X	X	guests of whom she speaks laugh; they agree & relive the experience.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	General description of interview			X		audience laughs & claps, understand Oprah's perspective.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	The artist's new name		X			artist appears shy, but readily responds after Oprah's comment.

Guest(s)	Topic of Discussion	Affirming	Invitation	Story-telling	Testifying	Effect on Audience
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	The artist's music.			X		audience claps.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	The artist's relationship w/his wife.			X		audience giggles.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	The artist's relationship w/his wife.	X	X			Prince's wife responds.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	Common perceptions of the artist.	X				audience giggles.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	The artist's clothes.			X		audience yells and screams.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	A former comment by the artist.	X ("Vera intarestin!")				audience claps.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	The artist's Slave Phase.	X ("Y'all rememba dat!")				audience claps and yells.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	Freedom.	X				video clip—no audience.
The Artist Formally Known as Prince	Music.	X				audience yells and screams.
Rod Stewart	News reports.	X (of news reports)				Stewart responds with an affirmation.
Sylvester Stallone	His new film.			X		audience yells and screams.
Sylvester Stallone	His new film.			X		taped—no audience.
Oprah's Audience	The audience's perception of Oprah.	X (audience member says she looks good)		X		audience laughs.
Oprah's Audience	World Cup.	X		X		audience member responds with "That's right!"

Oprah's AAVE Use with Guests



Note: The labels indicate the amount of AAVE used by the guest.

Discussion

Of the ten episodes of *Oprah* that I viewed, only seven of those incorporated AAVE. The shows that did not include the dialect dealt with life-threatening incidents on public transportation and in schools, with amnesia, and with Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York. These were, obviously, more serious in nature. When Oprah *did* employ AAVE, she was speaking only of personal, emotionally meaningful experiences, widely recognized taboo issues (for family television) such as sex and trivial subjects like clothes or music.

Oprah's use of AAVE ultimately achieved emotional appeal: the audience either laughed, yelled, or screamed after each incident that was performed in front of a live audience. Likewise, in each prerecorded incident, the guest usually responded to Oprah's use of vernacular.

The surprising amount of story-telling that was conveyed with AAVE proved to dominate the homiletical tasks. Sanders writes that the "stories . . . from human experience are told to make the sermon's message 'come alive'" (383). Oprah's use of her dialect in these instances truly did make the incidents come alive, as she used her speech acts as a contrasting device to set certain incidents apart from the rest. The lengthiest narratives reflected—not surprisingly—emotional incidents. In fact, as she spoke of her dinner with Toni Morrison, Oprah began by repeatedly saying

what a meaningful experience it was for her and how it impacted her life. Then she transitioned to AAVE as she described in detail the emotions she and her other dinner guests experienced that evening.

Body weight has always been an emotional subject for Oprah. In past seasons she has done week-long segments on physical fitness and weight loss. Not surprisingly, when an audience member made a comment about how good Oprah looked, the hostess again transitioned to AAVE, and recounted other audience members' perceptions of her.

Affirmation was the second most frequent homiletical task used by Oprah. I initially thought that invitation was more prevalent, but after viewing the shows I realized that what appeared to be invitation was actually an affirmation that extended an invitation. An excellent example of this occurred during her interview with Barbara Streisand. At the beginning of the show, Oprah exclaimed in Standard English that she did not want any "fawning" in this interview; she told Barbara right up front that she admired her and that was all she was going to say. (Barbara hadn't done a live interview in over thirty years, so she was a bit apprehensive about this interview.) So, when talking about Barbara's latest movie, *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (which Oprah liked a lot), Oprah used AAVE to affirm what Streisand had done as producer and lead actress. I suspected this was a type of invitation, but minutes later, when Barbara responded in AAVE, I realized that the use of AAVE to affirm laid the groundwork for a successful invitation for Streisand to participate. A similar exchange occurred repeatedly with Prince, an extremely timid guest. Yet Oprah responded to the shy guest—who spoke predominately in AAVE—by using her style of AAVE to affirm his responses. The interview turned out to be quite engaging for Prince, and once more Oprah's manipulation of AAVE proved to be useful.

The variety of AAVE used by Oprah was dominated by grammatical features such as zero copula, the invariant "be," omission of the forms of "have," and negation as described by Daniel Ray Harper (25–29). In addition, I found certain phonological features present in her variety, including substitutions of alveolar stops, consonant cluster reduction, nasal replacement, absence of postvocalic [r], and elision of unstressed words' initial syllables.

Conclusion

Oprah Winfrey has tapped AAVE with an artful and rhythmic use of dialect. Her deft use of this “jazz speak” proves that intelligence can transcend a stereotype. This brief study demonstrates that there is *much* ground yet to be covered in AAVE studies. A lack of source material also illustrates this need. Intertwining African American Theologian studies, a root issue in African American culture, is necessary in order to see the whys of speech act theory in relation to AAVE. This dialect, called a Creole by some, is rhythmical and forceful just like the folk preaching still prevalent today. And so much more than mere analysis of grammatical and phonological feature must take place for more understanding to be perpetuated.

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