

**BAD WORDS GONE GOOD:  
SEMANTIC REANALYSIS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH**

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Semantic reanalysis produces lexemes that bear positive connotations in AAE in contrast with their “Mainstream” American English (MAE) (Lippi-Green, 1997) homonyms. For example, **bad**<sub>AAE</sub>, *awesome*, versus **bad**<sub>MAE</sub>, *characterized by negative qualities*. This present survey of semantic reanalysis in AAE shows that lexical meaning is subject to analogous types of linguistic variation commonly discussed in variationist studies. It helps lay the foundation for a quantitative study of African American English (AAE) lexemes and semantic change through an exploration of semantic reanalysis.

Previous investigations of semantic reanalysis (e.g. Smitherman, 1977) claim that using defamatory words, like **bad**, in positive ways derives from an African tradition, i.e. hypothesizing that these are semantic calquings from Niger-Congo languages. Although semantic reanalysis appears in West African languages, it is also used by minority groups with no West African connection. Additionally, although the sociohistorical evidence suggests that AAE is a restructured English variety, semantic reanalysis is not a necessary strategy for restructured Englishes. The inadequacy of Afro-genetic accounts, together with the fact that the linguistics literature lacks a cohesive discussion of AAE semantic reanalysis, has motivated the present study. It offers more accessible, verifiable and generalizable explanations for AAE semantics. This study reveals that AAE’s distinct semantics cannot be attributed to Niger-Congo

retention but rather to the ecology around which AAE emerged. I propose that AAE semantics derive from sociohistorical factors that have shaped the variety. I also suggest that semantic reanalysis is a pervasive, community-wide phenomenon that a number of AAE speakers employ as a form of responsive discourse, i.e. to differentiate themselves from non-community members.

These results are based on quantitative and supplementary qualitative analyses of data from 53 AAE-speaking adults from the Rankin community in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. Participants provided definitions and positive/negative evaluations of a variety of lexemes, including semantically reanalyzed words. Responses were coded using AAE and MAE dictionaries alongside my own native-speaker intuitions. Frequency analyses helped assess the pervasiveness of semantic reanalysis in the AAE community.

Mixed-effects regression tests identified a generation-stratified pattern of variation wherein participants born after 1959—i.e. post-de jure segregation—were more familiar with reanalyzed words.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The semantic evolution of lexemes has been treated from a number of perspectives, including contact (Holm, 2000; Winford, 2003), diachronic (Bloomfield, 1933; Eckardt, 2006), and cognitive (Warren, 1992) linguistic perspectives. A number of emergent works have aimed at understanding the phenomena that trigger this regular process in language change. Many of these works have attributed semantic shift to extralinguistic forces, generating theories that are less reliant on language-specific phenomena and more on social settings (Coates, 1993; Yuen-Ching Chen, 1998; Brontsema, 2004). A number of researchers have also begun considering the themes or semantic fields that commonly undergo semantic change, for example, semantic depreciation of female terms (Romaine, 1999; Curzan, 2003) or sexual organ metaphors (Bucholtz, Liang, Sutton, 1999; Allan and Buridge, 2006). These scholars have reminded us that semantic changes are not always value-neutral and, in fact, are often employed strategically to the ends of particular groups. By relying on sociohistorical and sociocultural data, recent works have highlighted crosslinguistic similarities in the semantic evolutions of varieties and have, in turn, pivoted the study of semantic shift into a more universalist trajectory.

This research employs a sociocultural perspective embedded within a contact linguistic framework in order to provide an account for a number of lexemes in the African American English (AAE) lexicon that have undergone semantic amelioration. Semantic amelioration is the mechanism through which the meaning of lexemes is made more positive. It is responsible for

generating AAE words with positive meanings, e.g. **the shit**<sub>AAE</sub> (or ‘the best’), which is derived from the Mainstream American English word, **the shit**<sub>MAE</sub> (i.e. ‘feces or excrement’). Although semantic change is certainly a crosslinguistic phenomenon, the focus of this research is on “the whole of language use in the African American community” (Lanehart, 2001: 7). Here, African American English will be used to reference the entire continuum of varieties between the more vernacular and the more standard poles of language.

This project considers possible rationales behind the existence and pervasiveness of semantic amelioration. The plan was intended to meet the following additional objectives: (1) offer a cohesive account for a process in African American English (AAE) that affects word meanings (i.e. the process of semantic reanalysis); (2) question ideological constructs that underpin current linguistics research; (3) consider the links between language forms and social meanings (i.e. indexicalities) in word meanings (i.e., the semantics) of “mainstream” and AAE cultures in order to account for the process of semantic reanalysis; (4) validate my research claims; and (5) determine whether there is a relationship between study participants’ biographical information (i.e., demographic variables) and their knowledge of the words. This research is furthermore important for its ability to add equilibrium to the existing gender- and race-centric body of literature on semantics and the African American English lexicon. Finally, it aims to add cohesion to existing research on semantic reanalysis by offering a sociohistorical account of the phenomena that is more generalizable and economical.

My main research question is whether semantic reanalysis is a fad among particular subgroups of the AAE community, or instead a pervasive, community-wide phenomenon. I also wished to consider how the strategy is employed in different (socially-stratified) ways throughout the AAE community. In order to assess the semantic changes that have taken place

in the AAE lexicon, thirty-one lexemes were selected and classified into five groups: (1) reanalyzed racial epithets: *ace boon coon*, *my nigga* (i.e. my nigger), *your boy*; (2) reanalyzed belittling terms: *girl*, *dog* (i.e. dawg), *child*; (3) reanalyzed descriptors: *baddest*, *grimy*, *nasty*, *to be down*, *dope*, *junks*, *fat* (i.e. phat), *sick*, *gangsta*, *vicious*, *funky*, *ill*, *tough*, *tight*, *mean*, *mad*, *stupid*, *def*, *monster*, *bomb*; (4) substitutes for reanalyzed profanity: *the ish* (i.e. the shit), *mama jamma* (i.e. mother fucker); (5) reanalyzed phrases: *get out of here*, *shut your mouth*, and *I'm scared of you*.

For the thirty-one lexemes, I gathered denotative (i.e. definitions and/or synonyms) and connotative data (i.e. whether words were perceived positively/complimentarily, negatively/offensively, and/or in some other way) from 53 participants in a written, questionnaire-based Identification Task. Each participant was provided exemplary usages for all 31 lexemes (i.e. in the context of a sentence for each), and asked to describe the lexeme in terms of its denotation and connotation. This data was interpreted using quantitative measures (*goodness-of-fit* tests, Rbrul analyses, and chi-square tests) as well as qualitative measures (e.g. drawing on participant intuitions). These tests reveal that the AAE speech community does not behave as a coherent unit and that semantic reanalysis is not employed uniformly across the continuum of African American English varieties. Furthermore, semantic reanalysis is stratified by generation so that the younger participants are more familiar with the strategy. Finally, there are generational differences regarding the use of reanalyzed terms; however, there are also lexemes that transcend generational boundaries. The results of these tests will be discussed alongside the general theme of semantic reanalysis in the following schema:

Chapter 2 *Theoretical Background on Semantic Reanalysis* introduces the topic of semantic reanalysis and provides the reader with some theoretical background on the topic. This

chapter also details the body of existing research on semantic evolution and highlights specific cases of semantic changes in contact varieties, so-called “normal languages”, and African American English. It surveys the different types of semantic changes that may arise in languages, for example, semantic restriction (decrease in the number of referents denoted by a lexeme), broadening (increase in the number of referents denoted by a lexeme), pejoration (depreciation in meaning), and amelioration (improvement or elevation of meaning). Notably, this chapter discusses some of the mechanisms that introduce semantic changes to a language, stating that language contact is one venue through which semantic changes arise but that language-internal processes may also cause meaning changes.

Chapter 3 *Sociohistorical Context* discusses the ecology in which early AAE varieties would have emerged in Western Pennsylvania and the general U.S. context. It also discusses some of the theoretical disagreements regarding the exact (developmental) trajectory of early African American English as well as the sources of unique features, e.g. semantic reanalysis, in the modern variety. Furthermore, this chapter introduces the two fieldwork sites where data was collected, while also discussing aspects of the history of the community. Finally, this sociohistorical survey of AAE explains why new approaches are needed to account for semantic reanalysis in African American English.

Chapter 4 *Methods and Procedure* details the research questions of the study and states the methods and procedures that were used to address them. Here, I also elaborate on the nature of participant recruitment, the sample population, and the process of data collection, e.g. the specific measures of the research. The chapter offers projections for the outcomes of the research based on previous studies with similar social variables.



Chapter 5 *Results and Interpretation* answers the research questions by stating and interpreting the results of the statistical tests. It also presents qualitative data, i.e. excerpts from interviews, to further bolster the central findings of the research. The final chapter, Chapter 6 *Discussion and Conclusions*, restates the results of this research and revisits the topic of possible motivations for AAE semantic reanalysis, namely differentiation and gate-keeping. I conclude this chapter by suggesting directions for future research.

## 2.0 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ON SEMANTIC REANALYSIS

Semantic reanalysis, also described as semasiological change (Traugott and Dasher, 2002), is a specific type of language evolution that is characterized by transformations in the meaning and usage of word forms. One way of analyzing semasiological shifts is to look at those which have developed through a period of time (i.e. diachronically), such as semantics contrasts across different generations of language users within a single speech community. Thus, we can see a historically/temporally based semantic distinction between the dated and earlier use of “fag” to mean “a cigarette” and the later, pejorative use of the word as a homophobic epithet for gay men or males in violation of heteronormative standards of comportment. Semantic variations may also be examined synchronically, as in cases where the meaning or usage of a form depends not on the point in time when it is used but rather on the context in which it is used, that is, the point in space. For example, there is a synchronic difference in the connotation of “culo” in modern-day Spanish. If we compare “culo” dialectally or geographically, we will find that it is an informal but inoffensive term, similar to “butt”, among Castilian speakers, whereas it will likely carry a more vulgar or profane connotation (i.e. similar to “ass”) for Cordobesian speakers of Argentina. In the present thesis, we see how the semantics of certain words contrast socially in a manner that is both spatially and temporally conditioned, that is, depending on the dialect (read as speech community) of the language user and also her background, including social class or socioeconomic status, ethnic or racial affiliation, gender, age or generation, and

profession/occupation. Said spatial and/or temporal, semantic differences may be products of language-internal forces that are characteristic of normal restructuring processes, or they may be triggered by external forces, such as contact with a foreign language or another dialect. Let us go first to those language-external drivers of semantic change, considering first *borrowing* and then *transfer* as triggers of semantic shift.

## 2.1 BORROWING AS AN IMPETUS FOR SEMANTIC REANALYSIS

In contact settings involving two or more language varieties, it is common for language users to incorporate elements from a non-native language into their own mother tongue. *Borrowing* describes this adoption of foreign linguistic elements into the inventory of one's first language (L1) (Haugen, 1950; Weinreich, 1953), and it occurs when a language learner reproduces linguistic patterns outside their original context, i.e. in another language. One example of this adoption is lexical borrowing, that is, when a language user incorporates lexemes (or *loanwords*) from another variety into her native language. Loan translations (i.e. calques) are also a form of incorporation, involving (sometimes isolated) (morphosyntax) borrowings so that the borrowed form is a word-for-word copy (translation) of the expression in the source language. *Skyscraper* is a common loan translation, for example, used in Portuguese as *arranha-céu* ("scratch-sky") and in Spanish as *rascacielos* ("scratch-skies"). Loan meanings and loan coinages are two other types of borrowing but, in these cases, the borrower uses resources and words within the native language to convey the foreign concept.

What motivates users of a language variety to borrow linguistic elements from another code? Borrowing may occur for a variety of reasons, including a number of stylistic motivations

or because of the prestige associated with words of a certain etyma. For example, English lexical incorporations were meant to signal modernization and social advancement for the country of Japan in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thus, it was the semantic connotation (i.e. style and prestige) of English lexemes that motivated Japanese speakers to use/borrow them. Winford (2003: 35) explains, however, that these English loanwords assumed new meanings with their integration into Japanese. Thus, “ranchi,” the Japanese word for “lunch”, refers specifically to “restaurant cooking” as opposed to the more general meaning of “a noontime meal”, as in English. From the example of the Japanese word, “ranchi”, we can see that some borrowings trigger semantic changes, creating differences between the meanings of a form in its source language and its meaning in the borrowing language.

In addition to stylistic reasons for borrowing, language users may draw features—whether loanwords and/or simply concepts (loan translations or loan coinages)—from non-native languages as a mode of structural expansion in order to express new entities. In need of a word to reference the concepts, “bicycle” and “taxi”, Xhosa speakers incorporated the English loanwords into their language and adapted them to the Xhosa system of nouns (through prefixation of *i-*), thereby forming “ibhayisikile” and “itekisi”, respectively (Mesthrie et al., 2009: 244). On the other hand, rather than acquiring terms (or “signifiers”) for novel concepts from foreign sources, which Casagrande (1954) terms *secondary accommodation*, some languages simply adopt the concept (or the new “signified”) and use indigenous language resources to represent it, i.e. *primary accommodation* (Appel and Muysken, 2005: 167). Thus, Comanche denotes the concept of “bicycle” with a native coinage, “nataʔaiki”, meaning “thing to make oneself go with the feet”, instead of using a foreign loanword (ibid, p. 250). These

Japanese, Xhosa, and Comanche examples each demonstrate how speakers can fill semantic (i.e. denotative and connotative) as well as lexical gaps in their mother tongue through borrowing.

Other reasons for borrowing foreign linguistic elements are to “introduce finer distinctions of meaning not available in native words”; to resolve homonymity and problems of semantic ambiguity; and/or to create synonymy for certain word meanings (Winford, 2003: 38). These borrowings equip the mother tongue with words to reference novel concepts or better enable it to serve a range of social and communicative functions, thereby thwarting its obsolescence and preparing it for more domains of use. Later (section 3.3.1), when we begin to look at different explanations for the semantic evolutions of certain English forms, such research on borrowing-induced semantic changes may offer insight for these accounts. Yet, before we begin accounting for specific examples of semantic reanalysis in African American English, let us continue considering general impetuses for semantic evolutions.

## **2.2 TRANSFER AND RELEXIFICATION AS IMPETUSES FOR SEMANTIC REANALYSIS**

Language transfer is yet another external impetus of semantic shift that has been used to explain semasiological transformations in African American English. Language transfer occurs in situations of second language acquisition (SLA), that is, when people are learning a second language either in addition to their native tongue, as in additive bilingualism, or in place of the first language, which is the case for subtractive bilingualism. Language transfer is a strategy that language learners employ to facilitate language acquisition and, in the cases of lexical and meaning transfer, it has semantic consequences. With lexical transfers, there is first language

(L1) influence in second language (L2) vocabulary use. With semantic transfer, mother tongue semantic structures have second language lexical representations and impact L2 processing (e.g. usage).

In the field of Contact Linguistics, L1 transfer in second language acquisition has been compared to substrate structural influence on contact varieties, e.g. pidgins, creoles and bilingual mixed languages. Siegel (2003) defines *language transfer* as a psycholinguistic process that involves “carrying over of mother tongue patterns into the target language”, that is, using “features of one language...when speaking another” (ibid, p. 187). Contact linguists have also used terms like “calquing” and “relexification” in referencing substratum (i.e. mother language) influence on creole grammars. The transfer of L1 features to an L2 (i.e. the target of language learning) occurs when individuals are “attempting to speak a common L2”, such as in a contact setting (ibid, p. 187). Siegel explains that the second language or target of acquisition may be a new variety of the L1, the L2 or even “a new medium of interethnic communication” that forms from the combination of the language learners’ L1 and L2 (ibid, p.190). Often what differentiates the two—i.e. whether the product of language learning is a new language (language genesis) or a new variety of the L2 or L1—is the degree of influence from the learners’ mother tongue and their second language.

The varying degrees of L1 and L2 input in contact vernaculars can be attributed to psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic strategies. Initially, as a language learning strategy, learners use their L1 knowledge as “a basis for establishing hypotheses about L2 rules and items” (ibid, p. 194). Semantics are one such area of the grammar that frequently survives the restructuring of the L1, as individuals frequently rely on the semantics of their L1 as they acquire the L2. This L1 grammar is then either rapidly or gradually revised through continued access to the L2

grammar and consequent negative evidence, all depending on how salient or conscious the L2 structural characteristics are to the learner. More salient features (e.g. lexemes) are not only restructured more quickly, but they are also more likely to be eliminated; however, other more opaque areas of the grammar are revised more gradually and, therefore, are more likely to be retained. Another semantic reason that L1 retention occurs is to “maintain distinctions and other patterns from the learners’ native language” (ibid, p. 188). The preservation of aspects from one’s mother tongue, however, may also result from insufficient data or input from the target, which in many cases leads to *relexification*, a coping strategy of language learners whereby the lexicon is replaced and the grammar remains intact (ibid, p.195). In relexified contact languages, semantic shift can be attributed to this mechanism of relexification, involving structural transfer and semantic retentions (i.e. calquing) from the language’s etyma.

In the case of Haitian Kreyòl, for example, the semantic difference from its lexifier, French, can be attributed to the fact that, while Haitian may have an overwhelmingly French lexicon, the semantic structure underlying its lexemes is not French, but instead a bedrock from the Fon dialect of Gbe, i.e. Fongbe (see Lefebvre, 1998). The same can be said of many bilingual mixed languages, such as Media Lengua, which Muysken (1997) describes as having a Quechua foundation (i.e. morphosyntactic frame) and Spanish lexemes. Because of semantic transfer, when a lexifier language contributes a form to the creole, the item may share the phonetic shape with its lexical base but not necessarily the function. That is, the form may be a false cognate, sounding like it would in the language of (lexical) origin but underlyingly behaving like another language.

What does all this—that is, the idea that forms can superficially be from one language, i.e. the lexifier, while having semantic origins of another source, i.e. the matrix language or

substratum—have to do with semantic reanalysis in African American English? Calquing through relexification/transfer and borrowing are relevant to our discussion of semantic reanalysis in African American English because these concepts have been used to account for a number of Afro-American<sup>1</sup> words that have been argued to use Indo-European phonetic shapes to convey Niger-Congo conceptualizations of meaning. Thus, Carrington (1993: 41) considers words, like *eye-water*—meaning “tears” in Guyanese Creole and Jamaican Creole—to be Africanisms that have “parallel expressions in several West African languages.” Cassidy (2007: 137) reiterates this idea about calquing as the basis for the many unique, Afro-American uses of lexifier forms: “Eye-water (tears) is an archaism elsewhere, but not in Jamaica...Similarly, mouth-water is saliva. It may well be, however, that both these expressions are loan-translations from African languages: Ibo and Mandingo have just these combinations.” Likewise, a number of researchers (Smitherman, 1977; Alleyne, 1994) have used this calquing (loan translation) explanation to account for lexemes in African American English (e.g. *bad*) that contrast with their homonyms in Mainstream American English and/or are ambiguous, having two or more lexical meanings in AAE where they would not in mainstream varieties. Specifically, Smitherman claims that a West African semantic process, which has been retained in AAE, produces these reanalyzed lexemes so that AAE users are basically speaking English according to African semantics.

I will not adopt a “calquing” (or relexification) argument here, as there are other, more economical (read as general or universal) accounts that can explain semantic changes in African American English and also in other, non-African languages that are spoken by members of marginalized group. However, let me first clarify that foreign words are not the only root of

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term, Afro-American, in the same sense as Alleyne (1994) to encompass creoles (in the Americas) with West African substrate languages as well as African American English.



semantic changes, as archaisms and regionalisms may also cause varieties of a single language to diverge semantically. This elucidation is important because if semantic changes need not be introduced by a foreign agent (e.g. borrowings or transfer/relexification), then we need not look outside a language for possible explanations of this phenomenon. Rather, we can begin to consider language-internal causes of semantic shift, such as those mechanisms of language change responsible for developments in other areas of the grammar.

Meaning changes may result from language-internal factors and may sometimes even correspond to grammatical changes, such as those that occur during grammaticization, the mechanism whereby a content word becomes more structural. Semantic bleaching, metaphor, and metonymy are among the semantic processes involved in grammaticalization processes (Eckardt, 2006). Aside from occurring within the context of grammaticalization, semantic changes are also attributable to other forms of language-internal development, such as those that occur as part of the nativization, stabilization, and structural expansion of pidgins.

### **2.3 LANGUAGE-INTERNAL IMPETUSES FOR SEMANTIC REANALYSIS**

Pidgins begin as contact varieties with reduced lexical inventories. Their early grammars reflect the myriad of pidginization and other simplification processes that occur in response to their originally limited functions and few social domains of usage. As Bakker (1995: 29) explains: “if the pidgin has a restricted function, the vocabulary will be more limited. These changes are also said to occur for communicative purposes, that is, to alleviate “the processing task of the hearer” (Foley, 1988: 171). Furthermore, in terms of semantics, these varieties have transparent form-meaning relationships. Yet, as these lingua francas progress through the stages of the *pidgin life*

*cycle*—from jargon/pre-pidgin, to rudimentary/crude pidgin, to extended pidgin, to nativized pidgin—they undergo a series of functional and structural changes (Sebba 1997). According to Muysken and Smith (1995: 3), “pidgins undergo structural expansion when their use is extended to many domains”, while nativization also has its structural consequences (Bakker, 1995: 25-27). Such changes include their extension and elaboration (nativization), functional and structural elaboration, conventionalization by the nondominant group, and stabilization in usage (Foley, 1988). Polysemy is one word-building tactic that pidgin speakers use to expand their lexicons as part of structural elaboration. Polysemy is the ability for a sign (or word) to designate multiple meanings (i.e. plurality of meaning), and helps to compensate for limited lexical inventories because it uses one linguistic form (phonetic shape) to function as multiple words (Holm, 2000). The semantically reanalyzed AAE forms that I will consider in this study are certainly polysemous lexemes (and examples of homophony or homonymy); however, I do not attribute this characteristic to language elaboration processes, as I do not find that African American English developed from a pidgin (but see Asante, 1990: 22-23 for this pidginization argument). I also do not find that the polysemy in the African American English lexicon occurred for the functional reasons it did in Atlantic, plantation creoles—i.e. as a word-building strategy part of lexical expansion—because I also do not find that African American English ever creolized (see e.g. Winford, 1999; Mufwene, 2000, for formation accounts that posit neither pidginization nor creolization for African American English). I will argue instead that while the polysemy in African American English did not result from a lexical deprivation/deficit, as was the case of expanding pidgins or creoles, it did stem from a social deprivation. I will elaborate on this position further in section 2.5.2, but first I will describe how semantic changes affect the scope and nature of word meanings.

## 2.4 SEMANTIC CHANGES: QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE

The consequences of semantic reanalysis can be described in countless ways; however, I wish to focus on two main aspects of shift: quantitative and qualitative semantic changes. Processes that alter the quantity of a semantic value either extend the field of a linguistic entity, i.e. *semantic extension*, or restrict the number of meanings intended by a particular entity, i.e. *semantic restriction* (cf. Bloomfield, 1933, *widening* and *narrowing*; Blank, 1999, *generalization* and *specialization of meaning*). Qualitative semantic changes involve processes that either elevate the meaning of a word (*amelioration*) so that it becomes more positive or that worsen the meaning (*pejoration*) so that it becomes more negative.

### 2.4.1 Quantitative Semantic Changes: Broadening and Restriction

*Semantic broadening*, as in the aforementioned case of pidgins, contributes to the polysemy of lexicons by making the semantic scope of a form more general; however, broadening is not limited to language contact situations. A familiar example of a semantic field becoming broadened involves the genericization of brand name items, that is, the adoption of trademarked names as generic terms to reference either the item or processes associated with it. This form of semantic extension results in (proprietary) eponyms or genericized trademarks. For example, to many English speakers as well as users of other languages, the trademark, *Kleenex*, has come to designate all facial tissues (i.e. *kleenexes*) no matter their brand names. The same can be same for the regional use of *Coke* (in the Southern U.S.), as the word originally referenced a trademarked brand of cola (i.e. Coca-Cola)—as it did it most regions of the country, but eventually came to indicate not only cola products but all carbonated soft drinks. The

genericization of *Kleenex* and *Coke* has also affected their lexical category memberships, so that the forms can now be common nouns in addition to proper nouns. Semantic widening also describes the Old English word, *dogge*, which originally designated a “particular breed of dog”, but has become the Modern English word for “any kind of dog” (Bussmann, Trauth, and Kazzazi, 1998: 420).

Adjustments to the semantic scope of form may result from purely linguistic forces, as I will discuss in the following sections; however, such changes may also result from external forces, for example, the introduction of new concepts to a speech community. In order to accommodate gaps in lexical fields, old words often acquire new references. In the field of transit, *coach* went from originally referencing any “large kind of [horse-drawn] carriage” in older varieties of English (around the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century), to referencing “railway [passenger] cars” (in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) (see the *Online Etymology Dictionary*<sup>2</sup>). With the introduction of new forms of transport, “coach” extended its reference to the “economy class” of an airplane (in 20<sup>th</sup> century American English), and also to the meaning, “comfortable motorbus”. Notice that these variant usages of *coach* ensued changes in technology (e.g. horse, steam, electric, and battery power) and/or new mediums of travel (i.e. land, air, and possibly water).

For bidialectal members of the African American English community who also participate in the Mainstream American English linguistic marketplace and social institutions, most if not all semantically reanalyzed words are polysemous. That is, they will have MAE denotations alongside their reanalyzed AAE meanings. For this reason, it was important to

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<sup>2</sup> The *Online Etymology Dictionary* lists several definitions for the term, *carriage*, including: (1) a ‘large kind of carriage’, which may be of Middle French, German, or Hungarian origin; (2) a railway car; and ‘economy or tourist class’. <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=coach&searchmode=none>> Retrieved 2009-09-07.

present words in the Identification Task to participants in the context of sentences when asking for a definition. For example, a *stupid* party can be *dumb* or *pointless*, as in MAE, or it can be *excellent*, according to reanalysis. The denotation will depend on attentiveness to the sentential content but also on a person's competence in the two English varieties. What became interesting was who was able to code-switch and identify both MAE and reanalyzed words "correctly" depending on context. Thus, some participants were either overgeneralizing the strategy or they were only aware of the semantically reanalyzed meaning. For example, participant 257 defined *stupid* in "That game was **stupid!** I don't wanna play anymore." as "enjoyable", which is the same way he defined *stupid* in the phrases "That party was stupid! You **shoulda** been there!" Thus, for him and other participants who do not recognize the multiple possible meanings for semantically reanalyzed terms—whether aside from the MAE definition or the reanalyzed definition, as with participant 257—such words are not polysemous.

*Semantic restriction*, on the other hand, describes semantic changes that narrow the semantic scope of forms. A reduction in the semantic field of a form is described as decline in taxonomy (Blank, 1999). This change is uncommon in contact-induced shift and, in fact, Stockwell and Minkova (2001: 158) describe it as unnatural altogether. The Old English word, *hund*, is one form that has become more specialized. Originally referring to any dog in general, *hound* now designates a "hunting breed" in Modern English. Thus, *dogge* (*dog*) and *hund* (or *hound*) have proceeded in opposite taxonomic directions, with the semantic quantity of the former increasing and the semantic field of the latter lexeme lessening.

Another example of narrowing in the semantic field comes from Holm (2000: 132-133), who explains how encounters with unfamiliar plants and animals in a new geographical context may necessitate semantic reanalyses. The Dutch lexicon, for example, was unaccustomed to the

local plants of what came to be known as the former Danish West Indies (currently the U.S. Virgin Islands), having been used in the moderate climate of Holland. Ultimately, semantic widening of Dutch lexemes enabled the lexicon to adapt to its new surroundings. Thus, the word ‘pin appel’, meaning ‘fir cone’, was reapplied to a tropical fruit resembling a pine cone. Eventually, both usages of pineapple were borrowed into English; however, while the original usage (i.e. “pine cone”) remains in some British varieties of English, General English has only retained the newest usage that denotes the tropical plant. Thus, whereas Dutch widened its semantic field and created homonymy (between the tropical fruit and the conifer cone) in order to encompass the unique *flora* and *fauna* of the Danish settlement, English restricted its semantic field, thereby eliminating the ambiguity caused by the polysemy of the word, *pineapple*.

Some trends of specification and restriction become evident upon synchronically comparing words across English dialect boundaries. Thus, both **dog**<sub>MAE</sub> and **dawg**<sub>AAE</sub> can refer to (a) man’s best friend; however, the list of possible referents for the former term is quite general so that the word can denote a companion but also any canine or even a canine that is not a companion, e.g. “a stranger’s dog”. **Dawg**<sub>AAE</sub>, the semantically reanalyzed word, on the other hand, will necessarily denote a human companion. Thus, in response to the filler sentences, “That’s my **dawg**, Rover. I got him from the dog pound.” participant 255 noted the infelicitous use of the word, saying “that’s not dawg, it’s dog.” Similarly, participant 258 recognized that <dawg> has a very specific meaning, writing “dawg should be pal.”

#### 2.4.2 Qualitative Semantic Changes : Pejoration and Amelioration

Changes in the semantic scope of forms may also be qualitative. *Pejoration* describes a decrease in the semantic quality of a form, whereas *amelioration* is characterized by an increase in

quality. Both processes may result from language-internal or extralinguistic forces. As a result of these processes, a semantic scope may be extended to include a new value alongside a preexisting one (i.e. semantic broadening), or replaced by the new meaning altogether (cf. semantic bleaching). It is our goal to better understand the process of amelioration, which yields the African American English lexemes in focus for this study. Thus, we will consider several instances of qualitative change in English, each with a different type of quantitative semantic shift. Although some linguists describe pejoration and amelioration as processes that alter the connotation of a form (cf. Traugott and Dasher, 2002), we will discuss qualitative semantic changes as affecting three types of meaning, that is, denotation and register in addition to connotation. *Connotative* changes alter the sense with which a word is used or the feeling evoked by a word, while *denotative* changes will affect the designee of the signifier. Shifts in *register*, on the other hand, impact the context or situation in which it is appropriate to use particular forms. We will first consider qualitative changes associated with *pejoration*, which depreciate the status of forms.

During the Norman Conquest of England, beginning in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there was an asymmetric relationship between the Norman invaders and the Anglo-Saxon subjects (Winford, 2003). The stratification of these groups extended to their languages, with French becoming the official and elite language of administration, instruction, the clergy, and of literacy, while Middle English acquired a lower status, becoming merely a vernacular. As is typically consequential of unequal language situations, there was an influx of loanwords from the dominant language into English. The borrowing of French into English (from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) was initially moderate, and was facilitated by a greater trend of community-wide language acquisition (i.e. language transfer) on the part of French speakers. As the Normans acquired English as their

second language, they imported native lexemes. The degree of lexical transfer or borrowing became extensive after the 13<sup>th</sup> century (but particularly during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) following the trend of language shift by Normans in England, who were replacing their native language with English. Although many borrowings were motivated by need—that is, because of gaps in the English lexicon for which there were no equivalents—some loans replaced English synonyms altogether (reductive change). Other words, adopted because of the prestige associated with the French language, merely supplemented their English synonyms (innovative change).

At this point, English's status began improving and the language acquired more functions, although French still maintained its official roles, for example, as the language of instruction. As Winford (2003) explains, the nature of French loanwords reflects the status of the source language for the lexemes. For example, *justice* and *finance* are two of the many higher register legal, administrative, and dining terms, respectively, that were imported into English (p. 36). Many French borrowings from the legal, governmental, and combat lexical fields replaced their Anglo-Saxon equivalents. Thus, “*dōm*”, was substituted by the French legal term, “judgment” (Vennemann, 2005: 14).

Still others reflect how the importation of (prestigious) French lexemes (e.g. meat terms) triggered the semantic shift of preexisting Middle English lexemes (of Germanic origin), thereby creating class distinctions in the Middle English lexicon to reflect the asymmetric power dynamic between the Normans and their English subordinates. Anglo-Saxon terms, like “ox” and “pig”, for example, were semantically reduced to one denotation (i.e. a “hunnable animal”) and pejorated to more informal registers (i.e. farm life) that would have corresponded with English's plebeian (functional) domain during the Norman Conquest (Vennemann, 2005: 15).



Their French replacements, “beef” (from *bœuf*) and “pork” (from *porc*), were narrowed to just their meat denotations, thereby omitting the second denotation that the words carried in French (i.e. reference to the live animal). The position of the French borrowings in a higher register reflects the prestige and refinement associated with Norman French, while their meat denotations are significant because such a food would have only been available to the (French-speaking) elite. Thus, the addition of French word to areas of the lexicon lacking lexical gaps resulted in the demotion of those preexisting (English) words to a lower register (of common speech).

Recall that Latin served official functions alongside Norman French, while English was the vernacular language (Winford, 2003). Accordingly, semantic distinctions were created by Latinate borrowings into English, which supplemented preexisting terms and reduced their Germanic equivalents to taboo forms. As Wajnryb (2005a: 202) explains in *Expletive Deleted*, “Latinate words seem particularly adept at taking the edge off—think of ‘copulate’ and ‘labia’. Indeed, until not so long ago, Latin served as a stand-in language when English became too risqué.” Wajnryb (2005b: 60) also explains how words that carried no stigma centuries ago, have now been pejorated by the presence of more “formal” terms: “We find the verb and noun FUCK as well as the adjective FUCKING happily and uninhibitedly romping through Scottish poems and folk songs” (author’s emphasis). By 1775, however, “fuck” was being described as ‘low’ and ‘vulgar’ (p. 61), and its Latinate equivalent, “copulate”, became the more appropriate of the two (Wajnryb, 2005a: 53). The same can be said for other Germanic derivatives, like “shit” and “ass”, whose Latin near-synonyms, “excrement” and “anus”, have relegated the words to a taboo area of the English lexicon. As a result, the Modern English meanings of these Germanic words have been limited to their negative senses (i.e. connotations) and/or registers (i.e. common language). Although Wajnryb (2005a: 53) considers it a “folk myth” that “dirty

words” are of one etyma (i.e. Anglo-Saxon), many English euphemisms are indubitably provided by Latinate borrowings. Another consideration may be that the creation of taboo terms often triggers language changes, which ultimately offer dysphemistic (more pejorative) and euphemistic (more positive) alternatives for preexisting words through the advent of new coinages, borrowings, and/or semantic shift (Allan and Burridge, 1991).

Pejoration may also be motivated from entirely intralinguistic forces, as occurred with the Old English word, “bitch”, which was originally a literal, zoological term referring to female canines, but eventually became a figurative, derogatory term for female humans. The semantic scope of “bitch”, however, has not been (entirely) narrowed to its negative meaning, as its original usage still persists. Nevertheless, Fillmore (1972: 11) explains the degree of semantic shift (i.e. pejoration and reduction) that the form has undergone, saying “the use of the word *bitch* in referring to an unpleasant adult female human was clearly figurative in its first instance, but when we find people who hesitate to use the word when speaking of a female dog, it is apparent that for them the insulting sense of the word does not draw on their creative abilities.”

The last example of pejoration I will consider involves the term, “girl”, which has undergone quantitative and qualitative reduction throughout the history of English. Curzan (2003: 149) explains that in the *Canterbury Tales*, written during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the term was used both gender-exclusively to reference female children (as it often does in contemporary English), but also to mean “child”, that is, as in a non-gender-specific sense that designates any sex. The term became excluded to only female children in early Modern English (by mid-15<sup>th</sup> century), occupying the same semantic scope as “slut” and “miss”. All three words followed a similar trajectory of pejoration, each coming to mean “prostitute” or “woman of questionable character” at various points between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (ibid, pp. 149-150). Of interest is

the fact that these words never completely lost their original meanings, but instead maintained their positive and negative meanings (i.e. “female child” and “whore”), though not always both at one time. In African American English, *girl* has actually undergone further reanalysis so that it no longer references just a “female child”, which might make it an offensive address term for a female adult (Troutman, 2001). Rather, its ameliorated form can denote a female friend of any age (see e.g. dialog 5.3 in section 5.2.3.) In the next section (2.5), we will reconsider patterns of degenerative change involving female-referencing words, like *girl*.

While my research is discussing examples of amelioration, many of these words are said to have undergone pejoration in their earlier histories. This is particularly true of racial epithets, *nigger*, *coon*, and *my boy*, all of which were semantically neutral terms—and may have had nothing to do with race at all—before they were appropriated by White speakers as derogatory terms for Blacks (see section 5.4).

*Amelioration*, which is the primary focus of this study, is the opposite of pejoration and is the process by which a meaning becomes more desirable or positive. Again, it is important to remember that shifts in meaning do not necessitate narrowing or extension of semantic range, nor does the process affect all words uniformly. Thus, we will consider the connotative, denotative, and register effects of amelioration. *Amelioration* has affected a number of lexemes in the English language. In *English Words*, Donka Minkova and Robert P. Stockwell (2001: 156) discuss how “knight” increased in its desirability, evolving from a term that refers to a male youth to one specifically referencing a (gentleman) soldier of status. Here, one can also see how the semantic range has narrowed from one denoting male children in general (as in Old English), to one only designating those who are of noble birth or particular class. The word “nice” has also evolved considerably over its long history, beginning as its Latinate root, ‘ne-scius’, which

literally meant ‘not knowing’ (Hall, 1950: 50). ‘Nice’ went through many stages of meaning, being reinterpreted as ‘silly’ in Old French, ‘foolish’ in Middle English, then ‘shy’, and ultimately as ‘pleasant’ or “likable” in Modern English (Lieberman, 2005: 195-196). According to Lieberman, ‘fond’ has a similar history, going from ‘foolish’ to “likeable” (p. 196).

In the following section, we will consider how underlying inequities in society are manifested through processes of semantic change, like pejoration and amelioration. Further, we will take note of several trends in semantic evolution, that is, what semantic fields tend to pejorate and what which tend towards to be more positive. Finally, we will consider what these patterns of change suggest about society and ideologies in language and segue to the present research study.

## **2.5 TRENDS OF CHANGE**

In the previous section, I introduced language changes that quantitatively alter the semantic values of forms, i.e. expansion and narrowing, as well as evolutions like pejoration and amelioration, which affect the qualitative nature of words. In this present section, I will briefly explore social agendas underlying semantic changes.

### **2.5.1 Pejoration**

According to Allan and Burridge (2006: 243), English contains a disproportionate number of connotatively negative terms for the semantic fields of bodily effluvia, body parts, and sexual acts, that is, in comparison with other semantic fields. Additionally, Allen (1990) finds that, in

comparison with terms for non-minorities, there is an abundance of epithets and derogatory terms for minority groups, including women (see also Curzan, 2003), ethnic minorities, and the doubly marginalized group, ethnic women. The pejoration of these semantic fields is commonly achieved through the use of metaphors, and animal terms are particularly common as metaphors for these semantic fields. For example, animal terms are dysphemistic of private parts (e.g. “cock” for *penis* or “ass” for *buttocks*), but they are also used as epithets for racial minorities and women. Thus, as previously discussed, “bitch” went from being a qualitatively neutral zoological term for female dogs to a taboo word used to derogatorily denote women (see discussion of term in section 2.4.2). Other instances of animal metaphors include the term “frog”, used for French speakers (cf. Heller, 2006), or “frog legs”, which is a gender-specific term used for French-speaking women (Allen, 1990: 42). “Mulatto” is yet another animal metaphor used in referencing minorities of mixed, black/white ancestry (p. 38). Nevertheless, some English speakers still use the term without any awareness of its underlying connotation, that is, that the root of the term for a mixed-race person plays on the fact that both a mulatto and a mule are hybrid creations.

Food terms are also employed heavily in reference to the abovementioned semantic fields. Thus, in the realm of private parts, the chest of females can be denoted with a variety of fruit terms, ranging from “melons” to “berries”, while male genitals are commonly called “nuts”. Most speakers of American English are also familiar with the widely used metaphor for the female hymen, i.e. *cherry* (Dupriez, 1991: 178). In addition to body parts, food has become a metaphor for minorities, with terms such as “dark meat” being used in reference to darker complexioned minorities in general or African American women, specifically (Allen, 1990: 40). Similarly, “fruit” is a derogatory term used to denote homosexuals. Other terms for ethnic

women include “hot tamale”, for Mexican women; “pineapple”, for Pacific-Islander women; and “banana” or “lemon”, which references the typically lighter skin color of multiracial women, namely those of Black/White parentage (ibid, p. 38).

One might ask what motivates these trends in figurative speech and pejoration, for example, with regard to the common use of animal and food metaphors to designate body parts, sexual acts, and minority groups. According to Allen (1990: 35), American English “terms of abuse for ethnic women are chiefly a male vocabulary of slang. Slang in general is mainly a male vocabulary, and its social referents tend to be stressful relations of all kinds.” Similarly, Allan and Burrige (1991: 119) name males as the primary users of obscenities and epithets, and suggest that men employ such language in an effort to seem masculine. These research claims suggest that epithets, termed “slang” by Allen”, are indicative of societal relations existing between males and a variety of other groups, including both gender and ethnic ones. For example, Allen (1990) explains the pejorative nature of terms for ethnic women reflects the sex and gender roles of males as well as ethnic quarrels. He also explains the reasoning behind the use of animal and food metaphors, which he says figuratively depersonalize sexual acts and objectify the sexual partner (i.e. women). I believe this explanation can be extended and applied to the usage of nonhuman metaphors used to reference ethnic groups. That is, the use of food and animal terms for minorities is an attempt to figuratively depersonify them. Therefore, it indexes (Silverstein, 1996; Johnstone and Kiesling, 2008), i.e. points to and also helps constitute, the tumultuous relationship between these marginalized groups and other (i.e. White or mainstream) males (Allen, 1990).

Now that we have heard Allen’s (1990) argument that pejorative language—e.g. regarding body parts, sexual acts, and minorities—is a reflection of greater social tensions, let us

begin considering the semantic shift of racialized metaphors and of other culturally related concepts. Considering the semantic shift of racialized metaphors and other culturally related terms will lay the foundation for discussing the expropriation of racial epithets as parts of African American English semantic reanalysis.

We saw that the processes of metaphorization (of a targeted group) and pejoration of that metaphor are employed strategically by particular and usually more socially dominant groups. In the same way that such semiotic processes are used as attempts to maintain covert bigotry, for example, with homophobic, heteronormative words like “fruit” or sexist words like “bitch”, the strategic shift of originally neutral or inoffensive language has also been employed in order to project its ideas and to reproduce racist ideologies. Earlier, we considered racist language targeting ethnic minority women, in general, but let us now consider exclusively the epithets derived for the African American group.

### **2.5.1.1 Pejoration of Black-related language**

For African Americans, or racial groups in general, the process of pejoration has involved the metaphorization of a color term; in this case, black. Through the racialization of the black color metaphor—but not definitively before or after the color was chosen—black also underwent pejoration. Accordingly, one may notice that there is an all-too-common indexical relationship between *blackness* and derogatory qualities. Indexicality is a mode of signification by which some entity comes to stand for another (Silverstein, 1996; Johnstone and Kiesling, 2008). This color indexicality, for example, is demonstrated by pejorative words like *denigrate*, literally meaning “to blacken”. These indexicalities are problematic because while color has become a metaphor for race, black is also still a non-racialized, metaphorical pejorative morpheme in English lexemes like *blacklist*, *black comedy*, *black magic*, *black humor*, or *black marketeering*.

This indexicality can lead to the presupposition that black is something negative. In effect, English semantics has been argued (e.g. Goatly, 2007) to be one semiotic means employed in order to reinforce an association between blackness and badness in the semantics of the English language, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of *de facto* racism.

There is a pivotal scene in Spike Lee's (1992) movie, *Malcolm X*, in which Malcolm is on the verge of converting to Islam and begins to look up the dictionary definitions for *black* and *white*. After his dictionary perusal, one might say that Malcolm notices a strong correlation between positive denotations for the word *white*, and negative associations with the word *black*. In that scene, also recounted in *Engaging Film* by Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon (2002), Malcolm has an epiphany about words and their creators or coiners. That is, he recognizes that language use often reflects the ideas and worldviews of their creators and users. Malcolm is then able to deduce a reason for why, in the dictionary, *white* overwhelmingly references a positive attribute and *black* negative ones. He exclaims, "Wait a minute, this was written by white folks, though, right?" (p. 251).

Malcolm's epiphany about the frequency with which users of the English language associate certain qualities with certain colors is one experienced and subsequently explored by a number of scholars in their research. Goatly (2007: 46) also notes how "black" is defined as *evil* or *wicked*, while "good" is "clean/white" and "fair" is 'morally correct or just.' Their discoveries make several important implications about language. First, they suggest that the signifier-signified relationship between forms and words (i.e. lexemes) and their meanings (i.e. semantics) is not an arbitrary one (i.e. symbolic), but instead one that has become indexicalized (Silverstein, 1996). The suggestion of an indexical relationship between certain colors and certain qualities offers a second important point, which is that language is naturally arbitrary.



That is, connections between entities like *whiteness* and *goodness* or *blackness* and *badness* are social constructions. Therefore, qualities and lexemes, that is, the signifier and the signified, have to be socially associated or linked. To put it another way, *whiteness* is not inherently *good*, nor is *blackness* naturally *bad*, and neither is the reverse true for these colors.

How then does a socially-created indexicality become naturalized? Indexical signs are more likely to become naturalized after the signified and the signifier have been habitually linked. Because words which demean *blackness* or revere *whiteness* are linked through language use—a very ordinary practice—these associations can be enshrined daily, for example, when we excuse a falsehood because it is a white lie, or when we think of white magic as an antidote to the evil of black magic. Using Michel Foucault’s idea of a ‘régime of truth’, Heller (2006: 11) explains that compliance with the norm and idea of certain, hegemonic groups implies, “It is the right, normal, natural way to do things for everyone, despite the fact that only certain people get to make up the rules, and hence profit from the fact that they do so, while putting everyone else at a disadvantage.” In short, it can be argued that we are furthering these associations in addition to endorsing a particular culture’s concepts of bad and good whenever we use *black* or *white* as metaphors for badness and goodness, respectively.

Given that everyday metaphors are only referring directly to inanimate beings in a non-racial schema, like (white) lies or (black) magic, one might ask why the realizations of Goatly (2007) and Spike Lee’s character, Malcolm, merit any consideration. The use of *black* and *white* to denote negative and positive qualities, respectively, could be problematic because the same color terms in English have been used to metaphorically describe skin color and, in turn, have become metaphor terms for U.S. racial categories. Thus, we can refer to certain groups of humans as White, while we refer to other groups as Black and so forth. In *Washing the brain:*

*metaphor and hidden ideology*, Goatly relates metaphorical patterns and themes, like the aforementioned uses of *white* and *black*, to an array of areas in contemporary life in order to reveal how metaphors construct our conceptualizations of the world and our social behavior. He discusses how some ideologies, such as capitalist, conservative, or other, create and exploit metaphors to support their ideologies. Thus, he argues that English lexemes that reinforce the association of *blackness* with pejorative qualities—as do *blackguard*, *blackleg*, *black economy*, *black market*, and *black sheep*—prolong “the prejudice created by these associations between evil, crime, and people of African races” (ibid, p. 46). Goatly believes that because of the negative value *black* has received in English, many nonwhites are reluctant to identify themselves with color labels. At the same time, he claims that the color metaphor underlying the English language has made ethnic labels more easily accepted by whites, considering that “good is clean/white” while *fair* is ‘morally correct or just’.

Thankfully—for the targets of (overtly or subliminally) pejorative language and epithets, i.e. gender, sexual, ethnic and racial minorities—one of the most reliable aspects of language is the regularity of its evolution and, in particular, the short lifespan of slang terms. As Connie Eble (1996) discusses in *Slang & Sociability*, amelioration is more common in slang than in other areas of the lexicon. Part of the regenerative capability of taboo forms stems from language-internal mechanisms, like the coining of new lexemes, or external processes, such as borrowing (lexical incorporation, calquing, or loan coinages), which change the meanings of words. Also, as discussed in a previous section (2.4), semantic shift may extend the meaning of a word to include more positive values alongside derogatory ones, thereby enabling previously condemned words to be (re)cycled into the accepted, basic vocabulary of a language.

## 2.5.2 Amelioration

### 2.5.2.1 Amelioration of sexist, homophobic, and racist epithets

It is our goal here to better understand the amelioration process that yields the African American English lexemes in focus for this study. This type of semantic shift has been responsible for the reinvention of negative words in a number of English varieties alongside AAE. Such recycled words include formerly pejorative titles for linguistic, sexual, gender, and racial minorities. Brontsema (2004) discusses this process as *linguistic expropriation*, whereby the targets of pejorative terms *reclaim* derogatory words and redefine them for in-group usage. Chen (1998: 130) discusses this same mechanism, saying “reclaiming refers to an array of theoretical and conventional interpretations of both linguistic and non-linguistic collective acts in which a derogatory sign or signifier is consciously employed by the ‘original’ target of the derogation, often in a positive or oppositional sense.” Examples of reappropriated or reclaimed epithets include the progressive use of formerly sexist language by mainstream feminist women, e.g. *cunt*, or the reclamation of homophobic epithets by younger homosexuals, e.g. *queer*. Brontsema also considers the in-group usage of the racial epithet, *nigger*, which can identify a fellow Black person as a ‘best friend’ (cf. Smitherman, 1997) or even one’s lover (cf. Smitherman, 1977).

Monica Heller’s (2006) *Linguistic Minorities and Modernity: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography* similarly discusses an appropriation of epithets by students at a Toronto French-language high school called l’École Champlain. Francophone students at this high school have adopted *frog*, a formerly pejorative out-group term used to denote francophone Canadians and Québécois. Such students reappropriate the language epithet, *frog*, as their high school mascot, thereby reassigning it a positive symbol. Heller further describes that this term eventually became adopted by local and provincial francophone organizations.

Yet another example of semantic amelioration is found in Bailey (2002), which elaborates on the adoption of gendered taboo terms in the cases of African American and Dominican female high school students in a particular Rhode Island. Rosa, one consultant in Bailey's ethnography, describes such innovative language use among marginalized groups, saying: "you'll see Black girls calling each other 'bitch' in a friendly way, and you'll see Dominicans calling each other *putas* ['whores']...in a friendly way. But you don't see that in White people (p. 112). Now, Rosa's restriction of positive curse word use to Blacks and Dominicans may or may not be accurate, as this usage of *bitch* may also be characteristic of Whites. Nevertheless, if nothing more, it is remarkable that this student thinks of such language as uniquely her own, i.e. exclusive to minorities, and says a great deal about her attitudes towards language and society and the empowering quality of semantic reanalysis for ethnic minorities. I will return to this topic in later chapters (6.1), discussing similar, exclusionary attitudes among participants of my research.

### **2.5.2.2 Amelioration of non-epithets**

Semantic reanalysis extends beyond expropriated epithets to the realm of terms whose original use is not nearly as controversial as derogatory ethnic labels, but which nevertheless follow interesting trajectories of meaning change because they show the constant ability for language users to reinvent language. We find a number of these ameliorated words in African American English. Such words often have Mainstream American English homophones, that is, words that are phonetically similar but which contrast in meaning. Several of such terms are found in Smitherman's (1994) dictionary of African American English and include individual words, like *fat*, as well as whole phrases, such as *get out of here*. Regarding the former, Smitherman explains: "'Fat,' spelled *phat* in Hip Hop, refers to a person or thing that is excellent and

desirable, reflecting the traditional African value that human body weight is a good thing” (p. 18). Likewise, rather than being a callous command, she discusses “git outa here” as “a response of enthusiasm or surprise” (p. 147). Through this study we can better understand the amelioration process that yields and links epithets, like *nigger*, with other semantically shifted lexemes, like *fat* and *get out of here*. It is my position that Blacks are strategically employing language (i.e. via semantic reanalysis) as a means of differentiating themselves from Mainstream culture and as a mechanism of gate-keeping that bars non-community members from the Black community.

The remainder of this thesis will focus on elucidating a linguistic mechanism the targets pejorative language, e.g. epithets, as well as phrases like *shut your mouth*. The primary focus, of course, will be AAE users and their employment of semantic reanalysis as one responsive strategy.

### **3.0 SOCIOHISTORICAL CONTEXT**

We previously established that African American English (AAE) encompasses “the whole of language use in the African American community” (Lanehart, 2001: 7), thus it is important to consider the development of this speech community in relation to the collective experiences of Black people. As Blauner (1970: 352) explains, “it is because black Americans have undergone unique experiences in America, experiences that no other national or racial minority or lower class groups have shared, that a *distinctive* ethnic culture has evolved.” Much like Smitherman (1977), Blauner names slavery, the subculture of the American South, racism, Emancipation, and poverty as sources of Black culture. Like Smitherman and Blauner, I will also consider these experiences as the ecology that contributed to the restructuring of English and the subsequent yielding of African American English. I will begin by discussing the linguistic history of African American English and the cultural matrix of its formation in section 3.1. This sociohistorical overview will provide the framework for my discussion of the impetuses behind semantic reanalysis.

#### **3.1 AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH: LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND**

The Transatlantic Slave Trade ushered in the largest diaspora of African people between the 16th and 19th centuries. As many as 15 million people survived the Middle Passage from slave ports

on the Western (i.e. “the Slave Coast”) and Eastern regions of Africa, while an unknown number perished on the sea. Of these survivors, an estimated 500,000 arrived to a port in Boston, New York, Norfolk, or Charleston as early as 1619. These importations continued until March 3, 1807, when the Atlantic Slave Trade was crippled by President Jefferson’s decision to back a bill that would outlaw the importation of slaves to anywhere within the jurisdiction of the United States. This bill aimed at the gradual end of the international slave trade but did not abolish U.S. slavery.

The mass importation of a Niger-Congo labor force to the U.S. and the almost 250-year period of their enduring bondage would introduce to the North American context what is still a remarkable case of prolonged, intercultural, language contact. Although there are several debates regarding the exact nature of the restructuring processes that yielded African American English (e.g. the *Dialectologist* and *Creolist* hypotheses), there is, however, general agreement that the early North American ecology left little room for preservation of African languages or even “true”/radical creoles (see also section 3.3). Let us focus on two main phases of the variety: the language shift of Africans and the emergence of a new English variety; and the divergence of the variety away from General American English in order to form AAE.

Towards the latter part of the 17th century, the polarizing atmosphere of U.S. society began laying the foundation for the formation of a new English variety, known as *African American English*. This variety would become entwined with ethnolinguistic identities of its speakers (Mufwene, 2001: 87). Much like other New Englishes, that is, “varieties that have resulted from the English colonial expansion” (ibid, p. 106), the development of African American English coincided with the identity reconstruction of people of African descent in the American sociohistorical context (Schneider, 2003). It was also a result of the United States’

tobacco and cotton production, industries which facilitated the servitude and Black Experience that Smitherman (1986) claims is embedded in the variety.

Its ancestral languages are of the Niger-Congo persuasion and they began converging with English immediately following the involuntary capture of their speakers, which is long before most immigrants cease use of their first language. There are several reliable ways of predicting the trajectory of change for a language in contact, that is, whether the language will be abandoned (shift), whether it will be preserved in its speech community (maintenance), or whether it will coexist with other varieties in separate systems (bilingualism) or even a single variety (language genesis). According to Paulston (1986), the origin of contact, the degree of enclosure, and the degree of control are three factors that determine a language's course. We can also supplement these predictors with constraints, such as the nature, degree, and/or intensity of contact; demographic factors (e.g. size, sex, and age of population); the location of contact, et cetera (cf. Arends, 1994). To better understand why the U.S. yielded a variety much different than those in other plantation contexts, i.e. where plantation creoles formed, let us briefly consider AAE in light of these aforementioned determinants. Understanding these details surrounding the formation of African American English will help to elucidate why West African semantic retention is an unlikely source of semantic reanalysis in modern-day AAE.

Just like most peoples who comprise the current U.S., West Africans immigrated to the North American context; however, the origin of their contact with Europeans or, more specifically, English speakers is different in that it was an involuntary migration. The origin of contact is important not only in understanding the emergent contact variety but also in determining the language attitudes of groups towards other languages in the contact situation (e.g. their attitudes towards the acquisition of the dominant variety). Ogbu (1999), for example,



finds the major difference between voluntary immigrants (e.g. recent African immigrants) and involuntary immigrants of the U.S. (e.g. Black Americans who descend from African slaves) is that the first group consented to joining U.S. society whereas the latter group did not. This distinction is important because people who were involuntarily brought to the U.S. view themselves and their languages as oppositional to the dominant U.S. culture for the very fact that the relationship was forced (see also Smitherman, 1977, the role of the Black Experience in the emergence of the AAE lexicon). Thus, the involuntary and migratory origins of Black-White contact in the U.S. will be important to our discussion of Black Americans' language use and the ideologies underlying their linguistic behavior.

One parallel between these immigrating populations is that the American colonies were not the native land (i.e. host country) of either Blacks or Europeans immigrants; however, I am hesitant to refer to the American contact location as one of neutral ground, since the first English immigrants had a 12 year head start, arriving in 1607 while the first Blacks arrived in 1619. *Host country* and *neutral ground* contact settings render languages that are termed *endogenous* and *exogenous* varieties, respectively (Arends, 1994: 31). This distinction in location is important because it considers two critical factors of contact-induced language change: 1) the notion of access to the target language, and 2) the *Founder Principle*. The notion of access to the target of acquisition considers whether the native languages of the contact groups will be spoken in the context. The range of a language's use and its availability to language users, in turn, predicts the rate (or even possibility) of shift for current speakers, whether the language will be natively acquired by subsequent generations (i.e. direct transmission), and determines the contribution that the languages will make to emergent contact varieties. The *Founder Principle* (Arends, 1994: 38; Mufwene, 2001) determines the linguistic output of a contact situation by considering

the founder of a settlement. According to this principle, the founder population's language will have a significantly greater impact on the emergent contact varieties of that settlement. According to the notion of target access and the Founder Principle, minor African input would be expected in AAE because the native languages of slaves were not widely available in the U.S. (i.e. an exogenous context) nor were they spoken by the founder population.

While Europeans and West Africans were both immigrants to the U.S., an unequal power dynamic significantly differentiated these immigrant groups. In "Social Factors in language maintenance and language shift", Paulston (1986: 11) references Lieberman et al.'s (1975) four types of contact populations: 1) "indigenous superordinate," 2) "migrant superordinate," 3) "indigenous subordinate," and 4) "migrant subordinate." According to this text, minimal or no native language shift is predicted for the first two cases, while a gradual rate of shift is expected for the third group. Rapid L1 shift is expected only among the fourth group and, thus, would have been the norm among the Niger-Congo languages or basilectal creoles spoken as mother tongues by the earliest U.S. slave populations.

Regarding the matters of degree of control and degree of enclosure, we know that upon arrival in the U.S., these human "imports" were not left to their own devices. Rather, their successful incorporation into the existing society was integral to their productivity as a labor force and to the hegemony of the dominant group. As Baugh (1983: 13) explains: "Blacks coming to this new world were systematically isolated from other speakers of their native language. Slave traders engaged in this practice, thereby deliberately planning the death of African languages, to restrict possible uprisings during the Atlantic crossing." The ethnolinguistic segregation of Blacks and the superimposition of communicative barriers as means to prevent intra-ethnic solidarity precluded the maintenance of native tongues and gave

way to language and cultural restructuring. Singler (2006: 344) discusses the linguistic implications of this system of exclusion, saying: “Two points come to mind readily. The first is that the need for the contact variety to serve as a medium for interethnic communication (Baker 1990) would always have been far greater...The second is that, *ceteris paribus*, if the substratal input is heterogeneous, substratal influence on the emergent creole is likely to be weaker (Singler 1988).”

From what Singler (2006) reveals in his article, “Yes, but not in the Caribbean”, the degree of Black intra-ethnic enclosure was very similar for Caribbean and U.S. plantations alike. Thus, one is left to wonder why modern African American English exhibits a lesser degree of African feature incorporation than do the contact varieties of other plantations throughout the Americas. This answer may be found in concept of target language access, that is, by considering the nature of contact between the L1 and L2 groups.<sup>3</sup> For early African Americans then, we know that there was a large degree of access to the English L2.

Baugh (1983: 13), for example, finds regular and prolonged interracial contact to have been scarce in places, like Pittsburgh, in the Northern U.S: “In the North very few whites had extended exposure to blacks, that is, in a broad range of social circumstances.” Contrastingly, he finds extensive contact to have been the norm in the South: “Slave overseers, who were among the lowest social class of whites, as well as wealthy plantation owners, who had house slaves and ‘mammies’ for their children, lived and worked in the close proximity to black people.” In addition to the impact of the accessibility of native English speakers for Blacks in the U.S., Hancock (1987: 269) presents evidence that the ratio of language speakers favored Blacks’ full or partial acquisition of the dominant language, as he explains that “those arriving with a

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<sup>3</sup> Some scholars operationalize the notion of L2 access in terms of physical isolation, group size, and participation in social institutions (cf. Paulston, 1986: 17).

knowledge of creole were outnumbered by speakers of metropolitan English” (Schneider, 1990: 87). Similarly, Mufwene (2001: 63) attributes the different linguistic outputs across New World plantations to the duration of population disparities, explaining that Whites outnumbered Blacks for longer spans of time in “the Southeastern hinterlands” of the U.S. than in the Sea Islands of the U.S. or in many Caribbean territories, like Jamaica and Haiti.

Altogether, these factors of extreme L2 access, Black-White population disparities, and prolonged interracial contact made inevitable the convergence of English and the slaves’ languages (i.e. basilectal creoles or Niger-Congo languages) and the substantial loss of West African linguistic features.

In sections 2.1 and 2.2, I discussed how language and culture contact can introduce semantic changes to a variety via borrowing, transfer, and other mechanisms. I cited Haitian Kreyòl, Jamaican Creole and Creolese of Guyana as creoles with West African calques. These creoles all formed in *sociétés d’plantation*, which contrast with *sociétés d’habitation* in terms of Black/White population demographics and their linguistic products. After surveying the sociohistories of Pittsburgh (section 3.1.1 and 3.1.2) and general African American English (3.2) and considering that this ecology did not favor the preservation of West African (i.e. substratal) elements, a West African retention account (Smitherman, 1977) for the presence of semantic reanalysis in modern African American English looks implausible. It is unlikely that Blacks in early Pittsburgh would have retained Africanisms, even as a possible L2 variety. It is also improbable that substratal semantic elements were maintained in even the more divergent varieties that were spoken throughout the South—excepting, of course, creole varieties in the Low Country in the Southeast—that would have been transplanted to the North during a Northward migration.

This next section provides background knowledge on the Black presence in early Pittsburgh and a survey of the sociohistorical and demographic evolution of the Rankin borough (the location of the two study sites for this research). This will better enable us to understand 1) the linguistic practices, repertoire, and choices of study respondents and 2) why this particular sample population was a good choice for studying the process of semantic change among African American English users. As Smitherman (1977: 206) explains: “In order to understand the AAVE lexicon, one needs to understand how and why this nation within a nation developed its unique way of using the English language.”

### **3.2 THE BLACK PRESENCE IN EARLY PITTSBURGH**

*Exodus* comes from *ex hodos*, the Greek word meaning “road” or “way out”. There have been several great exoduses in the history of civilization, but of interest to our study are the migratory trends that lead Blacks to Pittsburgh, namely, the departure of Black Americans from Southern states. Mass displacements of people are almost always motivated by a combination of several factors: political and ethnic conflicts, famine, human rights situations and, most predominantly, economic insecurity (Henderson, 2000). Accordingly, the large-scale migration of seven million African Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was caused by unfavorable conditions that dispelled them away from the South and motivated them to search for better opportunities in northern and western areas of the United States. The Black Northern migration can be accredited with the introduction of more divergent, Southern AAE varieties to Blacks in Pittsburgh (Gooden, 2009). Furthermore, it reintroduced ethnolinguistic enclosure to the area, albeit of a de facto nature at this time. Enclosure would have favored the divergence of the AAE variety and possibly its

semantics, as ethnolinguistic segregation is often responsible for linguistic differentiation between varieties that would otherwise have more in common.

The history of Black Pittsburgh, however, does not begin with the Great Migration of the 1900s, but instead long before the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even earlier than the birth of the United States.

### **3.2.1 Pittsburgh from the Homestead Phase to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century**

African Americans began arriving in western Pennsylvania as early as the mid-1700s, not long after the influx of Whites (Glasco, 2004). When the wave of settlement first began at the British post at Fort Pitt, Blacks were among the slaves and laborers responsible for erecting log cabins for settlers. Some came as Black soldiers, frontiersmen, fort builders and servants, while others arrived as slaves for settlers from Virginia and Maryland, who established plantations near Fort Pitt. Unknown numbers of these Blacks were also of Native American and/or White ancestry, while still others were born in West Africa and brought to America as slaves. An unknown number of these Blacks Pittsburghers would fight with the Continental Army during the Revolution.

After its abandonment by the French, Fort Duquesne joined Fort Pitt as one of several permanent British fortifications<sup>4</sup>. Eventually, following the French and Indian War and Pontiac's War, the British Crown decided to abandon its posts as well, leaving it the hands of local settlers. This outpost, lying just west of the Allegheny Mountains, was eventually renamed *Pittsburgh* after Prime Minister William Pitt. Although poor recordkeeping makes it

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<sup>4</sup> Fort Pitt Museum. <http://www.fortpittmuseum.com/History.html>. Retrieved 2009-09-01.

impossible to determine the exact number of Blacks in Pittsburgh during the city's foundation, historians estimate that 42 Black frontiersmen were present in 1758 when General John Forbes first used the name "Pittsburgh" in a letter to Prime Minister Pitt (Glasco, 2004: 37).

In March of 1780, while the American Colonists were still at war with Great Britain, the Pennsylvania Assembly ratified *An Act For the Gradual Abolition of Slavery*. This legislation freed all Blacks born on Pennsylvania soil after enactment of the law and required that all other slaves be registered or freed. A series of similar acts followed in order to enforce the original act. As a result of the new legislation, many slaveholders relocated to newer settlements with their slaves. The departure of some slaveholders and a degree of economic disadvantage in Pittsburgh reduced both the population of slaves and the popularity of slavery in Pittsburgh.

By 1790, records were showing there were only 159 (documented) slaves in Allegheny County. The linguistic implications of this ecology suggest that the language of the early Black Pittsburgh English settlers during this homestead phase would have been a non-creole (L2) English variety. This prediction follows the linguistic projection of Chaudenson (cited in Klingler, 2003: 54) for any "société d'habitation"—i.e. a small farm society characteristic of a colony's initial phase"—when Whites drastically outnumbered Blacks. This type of climate did not favor the preservation of African languages or linguistic features and, thus, greatly contrasted with sociétés d'plantation (e.g. in rural Guyana, Jamaica, and Haiti) that did. The nature of the emerging variety of Black English would have also been dependent on the social structure as well and, thus, it is important to take into account factors like racial segregation when speculating about the nature of a language.

Not only was Pittsburgh more progressive than other U.S. cities with regard to its slavery legislation, but the conditions of its slaves were generally more favorable than that of Blacks in

the South. As Glasco (2004: 46) explains: “there was no opposition, as there was in the South, to education and care for moral and intellectual well-being.” Even where there were barriers intending to exclude African Americans from mainstream institutions, there were efforts on the part of Black Pittsburgh to create opportunities for its own. As Glasco (p. 4) explains, “the community placed great emphasis on education, maintaining its own school and encouraging higher education.”

With so many *attractive* forces (Henderson, 2000: 235) and particularly for the prospect of emancipation, it is no surprise that as early as the late-18<sup>th</sup> century, Blacks were beginning to relocate to Pittsburgh in quest of such advantages. In 1800, Pittsburgh was home to 64 Black slaves and only a few freemen, which evolved to a mere 165 Blacks in 1818. In the 1820s, as part of a growing trend of northward migration, an influx of escaped slaves and Black freemen lead to further population growth (Glasco, 2004). Accordingly, records from 1837 place the Pittsburgh population of “Africans” at 2,400, comprising five percent of the entire Pittsburgh population by 1850.

When we consider the Black-White population disparity in 19<sup>th</sup> century Pittsburgh as well as the exclusion of African Americans from the Standard English marketplace, then it becomes more difficult to pinpoint the exact nature of this early Black English variety. The idea of a “societe d’habitation” predicts that the variety would have never creolized and would not be very divergent from White settler varieties of English. However, segregation (ethnically and linguistically homogenous communities and institutions) might have eventually allowed early Black Pittsburgh English to diverge from White varieties, thereby creating its own linguistic norms. Nevertheless, we should not assume that the early variety of Pittsburgh AAE resembled the speech of its southern neighbors in structure or concerning the sociohistorical factors their



developments. Briefly, the different linguistic trajectories of Pittsburgh and southern Black Englishes are due to a plethora of circumstances. Notably, while there was also a White majority on many southern plantations during the crystallization of Southern Black English (see section 3.2), there was no formal education for southern Blacks in comparison to those in Pittsburgh (see e.g. Glasco, 2004: 46). Thus, although we can say that neither variety ever creolized because of the White majority during their early histories and that both are, therefore, nonstandard, L2 varieties of English, Pittsburgh AAE would have certainly been closer to Mainstream English varieties because of the greater degree of access of Pittsburgh Blacks to formal schooling.

### **3.2.2 Pittsburgh from the late-19<sup>th</sup> century onward**

Steady waves of European immigration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries dramatically affected the composition of Pittsburgh, supplying the bulk of the city's White industrial labor force. Meanwhile, Blacks generally remained in service occupations though occasionally intervening as "scabs" (i.e. stand-in workers) during labor strikes. Due to trends of heavy migration and rapid population growth during this time period, Pittsburgh soon became the sixth largest city and boasted the sixth largest Black population (at over 20,000) in 1900.

Between the 1880s and the 1950s during this period of population growth, Rankin was among the communities that attracted large populations of central Europeans to its industrial mills. Newly arriving immigrants added to older populations of inhabitants with a longstanding presence in the community, dating back (before the 1700s) to its Shawnee, Iroquois and Delaware Indian inhabitants and then to the beginnings of White settlement (i.e. English, Scottish, and Jewish statesmen). As study participant 247 recalled, and Karaczun (1992) confirms, Rankin grew to become quite a melting pot complete with increasing numbers of

Serbian, Croatian, Jewish, Italian (p. 3), and, as early as the 1890s, Southern-born African Americans. This diverse borough was further characterized by relatively peaceful race relations and even interethnic and, occasionally, interracial marriages, though its population dynamic later changed with increasing immigration and other milestones in the community.

The influx of European immigrants to the U.S. came to a halt with the beginning of the First World War in 1914, resulting in a labor shortage for Pittsburgh industry. This shortage of laborers provided Blacks with an opportunity to enter the workforce. Industrial employers, in search of alternative labor sources, began accepting Black male laborers. With the prospect of better economic opportunities to supplement the relatively favorable social status of Pittsburgh Blacks—i.e. in comparison to the conditions of the American South—Southern African Americans had further incentives to relocate to the industrial north as well as sufficient reasons (e.g. social inequality, servile conditions, a tumultuous racial climate, et cetera) to abandon southern states. According to Henderson (2000: 235) the combination of these *repellent* and *attractive* forces led African Americans to trek northward in what was the largest migration of freed Blacks. African Americans came from all throughout the Deep South, but particularly the states of Georgia and Alabama. The settlement of African Americans in Allegheny County was aided by the establishment of Hawkins village, a housing project in Rankin, whose founding participant 247 dates back to the years of 1942 and 1943.

The Black northern migration continued throughout World War II and into 1970, and resulted in the establishment of an African American working class and urban Black communities throughout the northern United States. As the Black population of Rankin and, in particular, Hawkins Village increased, the population of White Rankinites decreased in inverse proportions. The socioeconomic face of Rankin began to shift so that what had been one of the more

promising economies in Allegheny County became less favorable. The availability of better opportunities and resources for the descendents of European immigrants outside Rankin drew many White members of the community to other boroughs, with few new families entering the community. Rankin's population has thus grown older, Blacker, and more ethnically and linguistically homogenous. With younger and Whiter populations leaving the borough in search of better employment opportunities, it is no surprise that, having dropped 8.9 percent since 2000<sup>5</sup>, the population was 2,108 in 2008. Thus, almost one century later (in 2008), Rankin has less people than the 1910 population of 6,042 people and significantly fewer residents than its 1940 population of 7,470.

According to the census of 2005-2007, African Americans now make up the second largest ethnic group in Pittsburgh, at roughly 27.12 percent of the entire population<sup>6</sup>, while Rankin's population is 69.33 percent Black and nearly 28 percent White. Its socioeconomic face has also changed drastically since earlier times so that it is no longer thriving. While the estimated household income for Pennsylvanians was \$48,576 in 2007, the estimate for Rankin was \$16,745. Because of the racial uniformity of the area along with its overall socioeconomic status, many of those remaining in the area have further begun to see themselves as a separate unit, apart from the Mainstream. As discussed in Chapter 6, this sense of separateness has led to the use of semantic reanalysis as a (responsive) strategy by which to enact further linguistic divergence from members of mainstream culture.

The next section introduces the two sites of data collection: Mount Olive Baptist Church and the Rankin Christian Center.

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<sup>5</sup> Onboard Informatics. <http://www.city-data.com/city/Rankin-Pennsylvania.html#ixzz0QKkMkqNd>. Retrieved 2009-09-06.

<sup>6</sup> United States Census Bureau. <http://factfinder.census.gov>. Retrieved 2009-09-01.

### 3.2.3 “Steadfast and Unmovable”: African American Culture and the Black Church

Mount Olive Baptist Church and the Rankin Christian Center were selected because of their high Black patronage and their central roles within the Rankin community. However, whereas the former has been predominately Black since its founding in 1893, the latter went through a period of segregation following its founding in 1904.

Geneva Smitherman (1977: 43) suggests that Black Semantics (i.e. the semantics of African American English) derives from four traditions: a West African linguistic input; “servitude and oppression; music and ‘cool’ talk; [and] the traditional black church.” I argue here that the history of the church and related religious institutions are ideal sites for the observation of Black cultural phenomena.

The primary reason behind selecting religious institutions for data collection was the need for a naturalistic setting, that is, places wherein I could observe and obtain authentic data. Desegregation has led to the decline of traditional Black institutions and to the decreasing cultural integrity of remaining institutions, making it difficult to find settings for the observation of Black cultural forms. Barbershops and beauty shops, however, are two places wherein one can still encounter authentic, Black (albeit gender-specific) cultural forms. Such businesses are also frequented by Blacks of all socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g. occupational and educational) along with a variety of age groups or generations. The benefit of conducting observations in religious institutions is that, in addition to them being generationally and socioeconomically diverse, they are more gender inclusive than Black-owned and -patronized businesses, like barbershops or beauty salons.

The church has also been credited as “the [Black] community’s most important institution” by Glasco et al. (1995: 6), and as “the oldest and perhaps still the most powerful and

influential black institution” by Smitherman (1977: 90). Historically, the exclusion of Blacks from many mainstream establishments contributed to the church’s vital role in the Black community; serving as a sanctuary from racial prejudice as well as a vehicle for motivating Blacks to action. Although desegregation and, in turn, greater opportunities have diversified the social networks of many Blacks, the church remains one of the unifying domains where Blacks reconvene irrespective of their (social) differences. The church has furthermore been an avenue allowing for the preservation of African American cultural forms, particularly its oral traditions. According to Smitherman, “the traditional black church remains an important source of African cultural survivals (p. 55). While Karaczun (1992: 11) does not recognize African survivals in modern African American culture, he does acknowledge the Baptist Church as medium for the transmission of “southern Negro culture.”

Mount Olive Baptist Church is one of four main Black churches in the predominantly Black borough of Rankin, selected because of my prior knowledge of its patrons through regular attendance at the church. This familiarity with Mount Olive Baptist Church facilitated my access to both the research sites and, because of my pre-established rapport with some contacts, aided in participant recruitment. Without at least partial reliance on my personal relationship with the Rankin community, it would have been next to impossible to gain access to the research sites, especially because of the stigma researchers often carry as a result of past exploitations of Black research participants, e.g. during the infamous *Tuskegee Syphilis Study* (see e.g. Howell, 2005).

### 3.3 THE ORIGIN OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH – A RECAP

As discussed in section 3.2, while there is general agreement that the early North American ecology left little room for preservation of African languages, basilectal creoles, or even Africanisms (in the way of semantics), there are several debates regarding the exact nature of the restructuring processes that yielded African American English as it is spoken today by people in Pittsburgh and in the Rankin community, more specifically. The question is whether English and the slaves' languages (i.e. Niger-Congo languages) formed an English-lexified creole with a West African substrate, or whether the slaves learned some variety of their enslavers' language with, at best, minimal remnants of their ancestral languages. McWhorter (2005) classifies these theories into the two major doctrines: the *Dialectologist Hypothesis* and *Creolist Hypothesis* (see also Rickford, 1998: 154; "creole origins issue" and "divergence issue").

The first of these doctrines finds African American English to be no different than Standard American English, that is, with neither creole origins nor African influences. Instead it argues that Black English, much like White varieties, diverged from settlers' dialects (e.g. nonstandard British Englishes) and is essentially an archaic form of such varieties (cf. Labov, 1969). This theory looks to nonstandard settler dialects in accounting for a number of unique features in AAE; thus, for example, the presence of habitual *be* in Anglo-English makes this variety a possible source for the similar aspect marker found in current African American English. Meanwhile, the theory attributes other more puzzling parts of the dialect, such as English dialect differences or variation, to social factors (e.g. post-antebellum segregation) that would have caused Black English to diverge from other English varieties. When we consider Paulston's (1986) claim that the degree of enclosure in contact settings determines the linguistic output of such contexts, i.e. segregation promotes the integrity of varieties, then the

Dialectologist hypothesis offers reliable accounts for why, although AAE has some difference with its American English relatives, these differences do not depend on explanations involving creole origins or West African substrate influences. Thus, Dialectologists can attribute the absence of the third-person singular marker, *-s*, in AAE to the universal tendency of word-final segment elision rather than linking it to a general pattern of non-agreement found in Atlantic creoles (cf. Baugh, 1983: 18-22; accounts for copular absence in Black speech).

The *Creolist Hypothesis*, on the other hand, traces Black English to a West African source, whether directly, such as from a West African proto-pidgin or via contacts with a creolized variety that has some West African input (cf. Smitherman, 1994). Another dimension to this *Creolist* proposal includes the notion that African American English developed along the same lines as the Atlantic creole, *Gullah*, and, therefore, resembled it at one point in time, when it would have possessed more West African features (Turner, 2002: xxxiii). According to the latter Creolist view, contact with English led this proto-creole ancestor to converge with the superstrate language in the formation of AAE. Creolist theories explain AAE features, such as copular absence, by comparing the dialect to other plantation varieties with West African influence (e.g. Atlantic creoles). Meanwhile, its explanation for the absence (or loss) of prototypical creole elements (i.e. *decreolization*) in the system of AAE has been that of racial integration. Integration is relevant to the trajectory of AAE because it would have meant decreased ethnolinguistic enclosure, better L2 access, greater participation in L2 or mainstream institutions, and broadened social networks for AAE speakers; all of which, according to Paulston (1986) and Arends (1994), would have facilitated the proto-creole variety's convergence with more "mainstream" English vernaculars.

Based on their abilities to efficiently account for the features in African American English using sociohistorically-based analyses, both of these theories seem lucrative. Yet they would have even greater explanatory power if they “put their heads together”, so to speak, as neither one by itself provides a satisfactory account of AAE semantics. Thus, one is left to wonder why theorists in the two camps do not adopt a more collaborative approach to the discussion of African American English. I believe that the answer to this question lies in the fact that these paradigms derive from very different research and cultural traditions and, as such, have developed into opposing agendas. McWhorter (2005: 338), for example, discusses research on behalf of the *divergence issue* or *dialectologist hypothesis* as being “constrained neither by the rigorous attention to detail enforced by competing analyses of quantification corpora nor by a guiding desire to delineate a unique African American heritage.” This theory maintains that “Black English was traceable solely to archaic or regional white English sources, and that Africa had played no significant parts in its birth.”

This cultural subjectivity is not unique to dialectologists and can be found also in *Creolist* perspectives. In fact, it is my position that the *Creolist* framework aims to cultivate or reify a link between West Africa and its diasporic cultures by tracing AAE elements to a West African source, that is, at times even without sufficient evidence to suggest such an input. Baugh (1983), in comparing these two schools of thought, also impresses that there are nonlinguistic motives underpinning both the *Creolist* and *Dialectologist* positions:

The creolist hypothesis is still very popular among many scholars and laypersons, because it provides supportive evidence that reinforces black pride and nationalism...The creolists were subsequently among the first legitimate scholars to establish strong links between African blacks and the African continent. (p. 12)



From McWhorter and Baugh then, we gather that, rather than striving for what should be the shared function of theory—that is, “to explain, predict, and control” (Paulston, 2009)—these two frameworks are motivated by their authors’ cultural ideologies.

Rather than adopting a polar position, however, other linguists (e.g. Mufwene, 2001) have taken a more complementary approach. Winford (1999: 206), for example, argues that rather than diverging or decreolizing from a more radical creole—i.e. a contact variety with the most prototypically basilectal or substratal features—Black English simply shifted to a lesser degree than did more conservative varieties. His position places AAE on a continuum that grades varying degrees of West African influence. According to his continuum, AAE is a restructured settler dialect with less substrate (i.e. West African) retention than the more restructured varieties, like Jamaican and rural Guyanese Creole, none of which occupy the same place on this restructuring continuum. Winford’s account reinforces the idea that we should not expect to see the same linguistic—namely semantic—features in African American English as we do in more restructured creoles, like Creolese of Guyana and Jamaican Creole. Thus, while we accept a West African retention account as a probable explanation for the unique semantics of African-based creoles (see e.g. *eye water* in section 2.2), we should look elsewhere for an account for the peculiar semantics of AAE. Furthermore, it reminds us that semantic changes and lexical effects do not always result from West African substratal influence (i.e. borrowing or transfer). Rather, semantic changes can result from internal, linguistic factors (see section 2.3), meaning that a contact explanation for semantic reanalysis is unnecessary.

Other modified versions of the Creolist and Dialectologist hypotheses have created a theoretical compromise through terms like *semi-creole*, *creoloids*, and *pre-creoles*, all which denote more intermediate varieties, like AAE. Schneider (1990: 85) summarizes Holm’s (1988:

9) explanation of ‘semi-creoles’ as a term for a variety that has “both creoles and non-creole features but does not necessarily imply that they were ever basilectal creoles.” Similarly, Schneider cites Mühlhäusler’s (1986: 10) use of ‘creoloids’—in contrast with ‘true creoles’—to reference varieties that “need not have undergone a radical break in language transmission, may lack a known pidgin ancestor, or may be the result of mixing between ‘full systems and developing systems, such as pidgins’”. The final term, *pre-creole*, though quite vague, refers to varieties that developed in sociohistorical contexts appropriate for creolization or basilectalization but which, nevertheless, did not fully restructure or “go all the way”, as did ‘full’ or ‘true’ creoles (Schneider, 1990: 83). Unlike Winford, Hancock (1980) and Holm (1988) find Bajan English and AAE to result from the same degree of restructuring, i.e. to be “intermediate varieties” (cited in Schneider, 1990: 86-87).

These intermediate hypotheses work best for intermediate varieties, as they compensate for the theoretical gaps in the former two paradigms while accounting for African American English’s Anglo archaisms, “creole-like” features, and its elements that are traceable to neither a English nor creole influence (Mufwene, 1992). While I will not specifically assume the perspective of Winford (1999) nor identify AAE as a *semi-creole*, *creoloid*, or *pre-creole*, I will nevertheless adopt a moderate theoretical orientation, employing sociolinguistic explanation that will have more generalizable implications. Additionally, I will offer a unique perspective that draws on the fact that I am a speaker of African American English and a first generation descendent of Gullah speakers.

### **3.3.1 Afrogenesis: Semantic Reanalysis as an African Retention, Borrowing or Calque**

To reiterate the main points of the previous section: African American English formed via rapid

language shift from a creole and/or Niger-Congo language to a nonstandard English dialect. This shift was instigated by the involuntary migration of a subordinate group to a colonized area with a superordinate founder population; intra-ethnic segregation that divided speech communities; intercultural encounters between speakers with different L1s; and a population disparity where a disproportionate number of Whites outnumbered Blacks for a prolonged amount of time. The presence of distinct (i.e. non-English-derived) features in AAE, therefore, cannot be attributed to West African retention. Rather, it must be attributed to the ecology around which the variety emerged. This ecology would include factors like post-antebellum segregation, which severed interracial contacts (i.e. decreasing Black participation in mainstream social institutions, homogenizing social networks, etc.). This may have halted AAE from further converging with English; or it may have instigated its divergence from other Englishes, e.g. those varieties now known as White American English Vernaculars (Mufwene, 2001).

It is thus my opinion that the latter scenario (of enclosure-induced divergence) occurred and that AAE is a restructured L2 variety of English with minimal West African retention. Although a number of works have demonstrated that there are African elements in AAE—or American English varieties, in general—this input is mainly marginal lexical influence and pertains overwhelmingly to culture items<sup>7</sup>. Thus, I will not use substratal influence as an account for semantic reanalysis in African American English.

In Chapter 2, I introduced the notion of the semantic amelioration of African American English lexemes, like *nigger*, *fat* and *get out of here*, adding that a variety of phenomena

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<sup>7</sup> Regarding the notion of Africanisms in the American English lexicon, Johns (1981: 150) writes, “Americans have Africa to thank for bananas, goobers, gumbo, okra and yams, as well as voodoo, hoodoo, zombies, [and] jukeboxes.” Similarly, Cooke (1993: 19) states, “Many of the *African words* brought to the South by the slaves have spread through the United States, including banjo, bogus, boogie-woogie, chigger, hep or hip, jazz, jitter, jive, mumbo-jumbo, phoney, voodoo, yam, and *zombie*.”

constrain the process. In sections 2.1 and 2.2, I discussed calquing through borrowing, transfer and relexification as a possible impetus for semantic evolution or reanalysis, that is, as vehicles for new meanings to enter a language. Let me briefly discuss this notion of calquing in terms of African American English.

The generally accepted explanation for semantic reanalysis was popularized by Smitherman (1977), who classifies the positive use of words, like *bad* (i.e. *awesome*), in AAE as the retention of a West African strategy, claiming that the inversion strategy “is derived from the African process of using negative terms to denote highly positive qualities [...or] the positive use of obscenities” (p. 45). Smitherman’s claim is problematic on several levels. First, semantic reanalysis affects several aspects of AAE, and we have already established the implausibility of substantial West African influence in all these areas.

Second, even though the process appears in West African languages, the implications of these attestations have not been fully explored. In describing the mechanism that renders new word meanings in AAE, Smitherman (1977: 44) says:

The speaker does to English what the West African speaker does to Wolof, Mandingo, Ibo, or Yoruba—same linguistic process, different language...This semantic reversal process, using negative terms with positive meanings, is present in a number of African languages—for example, the Mandingo *a ka nyi ko-jugu*, which literally means ‘it is good badly,’ or, ‘it is very good’.

This explanation would be sufficient if we were only considering *bad*, but what about other terms, like the other 30 in this study, plus the many more that exist for AAE users? This reveals yet another limitation of Afro-genetic accounts for the presence of semantic reanalysis in AAE, which is their very limited scope of application and ability to only account for a small portion of

the terms of interest. Smitherman's explanation posits that there is a (West African-based) inversion of the negative semantic value of *bad*, thereby creating their positive, contrastive denotations and usage compared to MAE. This approach, however, does not encompass the many other goals within and across semantic reanalyses, namely expropriation of racial epithets.

The final shortcoming of Smitherman's (African origins) approach is that it lacks proof. That is, can all the expressions (covered in this research) be located in West African languages, like Wolof, Mandingo, Ibo or Yoruba? Thus far, no researcher has proven that the many reanalyzed AAE forms were, in fact, present in the systems of AAE's substrate languages, which should be a prerequisite for attributing AAE semantics to West African languages.

If we do not rely on an account involving West African semantic retention, then how do we explain AAE semantic processes? The answer to this question is quite simple. A number of works (e.g. Coates 1993; Pollard, 1994; Yuen-Ching Chen, 1998; Brontsema, 2004; Heller, 2007; Bailey, 2002) have explained semantic reanalysis without an Afro-genetic approach. That is, they have demonstrated that these meaning changes occur in even groups for which an African account—involving West African semantic transfer, lexical borrowings, or calquings—are not the most accessible explanations. In the next section, I consider some of these accounts.

### **3.4 ECOLOGICAL, GENERALIZABLE ACCOUNTS**

For her research on women's language, Coates (1993) elaborates on Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of intergroup relations and social change, and treats semantic reanalysis as a strategy employed by groups with comparatively inferior social statuses. She uses so-called feminine characteristics of language as examples, explaining that many characteristics of women's speech

were considered undesired qualities for people outside the social group, i.e. men who wanted to sound masculine or women trying to avoid stigmas. Such people thought of feminine conversational styles, e.g. more sensitive styles or cooperative conversational strategies, as undesirable. However, because so-called feminine conversational styles became beneficial to doctors as they communicated with their patients, stigmatized (i.e. feminine) styles became more desirable to women and men alike. As such, Coates claims that minority groups in general can use semantic reanalysis to enact social change, that is, to literally redefine the values of the dominant culture. This suggests that West African retention is not an a priori explanation for the presence of semantic reanalysis in AAE.

Velma Pollard (1994) also demonstrates how non-dominant groups have modified their lexicons as an avenue for social protest and differentiation from a dominant language. Her research describes the reinvention of the Jamaican Creole lexicon and the emergence of a jargon, known as *Dread Talk*, in response to the turbulent social climate of early 20th century Jamaica. Pollard describes *Dread Talk* as the “recent adjustment of the lexicon of Jamaican Creole to reflect the religious, political and philosophical positions of the believers in Rastafari” (ibid, p. 15). For many Rastafari, English was a language superimposed through colonization and linked to the English monarchy outside the realm of Haile Selassie, the deity of Rastafarianism. Thus, divergence from the English language represented rebellion against colonization, and opposition to a white monarch. In order to achieve separation from the notions of colonization and the disappointing status quo, many Rastafari utilized Dread Talk. By rejecting and then reanalyzing English and Jamaican lexemes, Rastas have constructed both a divergent variety and a separate identity that reflects Rasta social attitudes towards English colonization and the post-colonial Jamaican social order.

Lastly, in research describing semantic reanalyses of derogatory epithets, (Yuen-Ching Chen, 1998; Brontsema, 2004; Heller, 2007; Bailey, 2002), we see that semantic reanalysis—or semantic amelioration, to be more specific—happened as a part of reclamation. These instances of reclamation involve a (former) target of epithets adopting those pejorative terms and reemploying them to their own ends. This research reveals that the reclamation process usurps power from the dominant group, i.e. the original users of the epithet, thereby allowing the term to be reappropriated for new usage. That is, use in a new context (in-group rather than inter-group); by new users, i.e. members of the original target group; and with additional, new meanings that are not racist, homophobic, or sexist (depending on the context and user). This research reveals that reclamation does not simply neutralize the negative effect and shock value of emotionally-charged hate speech, as terms like *reversal* and *inversion* (see e.g. Smitherman, 1977) would have us believe. Rather, the research details a number of other phenomena in addition to meaning and semantic value changes that occur alongside reclamation. Namely, the taking a former derogatory term and reinterpreting its meaning for in-group usage among the historical targets of the terms is a statement of self-determination, that is, the authority to challenge linguistic ownership and to define one’s own language (i.e. resignification). As Brontsema (2004: 1) explains: “At the heart of linguistic reclamation is the right of self-definition, of forging and naming one’s own existence.”

Altogether, these different approaches to meaning changes and lexical innovations suggest that West African retention is not an a priori explanation for the presence of semantic reanalysis in AAE. Views like Coates (1993), Smitherman (1994), Brontsema (2004), and others (Yuen-Ching Chen, 1998; Heller, 2007; Bailey, 2002) offer a more productive perspective on semantic reanalysis in African American English and in the language of marginalized groups, in

general. They all present the language user as an agent of change, who can make language choices to challenge prescribed social norms about language. Furthermore, they detail the sociohistorical impetuses of meaning changes rather than merely discussing the notion of semantic reanalysis as little more than a language-internal process, e.g. West African semantic retention (Smitherman, 1977). By discounting other explanations for the phenomenon, Smitherman treats language and the values it represents as natural entities, i.e. things that African-derived peoples can naturally and magically inherit. The truth is, however, that neither semantics, nor ideologies, nor our worldviews are natural and/or biological endowments; they are instead cultural byproducts and social constructs. Additionally, by viewing AAE as a West African linguistic leftover, her and similar (Afro-genetic) research models fail to recognize AAE as a legitimate, culturally dependent variety.

Recall that the central goal of my thesis is to demonstrate that African American English speakers use semantic reanalysis not because of the linguistic structure (semantics) in West Africa but because of the social structure in the United States and their own desires for differentiation, which is similar to the disadvantaged groups detailed in Coates (1993), Pollard (1994), Yuen-Ching Chen (1998), Brontsema (2004), Heller (2007), and Bailey (2002). While the aforementioned texts account for semantic changes in epithets among the targets of hate speech, my approach will show how the ecology of the U.S. has affected how African Americans use words and language, in general. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will revisit my original hypothesis and elaborate my claims further.



## **4.0 METHODS AND PROCEDURE**

This project considers possible rationales behind the existence and pervasiveness of semantic amelioration by offering a sociohistorical account of the phenomena that is more generalizable and economical. In order for me to empirically study semantic reanalysis in African American English, my research hypothesis was that semantic reanalysis is a pervasive, community-wide phenomenon that is employed by AAE users in rejection of defamatory, superimposed mainstreams norms (i.e. the defamatory nature of “mainstream” English semantics) and as reflections of AAE cultural values). To test this hypothesis, I elicited data from native speakers of African American English using several research methods as described below.

### **4.1 DATA COLLECTION**

Participants began the study by providing biodemographic information that would be used to assess the degree of (social) variation in this particular community of speakers. They then defined (or gave synonyms for) and evaluated (i.e. decided on the connotation of) 31 semantically reanalyzed lexemes. These measures were intended to determine their familiarity with/recognition of semantic reanalysis overall as well as the connotations they assign lexemes derived by this process.

#### 4.1.1 Participant Selection and Recruitment

As noted in Chapter 3 (section 3.2.3), in order to more accurately represent the heterogeneity of the AAE speech community, recruitment was conducted in the predominantly Black neighborhood of Rankin, a borough lying eight miles south of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (see also section 3.2 for historical background). The recruitment process involved an ongoing snowballing sampling method that began two days before data collection, starting with door-to-door flyer distribution to community residents. Approximately six participants were recruited from flyer distributions. Participants were also recruited at a church service the day after flyer distribution, and then again on the following day at the local community center, thereby supplying the remaining 47 study respondents. Recruitment methods fell into three broad categories: media techniques (flyers and church program inserts), direct contact with potential participants (e.g. church and community center announcements, door-to-door flyer distribution, et cetera.), and contacts with community leaders (i.e. the church pastor and community center directors).

In order to identify prospective participants as AAE speakers, I targeted people who classified themselves as members of the African American community, recalling that a member of a speech community must be competent in the specific language variety as well as the norms of the community wherein the language variety is used (Hymes, 1972). Accordingly, participants needed to be native-born U.S. citizens, but not necessarily racially Black. Recruiting American-born participants of non-specified racial backgrounds allowed me to distinguish between ethnicity (i.e. being culturally Black and/or socialized in the post-slavery, Black American context of the United States) and race (i.e. being phenotypically black, e.g. Australian Aboriginals, and/or a person of African descent who could be African-born or a member of any

other Black community throughout the African Diaspora). Thus, while an Afro-Latino and African American, for example, may both meet the criteria for racial blackness, they will likely not be members of the same ethnolinguistic community or have shared sociohistorical experiences. It is important to differentiate between culture and race especially because this distinction is often leveled for people of African descent. The United States' criteria of racial groupings often assimilates U.S. immigrants of African descent into one seemingly homogeneous racial category, i.e. Black or African American (see Bailey, 2002); however, Ogbu (1999) notes that involuntary immigrants (e.g. African immigrants) and voluntary immigrants of the U.S. (e.g. Black Americans who are descendents of African slaves) should be investigated separately. He argues that this distinction is important because people who have been involuntarily made part of the U.S. view themselves and their languages as oppositional to the dominant U.S. culture because of their forced relationship with the U.S. (see also Smitherman, 1977; the role of the Black Experience in the emergence of the AAE lexicon). Considering that we are interested in the responsive language of Black Americans and because of my proposal, i.e. that it is the American sociohistorical context that fuels semantic reanalysis, it was imperative that I controlled for national origin and involved involuntary African American minorities in this study.

This sampling method assumed that members of the African American community are knowledgeable in AAE. As such, they were thought to be qualified to provide reliable intuitions about AAE usage, and to be familiar with semantic reanalysis. At the same time, members of certain groups within the community (e.g. specific age or gender groups) were expected to exhibit varying degrees of familiarity with certain words, since some semantically reanalyzed items are more prevalent within particular areas of the community. All interviewees identified

themselves as members of the African American community. Members of both genders were recruited, as well as representatives of various age groups (18 years and older) and different backgrounds (e.g. socioeconomic statuses and educational levels). Nevertheless, because the population of Rankin is predominantly female and about 45 percent of the population is below the poverty line (see section 3.2.2), many participants were females (72.55 percent of the sample population) and from certain socioeconomic groups (i.e. 15.68 percent were unemployed, non-homeowners with an 11th or 12th grade education).

#### **4.1.2 Measures and Scoring**

From June to August 2009, 53<sup>8</sup> residents in the Rankin borough and from three neighboring boroughs (Wilksburg, Braddock and Penn Hills)<sup>9</sup> completed paper questionnaires that inquired about participants' knowledge and perception of 45 lexemes. Participants also took part in audio-recorded interviews during which they provided additional insight about the specified lexemes<sup>10</sup>. Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews with adults in the same community as recruitment, with the exception of three in-home interviews conducted with older participants residing outside the main study site. Interviewing in the church, the Christian center and in participants' homes was meant to create a more naturalistic context for AAE speakers and, thus, aimed to obtain more unguarded responses. Each respondent participated in the following tasks: (1) a Screening Procedure or Preliminary Interview, (2) an Identification Task, and (3) an Evaluation/Reflection Task. Each measure had a different aim.

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<sup>8</sup> I eliminated the responses of two participants from all data analysis, as their answers were incoherent and would have likely skewed the results of the sample.

<sup>9</sup> All participants interviewed outside of Rankin were raised in Rankin and/or regularly participate in activities in the community, e.g. attending church and/or the local Christian Center.

<sup>10</sup> None of the stimuli in the research measures included epithets as address terms.

The preliminary interviews determined interviewees' appropriateness (i.e. eligibility) as subjects for the study, in addition to providing me with demographic information to be used in the delineation of the sociolinguistic variables. The Identification Task involved speech identification and evaluation, and required participants to evaluate and interpret the meanings of 45 words. These words included 31 authentic AAE forms, i.e. correct uses of semantic reanalysis; and 14 fillers, i.e. bogus forms and/or incorrect uses/mispronunciations of authentic forms. The 31 semantically reanalyzed lexemes included the following: *ace boon coon*, *my nigga* (i.e. my nigger), *your boy*, *girl*, *dog* (i.e. dawg), *child*, *baddest*, *grimy*, *nasty*, *to be down*, *dope*, *junks*, *fat* (i.e. phat), *sick*, *gangsta*, *vicious*, *funky*, *ill*, *tough*, *tight*, *mean*, *mad*, *stupid*, *def*, *monster*, *bomb*, *the ish* (i.e. the shit), *mama jamma* (i.e. mother fucker), *get out of here*, *shut your mouth*, and *I'm scared of you*.

Authenticity of forms was assessed according to AAE dictionaries (i.e. Smitherman, 1994) and previous research on the forms of interest. These participants typically offered one of three possible responses: one that indicates the participants' uncertainty or unfamiliarity with the form, one that reflects the conventional, Mainstream definition of the form, and a third that bears the African American English denotation. Maximum participant familiarity in the Identification Task required that the participant successfully identified the African American English meaning of the 31<sup>11</sup> forms and recognized the 14 filler forms that are not authentic AAE lexemes. The Identification Task allows us to assess participants' competence in semantically reanalyzed lexemes irrespective of whether they use the words. After dividing participants into their respective social categories, I also used the Identification Task to test for subgroup differences in

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<sup>11</sup> Because of the large degree of variability of definitions for the terms, *junks* and *mama jamma*, they were coded but later removed for data analysis. Because one question, about *phat* and *fat*, had two levels and/or allowed for up to two different answers, I divided the one question into two separate questions. This left our overall data set with a maximum of 30 possible instances of semantic reanalysis of lexemes.

linguistic proficiency. Responses from this task in tandem with the recorded portion of the interview were used to address the following additional research questions: Which ideas does African American English culture define negatively and positively? Who can use these AAE forms? Why do only some words transcend group boundaries and enter the mainstream lexicon? Are language attitudes based on different sociocultural norms/values?

For the Evaluation Task, participants evaluated the research as a whole, suggesting possible motivations for AAE speakers’ employment of semantic reanalysis. Responses from the Evaluation Task indicate participants’ awareness of semantic reanalysis and suggest AAE speakers’ motivations for employing the strategy. Further, data from this measure answered the following questions: What ideology and sociocultural values background the process of semantic reanalysis and the forms it produces? How do (differences in) sociocultural norms affect language usage? Why do some “mainstream” words have positive connotations in AAE, but not all? What aspect of (the dominant) language, its semantics, and/or its lexicon has necessitated an alternative lexicon or the distinct use of language?

**Table 4-1 Coding Method for Identification Task**

Occupation	Homeowner	Education	Gender	Year	Participant	Question	Evaluation	Category
MN	No	HS	M	BVB	P211	1	P	AAE-sem
MN	No	HS	M	BVB	P211	2	P	AAE-sem
MN	No	HS	M	BVB	P211	3	N	shared
MN	No	HS	M	BVB	P211	4	P	AAE-sem
MN	No	HS	M	BVB	P211	5	P	STE
MN	No	HS	M	BVB	P211	6	N	overgen?
CL	yes	SC	F	JC	P213	1	P	AAE-sem
CL	yes	SC	F	JC	P213	2	P	AAE-sem
CL	yes	SC	F	JC	P213	3	N	shared
CL	yes	SC	F	JC	P213	4	P	AAE-sem
CL	yes	SC	F	JC	P213	5	N	null
CL	yes	SC	F	JC	P213	6	P	overgen?

Table 4-1 shows the coding method for the Identification Task. *Evaluation* contains information on the connotation that the participant assigned to words. *Category* refers to the classification of their definition of said word and is the dependent variable for the Rbrul analysis. “AAE-sem” constitutes an instance of reanalysis; “shared” means that the definition is shared (i.e. not contrastive) among the AAE and MAE communities; “STE” means that the definition is according to Mainstream American semantics; and “overgen?” means that the participant has overgeneralized semantic reanalysis, applying it to a word or context that should not warrant reanalysis (see e.g. section 2.4.1’s discussion of participant 257’s definition of *stupid*). The remaining columns contain codings for social and other variables (see section 4.1.3).

### **4.1.3 Social factors**

I chose three social variables that are known to be important sources of internal linguistic variation. Data collected from subjects has been interpreted according to these three social categories: YEAR, GENDER, and SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS.

Year/Generation categorizations are based on when participants were socialized in relation to what I deemed to be significant social events. Those born in the 1920s and 1930s are products of the *Jim Crow Era*, which was characterized by legal segregation due to the (1896) *Plessy v. Ferguson* landmark decision. Members of this group most likely attended segregated schools and participated in segregated institutions. The second group was born in the 1940s, i.e. the end of *de jure* racial segregation, thanks to the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). This cohort likely attended schools during desegregation processes (i.e. circa 1954) and thus probably had early exposure to Mainstream institutions. The next group, born in the 1950s and 1960s, were likely socialized during milestones, such as the *Black Power*

*Movement*, which supported—among other things—pan-Africanism, separatism, and the promotion of black pride and values. According to researchers (e.g. Smitherman, 2001), the values promoted as part of these movements of the 1950s and 1960s have impacted Black speech by fostering the use of Black language features. Finally, there is the youngest group, whose life experiences reflect the aftermath of these earlier events. Born between the 1970s and the early 1990s, we expect members of the Pryor generation to have had little to no first-hand exposure to racial epithets, which I predict will impact their linguistic behavior (see Brontsema, 2004). Furthermore, I refer to them as the “Pryor” group because they grew up after the epithet, *nigger*, had gained new denotations, thanks to Richard Pryor. Consider, for example, his acts, *That Nigger’s Crazy* (1974) and *Bicentennial Nigger* (1976), which help substantiate this claim that use of the word, in some cases, had become less offensive and even comedic by these last three decades.

1). Age/Generation: *JC* or Jim Crow (born during 1920s and 1930s); *BVB* or Brown v. Board (born during 1940s; attended school during landmark decision); *BP* or Black Power (born during 1950s and 1960s); *PR* or Pryor (born during 1970s, 1980s and 1960s)

2). Gender: female and male

3). Socioeconomic status operationalized as Education, Occupation, and Homeownership together and as a multi-index scale:

A. Split Socioeconomic Status Categories

1) Education: a). 11<sup>th</sup> grade education, GED, or H.S. diploma b). trade school/vocational training, some college, or 2-year degree; c). Bachelor’s degree; d). Graduate degree



- 2) Occupation<sup>12</sup>: clerical; professional; manual; technical; unemployed
- 3) Homeownership: Yes (current or former homeowner); No (neither past nor current homeowner)

**B. Collapsed Socioeconomic Status Categories as Multi-index scale**

The categories within each of the three social class categories were assigned ranked and assigned numbers, as shown in Table 4.1. Each participant was assigned a number—as high as 10 but no less than 3—that equaled the sum of the values for the respective occupation, homeownership status, and level of education.

**Table 4-2 Multi-index Scale for SES**

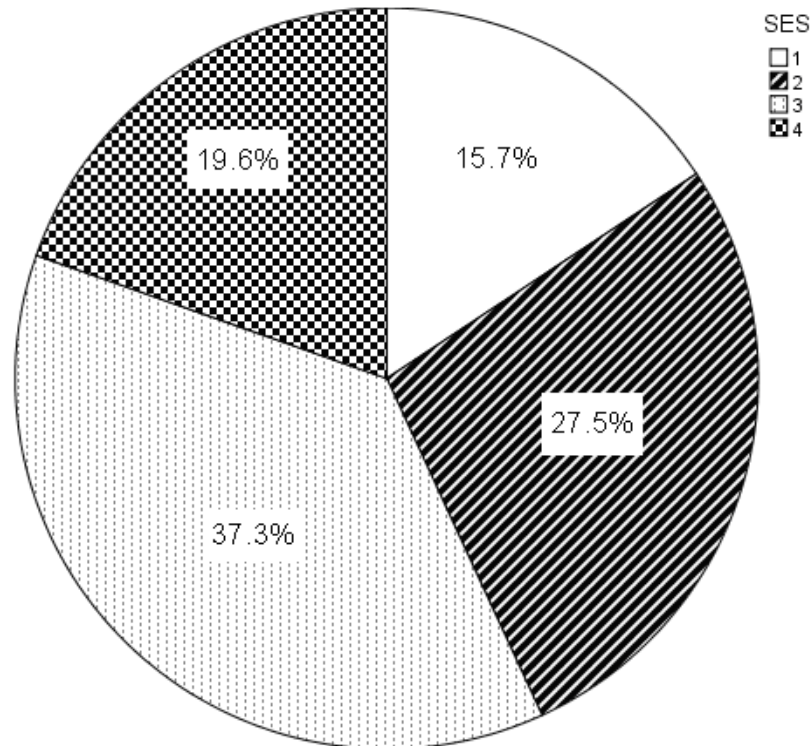
Professional	4	Yes	2	Graduate Degree holder	4
Technical	3	No	1	Bachelor Degree holder	3
Manual/ Clerical	2			Some college	2
Unemployed	1			High school	1

These scores, ranging from 3 to 10, were then collapsed even further into four categories, from 1 to 4, in order to create a four-class system that captures the main socioeconomic distinctions.

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<sup>12</sup> Retired participants were categorized according to their occupations prior to retirement. Homemakers and housewives were classified as “unemployed.”

**Figure 4-1** Pie chart of the Collapsed Socioeconomic Scale



SES categories were collapsed into four groupings from lowest to highest: 3 is **Level 1**; 4 and 5 are in **Level 2**; 6 through 8 are in **Level 3**; 9 and 10 are in **Level 4**. This categorization method has fewer distinctions.

## **4.2 RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AND STATISTICAL TESTS**

### **4.2.1 Hypotheses**

I considered generation-stratified variation patterns (i.e. the YEAR variable) by grouping participants according to shared experiences of sociohistorical or external events. We can expect the oldest group to have been socialized in a segregated society. An upbringing in a more homogenous, Black community may indicate less of an awareness of or less of an ability to participate in the “standard language market”, that is, social networks and institutions that

support the use of Standard English (Eckert, 1997). Therefore, we expect greater familiarity with traditional, African American English lexemes, including semantically reanalyzed forms, among people with a segregated upbringing. Linguistic research has revealed that age is directly proportional to linguistic conservatism (Eckert, 1997); however, the definition or conception of what conservative language is may differ by community. For (some) Whites, conservative language may imply Standard English, while for Blacks, the traditional language of the community is African American (Vernacular) English. Thus, in Edwards (1992), (Black) participants above the age of 60 actually used more AAVE than younger participants. Accordingly, I expect older participants to have more prototypically AAE speech, including more knowledge of semantically reanalyzed AAE lexemes.

Another prediction is that older participants will have firsthand experience with censored language, including epithets—like *nigger* and *coon*—as out-group terms, that is, White language, and will be less likely to view the use of epithets by Blacks as appropriate (Brontsema, 2004). Thus, we expect generational division in the appropriation of racial epithets. Younger participants are expected to reclaim and semantically reanalyze epithets (e.g. as in-group terms of endearment), while older speakers will not semantically reanalyze epithets because of their interpretation of them as highly offensive and censored out-group terms. As such, older participants will likely employ AAE semantic reanalysis for the appropriation of lexemes other than epithets. Because of the notion of “standard language marketplace” and “local vernacular marketplace” (Eckert, 1997), I expect the language patterns of participants with lower SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS to parallel those participants characterized by older age. This prediction reflects the idea that members with these characteristics will have less access to and/or less of a need for more mainstream language and, as such, will be more familiar with AAE

lexemes like those produced by semantic reanalysis. We might also consider that if semantic reanalysis is a form of oppositional performativity and is the result of having an oppositional stance to hegemonic norms, then marginalization (i.e. membership in social groups that are also minority groups) will likely stimulate oppositional performativity, that is, the rejection of hegemonic forms and norms through semantic reanalysis.

Linguistic literature has investigated variation with respect to the use of several individual lexemes, e.g. *dawg* as more common among males (Smitherman, 1977), and *bitch* and *girl* as more typically used by women (Bailey, 2002; Smitherman, 1977; Troutman, 2001). Although I do not expect systematic gender differences in the language use of participants, the interaction of several social variables and/or compounded minority status will likely contribute to gender-stratified linguistic differences in the employment of semantic reanalysis. I also expect interactions between these social variables. Thus, for example, younger female participants are expected to use oppositional language like reappropriated racist and misogynistic epithets because of their compounded marginal statuses. In contrast, we do not expect older males to affectionately employ forms like *nigger* and *bitch*, following the idea that the positive use of these forms is limited to specific factions of the AAE community, i.e. younger generations and female participants.

There are two main predictions surrounding whether semantic reanalysis is a community norm that is affected by intragroup variation that exists within the AAE community:

Hypothesis (1) **Pervasiveness and Recognition**: Semantic reanalysis is a pervasive phenomenon employed across the AAE speech community. In other words, most of the participants—as members of the AAE speech community—should be knowledgeable in a significant number of the authentic forms in the Identification Task and behave as one population

in terms of their recognition. Secondly, they should recognize roughly the same number of lexemes so that, were I to visualize how many terms the participants were familiar with, then I would see the population clustering around one particular area of the figure.

Hypothesis (2) **Intragroup Variation**: The use of semantic reanalysis varies according to particular subgroups of the AAE community. Thus, having stratified participants by their respective social categories, *Year/Generation*, *Gender*, *Education*, *Occupation*, *Homeownership*, and *SES*, I am now able to use a logistic-mixed effects regression to test the Identification Task responses (i.e. semantic reanalysis recognition). Significant differences in demographic categories will indicate that speakers differ in their familiarity with semantic reanalysis.

In short, I expect AAE speakers to behave as a group, while also representing intragroup variation.

#### 4.2.2 Statistical Methods

This research is concerned with answering several types of questions: one about how common semantic reanalysis recognition and use is across our sample population; and another one about whether social factors are able to predict when a participant will recognize a case of semantic reanalysis in the Identification Task and, if so, which predictions (by social factor) are more reliable. For these two distinct questions, I employed separate statistical methods aimed at determining whether test results could be due to mere chance and assessing the validity of the primary research questions.

In order to get a rough gauge of pervasiveness, I used two assessments of *goodness-of-fit*, which visualized the distribution of the data. Both determined whether our empirical data followed or deviated significantly from a hypothetical and predetermined normal distribution.

These visuals also indicated how many reanalyzed lexemes the majority of the population recognized.

For the second question, I used Rbrul to perform four multiple regressions (i.e. logistic mixed effects regressions that used a “step-up & step-down” algorithm). First, I accounted for random effects, i.e. *Participant* and/or *Question*, using two different models: one with *Participant* as the sole random effect (and *Question* as a fixed factor), and then the second with *Participant* and *Question* both as random effects. Next, I assessed the different SES coding methods by performing three runs: one where SES is split as *Education*, *Occupation*, and *Homeownership*; another with these three categories collapsed as one SES column; and then a third model where the split SES categories and the single SES column are run together. The binary response variable for all runs included instances of semantic reanalysis in the data (*AAE-sem*) as the dependent variable of interest, while instances of some type of language other than semantic reanalysis (*overgen?+shared+STE+switch+X*) were the other dependent variable (see section 4.1.2). This test allowed me to determine which logistic regression model (i.e. combination of social factors) would best predict the pattern of variation (i.e. the identification of semantic reanalysis) in the sample population.

Additionally, I performed several post-hoc tests using chi-square in order to test independence relations, that is, 1) whether the evaluation (connotation) of “the N-word (i.e. <nigga> and <nigger>) is related to the generation (or age) of participants; and 2) whether the evaluation (connotation) of lexemes, *nigger* and *fat*, is dependent on their spelling in written form.

The next chapter will discuss the findings of the research in terms of the research questions and will elaborate on these hypotheses using qualitative measures and post-hoc tests.

## 5.0 RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

This section presents results of the statistical analyses of semantic reanalysis recognition by social variable. Some of the original hypotheses do not hold and will be further explicated in this section. In order to gain a better understanding of results of the statistical analyses, I will also present the more qualitative data, including selected interview transcripts.

The sample population consists of 11 participants in the *Jim Crow* group (5 from 1920 and 6 from 1930s); 12 from the *Brown v. Board* cohort (1940s); 18 from the *Black Power* generation (13 from 1950s and 5 from 1960s); and 10 from the *Pryor* group (4 from the 1970s, 3 from the 1980s, and 3 from 1990s). There were 37 females and 14 males in the data set. In the area of occupation, there were 13 unemployed, 7 manual, 7 clerical, 3 technical, and 21 professional participants. Regarding homeownership, there were 30 present or former homeowners, and 21 non-homeowners. For education, there were 22 participants with an 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> level of education and/or a GED; 17 participants who had attended approximately two years of college and/or obtained a 2-year degree; 7 bachelor degree holders; and 5 participants with at least a master's degree. After collapsing Education, Homeownership, and Occupation into four categories, the participants divided out as follows: 8 in the lowest category, 1; 14 participants in the lower intermediary category, 2; 19 in the upper intermediary category, 3; and 10 in the highest grouping, 4. A cross-tabulation of collapsed SES categories, YEAR, and gender reveals the following distribution of social categories:

**Table 5-1 Year \* SES \* Gender Crosstabulation**

Gender			SES				
			Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Total
Female	Year	JC	0	1	5	4	10
		BVB	1	2	4	0	7
		BP	3	5	4	2	14
		PR	3	3	0	0	6
		Total	7	11	13	6	<b>37</b>
Male	Year	JC	0	0	1	0	1
		BVB	0	1	2	2	5
		BP	0	0	3	1	4
		PR	1	2	0	1	4
		Total	1	3	6	4	<b>14</b>

Throughout this chapter, I will discuss the significance of these social factors as predictors of semantic reanalysis in this data, and in relation to this phenomenon as a whole.

### 5.1 HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH CLAIMS

My original research hypothesis was that semantic reanalysis is a pervasive, community-wide phenomenon that is employed by AAE users in rejection of defamatory, superimposed mainstreams norms. Accordingly, semantic reanalysis would redefine English lexemes



according to Black cultural norms, so that certain qualities which have been stigmatized as negative in Mainstream culture would become desirable in AAE semantics.

In turn, this reanalysis process would allow the ever-present association between blackness and negative attributes to become complimentary through the gratifying use of negative or offensive words, in general, e.g. ‘stupid’, a word used to amplify positive qualities, and ‘bad’, meaning ‘awesome’. It would also explain the reinvention of the derogatory color metaphor in racial epithets, like ‘coon’ and ‘nigger’, or everyday words, like *blacklist* (i.e. a list of undesirable persons), which have equated *black* with negative qualities. Notably, this argument is in line with a similar perspective by Smitherman (1994). Thus, for example, Smitherman cites *whitemail* as an example of a term that Blacks have semantically reanalyzed from *blackmail* in “an effort to reverse negative images of Blackness in the English language” (p. 236). This hypothesis very neatly accounts for the fact that racial epithets go from having negative or offensive denotations and uses to bearing positive and often complimentary meanings in AAE. This explanation of meaning changes among epithets is supported by the fact that other researchers (e.g. Coates, 1993; Pollard, 1994; Brontsema, 2004) have also shown that semantic changes among marginalized groups arise as a form of responsive discourse.

It is also possible that other lexemes, namely [fæt] or *phat*, underwent reanalysis because their meanings in Mainstream culture were in opposition to values in the greater African American community. Consider, for example, the different uses of ‘fat’ in White and Black semantics. This semantic discrepancy between cultural evaluations of weight and body size could account for the different usages of *fat* in White and Black communities, thereby indicating how Black sociocultural norms diverge from values outside the community. Smitherman (1994) explains that differences in language usage “reflect distinct Black values that are often at odds

with Eurocentric standards. ‘Fat,’ spelled *phat* in Hip Hop, refers to a person or thing that is excellent and desirable, reflecting the traditional African value that human body weight is a good thing” (p. 18). Similarly, non-linguistic studies investigating racial differences in conceptualizations of ideal body size confirm Smitherman’s claims about how African Americans view weight and body size. These studies support the (commonly forgotten) notion that evaluations of weight and body composition are racially and culturally determined.

In a study comparing cultural differences between White and Black male adolescents’ ideas about ideal body sizes, Thompson, Sargent and Kemper (1996) reveal that smaller female body sizes are more socially acceptable or desirable in White culture, while Black culture is more desiring of larger sizes for females. These evaluations of weight and body size also inform cultural perceptions of female attractiveness. In a follow-up study treating perceptions of ideal body size by Black and White adolescent females, Parnell et al. (1996) revealed that Black adolescent females were 5.3 times more likely to desire a larger hip/buttocks size and 4.0 times more likely to prefer a larger thigh size than their White adolescent female peers. Not only were Black female participants more tolerant of being overweight, but research demonstrated that “the social consequence of some Black women being obese may be much less severe, perhaps even a valued characteristic, than for White women. This acceptance of larger amounts of body weight is not viewed in a negative context by Black adolescents and, in fact, may serve as a source of reinforcement” (ibid, p. 1).

In short, these studies corroborate the idea that fatness is a highly desirable quality in the African American community, while it is not in Mainstream culture. Accordingly, the negative use of ‘fat’ in Mainstream American English to indicate something undesirable or unattractive corroborates the way fatness is viewed in Mainstream culture, as discussed by

Thompson et al (1996) and Parnell et al (1996). Similarly, when African American English speakers use ‘fat’ (i.e. extra body weight) to designate something desirable or attractive, they are embedding language with their cultural values about body size, femininity, and what constitutes beauty. This relates to the idea of *Semantic Relativity*, i.e. the idea that ‘the [semantic] structure of the language reflects in some way the structure of experience, that is to say, the structure of the world, including...the perspective imposed on the world by the speaker’ (Croft, 2001: 108). When we consider that Semantic Relativity is a cross-linguistic tendency—that is, languages are commonly shaped by specific cultural frameworks and worldviews and that semantic interpretations are highly subjective (Croft, 2001)—then the culturally relevant usage of ‘fat’ by members of the African American speech community appears commonsensical. Thus, in my research, participant 257 named “looks good” as synonyms for both *phat* and *fat*. Similarly, participant 252 defined *phat* and *fat* as “looks good, attractive.” Participant 232 also found both words to mean “nice”, and likewise participant 228 defined them as “fine, good looking.”

To recap, it is possible that by rejecting Mainstream norms or semantics regarding ideal weight or body size in order to promote their own cultural values through the positive use of ‘fat’, members of the African American English community are attempting to resist the superimposition of norms by dominant culture. This rejection also aids in the denaturalization of Mainstream norms, that is to say, that in adopting alternative or culture-specific semantics that reflect alternative cultural frameworks, AAE helps to expose discrepancies in worldviews and reminds us that they are not universal.

A limitation of this hypothesis is that, while providing a productive account for semantic changes in epithets and words like, [fæt], it does not encompass all of the lexemes of interest to this study, e.g. *ill*, *sick*, or *ish*. In other words, semantic reanalysis may very well be a

strategy or form of protest against “mainstream” discriminatory discourse and Mainstream messages underlying terms for Blacks (i.e. racial epithets) and words regarding physical beauty (e.g. conceptions of body image for [fæt]), because there is evidence that Mainstream culture and Black culture’s conceptions of Black people and physical beauty have not always coincided. However, this account might not be the most accessible explanation for the use of other words, like *ish*—i.e. a substitute for *shit* (or *feces*)—to mean “the best” (according to participant 220), “what is up” (as per participant 211), or “all that” and “nice” (following participant 232). This is not to say that my original hypothesis is totally invalid but rather that it does not work best for all the data before us. Thus, I will reformulate my hypothesis in order to offer a more productive account for the semantic mechanism attested in AAE.

On the whole, I propose that semantic reanalysis is a (conscious or unconscious) form of responsive discourse that derives from the rigid social order in the U.S. For some AAE community members, semantic reanalysis is a mechanism for achieving social and linguistic differentiation (i.e. a means of diverging) from Mainstream culture. For others, it is a means of gate-keeping and boundary maintenance that reifies borders between racial communities. I believe that both types of participants manipulate the racialized and/or exclusionary nature of reanalyzed lexemes in order to achieve these goals. As you read through this chapter, pay attention to the ways in which speakers use semantic reanalysis to distinguish themselves from people outside of the African American racial/cultural community. Then, in section 6.1, I will recapitulate and emphasize how semantic reanalysis is abetting differentiation processes.

## 5.2 GENERATION-STRATIFIED PATTERNS OF LANGUAGE

One of the aims of this study was to determine whether social factors are able to predict when a participant recognized a case of semantic reanalysis in the Identification Task and, if so, which predictors (social factors) were most reliable. There were three social variables that were considered in this research, as they are known to be important sources of internal variation: YEAR/GENERATION, GENDER, and the collapsed factor, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS. In order to answer this question about the best predictor variable(s), I used Rbrul to perform a series of logistic regressions with mixed models (for random effects).

### 5.2.1 Determining the random variables

The first two runs were to determine which factors to control as random variables. It was obvious that I needed to control for PARTICIPANT, especially since its significance level is drastically increased ( $p = 1.88e-18$ ) without any such control. Thus, the real question was whether to control for PARTICIPANT alone or to also include QUESTION as well. I ran two models, the first with PARTICIPANT as the only fixed factor and the other with both PARTICIPANT and QUESTION as random effects. These runs are shown just below.

A. BEST STEP-UP MODEL WAS WITH Participant (random) + Question (0) + Year (0.000393) [A]

B. BEST STEP-DOWN MODEL IS WITH Participant (random) + Question (random) + Year (0.000399) [D]

According to these runs, the best logistic regression model contained the factor, PARTICIPANT, as a random variable and QUESTION ( $p < 0.001$ ) and YEAR as fixed effects.

### 5.2.2 Arranging Social Class

The next series of models were intended to determine how I should arrange the social class variables, i.e. as a single, collapsed category of SES or as three separate categories, i.e. OCCUPATION, HOMEOWNERSHIP, and EDUCATION. It was important to try different arrangements for social class in order to determine which would best predict semantic reanalysis recognition, i.e. the dependent variable in the regression tests. I ran three Rbrul models in order to address this question, each containing a different manifestation of social class.

A. split class categories: OCCUPATION, HOMEOWNERSHIP, and EDUCATION

B. collapsed categories: SES

- a. SES with eight categories based on the multi-index scale (see chapter 4), ranging from the lowest, 3, to the highest, 10.
- b. SES with four recoded groupings of the eight multi-index SES scale categories: **class 1** containing 3; **class 2** with 4 and 5; **class 3** with 6 through 8; and **class 4** with 9 and 10.

C. Both split and collapsed social class categories

- a. OCCUPATION, HOMEOWNERSHIP, EDUCATION, and SES, with eight groupings for SES
- b. OCCUPATION, HOMEOWNERSHIP, EDUCATION, and SES, with four groupings for SES

For all five runs, Rbrul indicated that a participant's social class—no matter how social class was organized—could not predict whether she would recognize a semantically reanalyzed form in the Identification Task (i.e. social class was not a statistically significant predictor variable). This was the case on the step-up and step-down runs, which matched. Thus, for future mixed-effects

models, I opted for the simpler model with social class collapsed as SES, since doing so would not cause me to overlook any important distinctions or predictions in the data.

### 5.2.3 Mixed-effects Model Results

Of the social variables of direct interest to this study—i.e. social class, YEAR, and GENDER—the YEAR factor best predicted semantic reanalysis recognition for the Identification Task, with a p-value ( $p=0.000393$ ) well under the alpha level that indicates significance. Below are the results for the social variables from the best model containing: PARTICIPANT (random) + QUESTION (0) + YEAR (0.000393).

**Table 5-2 Significant Predictor Variables for Semantic Reanalysis**

Social factors	Logodds	Centered Weights	p<0.05
<b>Year</b>			
BP	0.741	0.677	Significant
PR	0.413	0.602	Significant
BVB	-0.155	0.461	Significant
JC	-1.000	0.269	Significant
<b>Gender</b>	none	none	not significant
<b>SES</b>	none	none	not significant

deviance=1305.137; df=48; intercept= -4.508

grand mean= 0.512; centered input probability= 0.011

The results of the best model revealed that semantic reanalysis recognition is best predicted by year ( $p < .0005$ ), the question ( $p < .001$ ) and participant, among which YEAR was the most significant predictor. This outcome is notable because gender and social class did not emerge as significant predictor variables in any of the runs. Thus, after removing non-social variables (i.e.

Question and Participant) from the model, year ( $p=2.17e-07$ ) still prevailed as the only remaining predictor variable in the best model. Only after removing all the significant indicators (i.e. Question, Participant, and Year) from the model, did social class ( $p=0.0209$ ) and gender ( $p=0.0482$ ) barely emerge as significant factors, with p-values just under the alpha level. Thus, I can confidently conclude that there is no gender or social class effect for semantic reanalysis recognition in this data and that, based on the confidence intervals of the significant predictor variables, these outcomes would hold were I to repeat this study in this community.

The positive log-odds reported in the Rbrul output for the categories, *BP* and *PR*, within the YEAR factor reveal that the two younger age cohorts favored semantic reanalysis recognition in the Identification Task, while the older groups did not. If one recalls that older participants favor conservative language and that, for Blacks, this would be African American (Vernacular) English (see e.g. Edwards, 1992), then the finding that older Black participants disfavor nonstandard language could be problematic. That is, unless we consider that semantic reanalysis is innovative rather than conservative, as it constantly yields new lexemes. Some of these newer terms are even associated with younger generations, which would explain why many older participants are unfamiliar with them. Consider, for example, participant 246's remarks on the word, *baddest*.

(5.1) It's uh derogatory unless you're unless you're talking to a teenager<sup>13</sup>. [laughs] If you're talking to a young person, they're they're saying "that's good". It's the opposite of bad. You know like like uh...Michael Jackson's song...he said "I'm bad. I'm bad," but what he was saying was "I'm good. I'm good at what I do."

Another female member of the *Jim Crow* generation, born in the latter part of the 1930s, similarly attributes *bad* to younger speakers.

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<sup>13</sup> Although participant 246 does not specifically say which race she associates *baddest* with, she did explain that she was not familiar with—or interested in learning about—language use among Whites: "I wouldn't have any...reason to...to know whether they would or not."



- (5.2) AW: Who generally uses *bad*?  
 P248: Bad...instead of good?  
 AW: Uh huh.  
 P248: uh...uh...the kids of today...uh...yeah uh...that's what they say...if somethin good, they say "bad."  
 AW: Are they black kids, white kids?  
 P248: Yeah, black kids. I'm not uh...too familiar with white kids.

These statements should reinforce the idea that, as a creative process, new terms are constantly emerging via semantic reanalysis. Thus, there are forms which are associated with younger people and known by few older participants. So while participants 246 and 248 were able to define, *baddest* and *bad*, i.e. a term they associate with younger people, this ability may not be the norm. Of course, just as there are certain terms which are primarily associated with younger community members, there are also older reanalyzed terms that emerged long before the *Pryor* and *Black Power* generations were even born. Some of these terms are still widely used, as participant 246 said that *mama jamma* is one such word that "stands the test of time." However, there are also terms that participants alleged to be primarily limited in use to older community members.

- (5.3) AW: For *girl*, you said that it could mean "friend"?  
 P248: "Girl"?  
 AW: Uh huh.  
 ...  
 P248: Girl...yeah that's what my...when we say, like older women [mumbles] "girl!", you know, "Girlfriend!", you know, "girl!" That's the way we...address each other.  
 AW: So older women, you said?  
 P248: Yeah, mostly. Yeah.  
 AW: Are they black or white?  
 P248: I mean...my age. Black.

Participant 248 also associates other words, like *ace boon coon*, with "senior citizens" over age 55, specifically. Likewise, she attributes *I'm scared of you!* to members of her generation: "It's like a congratulations...it's saying 'you did good!'" Then she explained, "My generation has

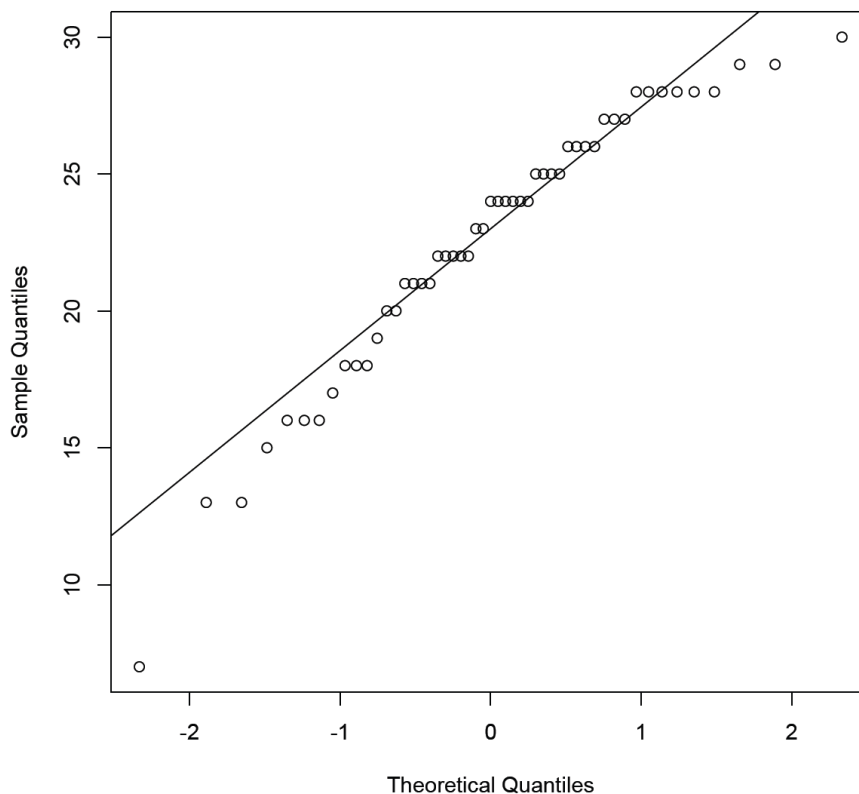
used it...I've never heard a younger person use it.” Participant 254 is another participant that recognizes the age-based stratification among the terms of the study: “Most of these, I would say, are African American, where there are just generational differences I see.”

From participants 246 and 248, both members of the *JC* generation, and *PR* generation member, participant 254, we see how AAE community members divide words by generation. Now that we have identified generation as a significant variable, let us consider semantic reanalysis recognition across the whole sample population community. Then, in section 5.4, we will return to considering patterns of age-based stratification across the data.

### **5.3 IS SEMANTIC REANALYSIS A PERVASIVE PHENOMENON ACROSS THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH COMMUNITY?**

As discussed in Chapter 4, one goal of this research was to find out whether semantic reanalysis is a community-wide phenomenon that is recognizable to all African American English speakers. The question I asked about my speech community sample was: are these participants behaving uniformly (in their recognition of semantic reanalysis), or does the sample, in fact, consist of multiple samples of separate populations? Based on the discussion above, it appears that there are different subgroupings of linguistic behavior in our one sample population; one whose familiarity with semantic reanalysis is greater than the others'. Thus, we cannot say that semantic reanalysis is recognized to the same degrees or that it is equally familiar (or pervasive) across the entire African American English community represented in our sample. A Quantile-Quantile plot, shown below in Figure 5-1, illustrates that there are a few outliers in the data, i.e. that there is not complete uniformity in the group of speakers.

**Figure 5-1** Normal Q-Q Plot



### 5.3.1 Multiple populations in the sample

How then does one deal with “weird data”? If there are outliers, one possibility is removing those outliers from the data. Of course, this action may distort the data and may misrepresent the variability or heterogeneity of the population under study. Speaking about the notion of removing outliers, Johnson (2008: 18) emphatically states “You should use *all* of the data you collect unless you have good independent reasons for not doing so.” Johnson goes on to identify what he means by “good independent reasons” for removing outliers, with one good reason being suspicion that a participant does not natively speak the language under study. This, however, is not a concern for my data. Rather, I am concerned with answering the question of whether there is heterogeneity among the speakers in this sample. If we briefly peruse the

literature on speech communities, namely African American ones, then we see that heterogeneous behavior—even among members of a single speech community—is not to be expected.

Rickford (1986), for example, presents data against this accepted notion of speech communities that come from Gumperz (1982) and Hymes (1972). Gumperz (1982: 24) defines *speech community* as “a system of organized diversity held together by common norms and aspirations. Members of such a community typically vary with respect to certain beliefs and other aspects of behavior. Such variation, which seems irregular when observed at the level of the individual, nonetheless shows systematic regularities at the statistical level of social facts.” In the case of my data, statistical measures reveal that the distinct behaviors of speech community members may even be visible when we zoom out, that is, “at the statistical level.” Another definition of speech community that names shared norms as a criterion comes from Hymes (1972: 54), who defines this social unit as “a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety.” While these conceptions of speech communities work in some contexts, they did not hold for the Cane Walk, Guyana, participants of Rickford’s research.

For his (1979) dissertation research, Rickford investigated creole-standard variation in personal pronouns in rural Cane Walk, a Guyanese sugar-estate community, where there is evidence of a creole continuum. His speech community consisted of members of two classes: the Estate Class at the bottom of the local hierarchy, and the Non-Estate Class occupying the middle tier of the social ladder. His research revealed that, even within a single speech community, there are groups that do not share values about language. In Cane Walk, in fact, the groups had conflicting ideas about social mobility, and different sociopolitical and language

values constraining their linguistic choices and their use of the variables of interest to Rickford. Based on his “unorthodox findings” about notions of speech community, Rickford (1986: 218-219) concludes:

The contrast between the sociopolitical values of these two groups—related in turn to differences between them in power and economics—helps to explain the linguistic differences between them...Pronounced internal linguistic differences like these challenge our more general characterization of speech communities as systems of shared norms (see Gumperz, 1982, p. 26; Rickford, 1985), and force us to come up with alternative conceptualizations which better account for their common and persistent heterogeneity.

Eberhardt (2009: 4) is another scholar who problematizes the “long-standing assumption in sociolinguistics that African American English (AAE) is a homogenous variety”, using her research on Pittsburgh AAE varieties to show that it is as heterogeneous and (regionally) variable as other Englishes. She also points us to the work of Eckert (2004: 109), who says

Although members of a population defined as living in the same community may all agree that they live in a particular area or political unit, they do not orient in a homogenous way to that area or unit or its surroundings...Categories, groups, and networks may, as a result, embody differences in spatial orientations and practices, with important consequences for linguistic variation.

From Eckert, it becomes clear that sociolinguists should not only expect regional variation, but also individual, linguistic differences at the micro level.

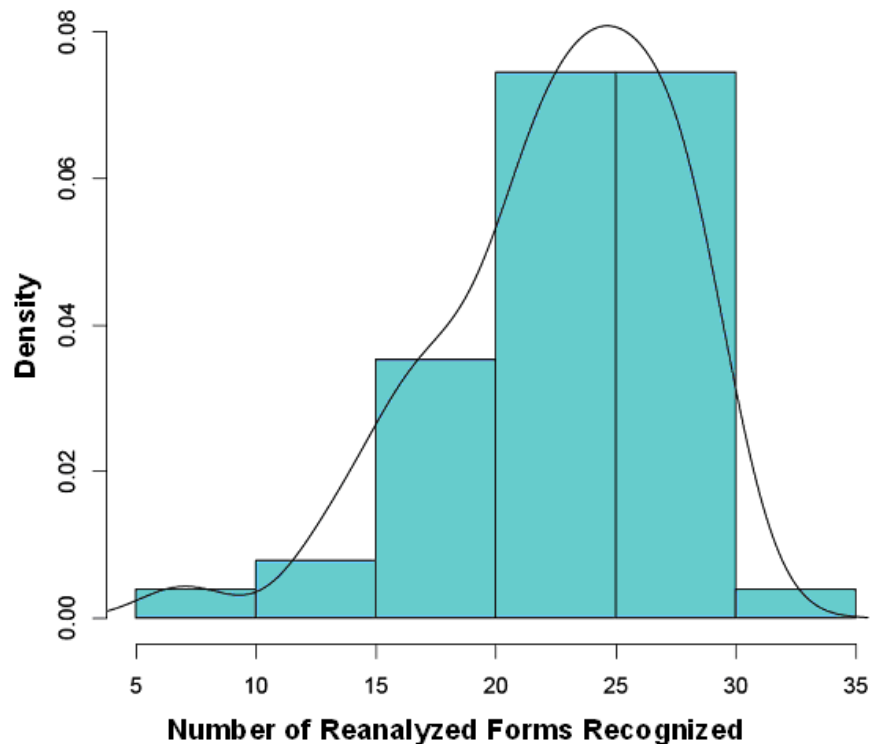
Some of the participants differ in their understandings of semantics, that is, the meaning of certain words and what evaluations they connote. Despite the fact that these meaning

contrasts would make calling my sample population a speech community a misnomer for Gumperz (1982) or Hymes (1972), I nevertheless recognize that linguistic and even ideological variation are parts of any normal speech community. In other words, even within this social unit of analysis, not everybody behaves the same way.

### 5.3.2 Pervasiveness of Semantic Reanalysis in the sample

The matter of pervasiveness can be addressed by referring to what proportion of the informants recognized semantically reanalyzed forms, which is shown in Figure 5-2.

**Figure 5-2 Histogram Representing Frequencies of Semantic Reanalysis Recognition**



This histogram reports the proportions of sample participants who recognized the reanalyzed lexemes in the Identification Task. The height of the bars indicates what percentage (from 0 to

80) of the population recognized a particular number of words (ranging from 5 to 30). This figure reveals that most of the population (i.e. 39 out of 51 participants) recognized 20 to 30 lexemes, that is, a majority of the lexemes in the Identification Task. Thus, we can say that this speech community has a similar degree of familiarity with reanalyzed lexemes, with a large portion of the population clustering around the 20 to 30 range of the figure.

#### 5.4 CONCEPTIONS OF RACIAL EPITHETS ACROSS GENERATIONS

Now we can return to the issue of how semantic reanalysis is distributed across particular sectors of this speech community. As discussed in Chapter 4, when mapping out the generation cohorts of the *Year* variable, I identified what stood out to me as several milestones in 20<sup>th</sup> century African American history, which most likely had an impact on social life and, in turn, the speech of Blacks in the US. Grouping participants into these life experience cohorts is not only imperative for testing my research hypotheses and predictions about their linguistic behavior and evaluations of semantic reanalysis as a whole but also for assessing specific lexemes, like reanalyzed epithets. Age groupings that rely solely on arbitrary birth dates would fail to capture the relationship between significant social events and language use.

The racial epithets studied in this research were *coon*, *nigger* and *boy*, none of which have derogatory origins and can, thus, be said to have undergone *pejoration* (Brontsema, 2004; Moxon, 2004: 126). *Coon* is a shortened form of the Portuguese word, *barracoos*, i.e. a slave pen or structure used to house African slaves awaiting sale. As Macrone (1995: 36) explains, “the slur for ‘African’ has nothing to do with raccoons.” Instead, it “derived from the last syllable of the Portuguese word *barracoos*, pronounced ‘*coons*’” (Baughman, 2005: 287).

*Nigger*, on the other hand, “derives from the Portuguese *negro*, translated as *black*, to refer to African slaves and was later adopted by the British and Americans” (Brontsema, 2004: 7). If we trace its origin back even farther, then we see that the Portuguese and/or Spanish etyma of *negro* is the Latin word for “black”, i.e. *nigrum* or *niger*. Like *coon*, *nigger* first underwent semantic change long before it was subject to the amelioration processes outlined here. *Coon* started off referencing an inanimate object, i.e. barracks, in general, and later (and more specifically) a slave pen, while *nigger* began as a value-neutral color term. Through semantic shift, both became ethonyms used to reference people of color or of African descent<sup>14</sup> although I cannot say that the terms also became derogatory at this time. In fact, Brontsema writes, “Geneva Smitherman states that “‘negro’ and ‘nigger’ were used interchangeably and without any apparent distinction....It was not until the twentieth century that whites began to semantically distinguish ‘negro’ and ‘nigger,’ with the latter term becoming a racial epithet” (1977: 36).” Thus, Smitherman considers the pejoration of *nigger* to be a fairly recent phenomenon, occurring only in the last century and not coinciding with the shift that made it an ethonym.

Naming *boy* as an epithet may seem like a stretch, considering that discussions of African American-targeting racial epithets (e.g. in linguistic writings) focus first and foremost on the infamous “N-word”, and rarely on *coon* or *boy*. But if we consider the opinions of study participants, like 248, then my decision to categorize *boy* with *nigger* and *coon* as a racial epithet makes sense.

- (5.5) AW: Uh, here you said “your boy” means “friend”?  
 P248: “Your boy”...mm hm...That’s like uh the men...like like uh women say “girlfriend” and uh men say “my...my boy”, “my dawg”...  
 AW: They say...? What’d you say they say?  
 P248: Men say...they used...like girlfriends say “girlfriend”? Men used to say “my

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<sup>14</sup> *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (1977: 775) defines *nigger* as “a member of any dark-skinned race”.



boy” [long pause] But it’d be better for ‘em to say “my man.” But most...a lot of people instead of sayin “my boy” they say “my man”...“my main man.”

AW: And why would it be better for them to say “my man”?

P248: Cause it go back to slavery...uh, “boy”...they called the Black men “boy”...Back, back in slavery time and comin outta slavery, they’s sayin “they’re not a boy, they’re a man! Don’t call me boy!...I’m a man!”

AW: So the reason why it bothers you is because it reminds you of something people said in slavery?

P248: Yeah...and if you’re a man...why you call ‘em a boy? That’s negative.

Participant 248’s disdain for Black men’s use of *boy* (i.e. a former epithet) supports Brontsema’s (2004) projections for older members of a targeted group. For participant 248, *boy*—even though it designates someone as admired or as a friend—should be avoided because of its history. Similarly, Smitherman (1994: 69) writes that, while *boy* can be used to refer to someone in the third person, it cannot be used directly as a term of address: “*Boy* should never be used to address any Black male over eight or nine years old; considered insulting.”

Because of the creative process of semantic reanalysis, all three words can be used as terms of endearment when appropriately employed by members of the African American English community in reference to themselves. Thus, the phrases *my nigger*, *ace boon coon* (also *ace* or *boon coon*), and *your boy* or *my boy* identify someone as ‘best friend’ (cf. Smitherman, 1994), and the word, *nigger*, can even designate a “lover” (see e.g. Smitherman, 1977; Brontsema, 2004).

My prediction for the older participants, e.g. *JC* (1920s and 1930s)—and perhaps *BVB* members (born in the 1940s)—was that they would have unpleasant, firsthand experiences with censored language, namely epithets. Furthermore, their experiences with words, like *nigger*, *coon*, and *my boy*, would involve out-group and/or inter-racial use of the words, that is, as White language and not Black language. I, therefore, expected the appropriation of racial epithets to be generation-stratified. Younger participants were expected to reclaim epithets (e.g. as in-group

terms of endearment), while I proposed that older speakers would not use epithets as much because they would interpret them as highly offensive and censured out-group terms. In short, I argued that 1) it would be less likely for older participants to view the use of epithets as positive, and that 2) they would further disprove of the use of epithets by Blacks. My predictions were right in line with one perspective presented about the reclamation of racist, homophobic and sexist language in Brontsema (2004: 6):

Because the word is rendered inseparable from its injurious power, many who oppose its reclamation are those who have directly suffered from its infliction and still bear the scars that can never completely heal: “We still lick the psychic and physical wounds inflicted by the word ‘Queer’” (Sillanpoa 1994: 57). This naturally results in an age-based division between supporters and opponents of the word’s reclamation, with those of an older generation who have experienced it as abusive and violent opposing its in-group circulation, which is often viewed in terms of the younger generation’s arrogance and disrespect. Pain marks the boundary of an uncloseable gap between generations.

Now the question is whether the data corroborates these predictions about epithets among the older generation, in particular. The following dialogue occurred between me (AW) and a female participant (P246) born in the mid-1920s.

(5.5) AW: When someone says “That’s my coon. We been friends since high school.” what do they mean?

P246: That’s um...uh...what they used to call uhh what [mumbles] Black people, uh “coons”, you know. And when a Black person uses that it’s it’s uh um it’s not derogatory, it’s positive for them...cause then when they say “that’s my coon”, you know, in other words they’re they’re in this mess together.

[Pause]

AW: What about when a White person uses it.

P246: It’s negative.

AW: What do they mean?

P246: NiggER<sup>15</sup>.

[Pause]

AW: Would you ever use that expression to refer to your Black friends?

P246: Yeah.

AW: Or some of your... You would?

P246: Um hm.

AW: Uh, is this an expression used by older people?

P246: Maybe younger people. Um hm.

AW: Um, is it an older word or...?

P246: No, it's it's been around for a long time, you know, all during slavery. It's been it's been around, uh, "coon," uh, but uh, in late days, the younger people have been using it. But it...they made it their own and it's supposed to express affection.

When preparing the research measures, I included *coon* in the task, thinking that it could not mean anything positive in isolation—especially for an older person who “survived” the *Jim Crow Era*. In general, I thought that, in order for *coon* to be affectionate, it must be used in the forms *ace boon coon* or *boon coon* but not in isolation. Thus, I was surprised when this older participant stated that the term was not derogatory, providing in-group use, that is. Her feelings about *coon* are no different for other epithets, e.g. *nigga*. Another shock was that, in addition to P246, a number of participants said the term meant “right hand man” (participant 244) or “friend”. Participants 246’s definition of *coon* as an endearing term did, however, diverge from some of the participants’ definitions, even while resembling others’ responses. Some participants, for example, said that *coon* was a “term used by whites to refer to blacks” and evaluated it negatively (e.g. participant 248, also from the *Jim Crow* cohort). For participant 259, of the *Black Power* group, the word denotes “friend” if two black people are talking; however, this participant felt it means *nigger* when it becomes a “white man’s word.”

In the interview below, participant 254 (born in the 1970s and from the *Pryor* cohort), had been discussing the definitions he provided in one of the Identification Tasks, when I began

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<sup>15</sup> I used uppercase letters in order to emphasize the very rhotic quality of P46’s pronunciation of [nɪgə].

asking him about whom he associates the various terms in the research task with. His thoughts on *coon* diverge from participant 246's.

(5.6) AW: What demographic, I guess, racial demographic do you associate these terms with?

P254: Uh racial...uh oh well, most of them...most of them uhh I associate them with...at least the ones I thought that were...they fit in the sentence...I tend to think of it as African American. The ones that didn't fit...I thought that they reminded me of a person outside of Black culture trying to be cool, you know, or even a Black person who's quote "not down" trying to use these terms

AW: um hm

P254: and they using them incorrectly.

AW: So which ones would you say are used incorrectly or sound like an outsider?

P254: Uh... "that's my coon". I really didn't know how to, you know...that just sounded like, I mean...you know, that's such an old term, period, or more of a KKK term. But it doesn't...I really couldn't...I don't really know who would use that. Cause you're trying to mix that positive acknowledgment with that... That's like saying "that's my jigaboo". You know, unless you're joking, you wouldn't say that.

In this dialogue, participant 254 discusses how the appropriate use of these AAE forms—that is, according to community-specific norms of language use—identifies the speaker as Black, while violation of cultural rules portrays a person as “outside of Black culture”. For him, being ‘down’—that is, a knowledgeable member of the African American speech community—represents AAE communicative competence. Although he recognizes that even a Black person may not be ‘down’, this participant alludes to the covert agency of language (see Chapter 6)—in this case, AAE communicative competence—to situate a person as either “African American” or “a person outside of Black culture.” Participant 254 also mentions the White Supremacy group, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and describes how the improper use of certain terms, e.g. “coon”—which originated as a racial epithet targeting Blacks—outside of the appropriate context can very negatively situate any person in the eyes of AAE speakers. Notice, however, that even while identifying *coon* as negative and describing it as “a KKK term”, participant 254 defined *ace boon coon* as “main man, partner” and evaluated it positively. Thus, his definitions seemed to be

dependent on linguistic factors, that is, whether the word occurs in isolation or whether it is part of the lexical chunk, *ace boon coon*.

What we notice in comparing these two dialogs from participants 246 and 254 is that even valid predictions fail sometimes, especially when assessed on an individual basis. Thus, some victims of epithets *can* reclaim it, allowing them to conceive of it as separate from its original meaning (of derogation). Likewise, we see that even for people born long after *de jure* segregation and who may not have experienced racist language firsthand, “bringing out the word [can] bring out the pain” (Brontsema, 2004: 6).

#### **5.4.1 Chi-square tests of independence: are there generational differences in how the “N-word” is perceived?**

Despite the different understandings of language (e.g. *coon*) between participants 246 and 254, there is still evidence of shared ideas and norms about epithets across generations, e.g. ideas of who (what race) can use certain terms affectionately (participant 245 and 246).

I performed a chi-square test in order to assess whether the evaluation (connotation) of “the N-word”, *nigga* and *nigger*, is related to the generation (or age) of participants. Rather than testing each of the reanalyzed epithets in the AAE community, I used “the N-word” as a stand-in for epithets, in general. Our chi-square test of independence for Year/Generation and evaluation/connotation indicated that there is no significant difference in how different age groups perceive (or evaluate) the epithets, *nigga* and *nigger* overall.

**Table 5-3 Community-wide Evaluations of the “N-word”**

	Positive	Negative	
JC	11	11	22
BVB	20	6	26
BP	23	11	34
PR	11	8	19
Total	65	36	101

Pearson’s  $X^2 = 4.273$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = 0.23345407$

Does this independence of generation and epithet evaluation change when we pair the groups differently for between-group chi-square tests? In one case, it did.

**Table 5-4 “N-word” Evaluation Differences between Generations**

Groups Compared	$x^2$ value	df	p-value
JC vs. BVB	3.776	1	0.05199281 ?
JC vs. BP	1.744	1	0.1866328
JC vs. PR	0.256	1	0.61288162
BVB vs. BP	0.624	1	0.42956473
BVB vs. PR	1.855	1	0.17320298
BP vs. PR	0.504	1	0.47774781

As shown from the series of chi-square tests in Table 5-4, there is no significance difference in evaluations of the “N-word” (*nigger* and *nigga*) by generation, in general, and even between most groups. There is, however, some relation between generation cohort and evaluation for the *JC* and *BVB* groups—despite the suspicious p-value of 0.05199281—with *JC* giving positive evaluations 50 percent of the time (11 out of 22) and *BVB* members doing so 20 out of 26 times. It is surprising that this suspect difference is found among two generations that are not far apart in years, that is, not as much as *JC* and *PR*, for example. Why not an *older* versus *younger* pattern of evaluation, e.g. *JC* contrasting with *PR*, or perhaps *PR* and *BP*

diverging from *JC* and *BVD*?

When I tried a test of independence for the latter scenario, *PR* and *BP* versus *JC* and *BVD*, I found  $\chi^2 = 0.002$  ( $p=0.96432941$ ), meaning that evaluation and generation are independent. I also found that evaluations had no significant relationship with age in a test of independence involving the three youngest groups ( $\chi^2=1.851$ ,  $p=0.3963332$ ). When I compared the evaluations of *JC* against the three youngest groups in a  $\chi^2$  test, the result was  $\chi^2=2.527$  and  $p=0.11191281$ . These tests confirm that there is no *older* versus *younger* pattern of evaluation with respect to *nigga/nigger*.

Why is it that the two older groups' evaluations of the N-word epithet are attributable to age when we would expect older groups (1920s through 1940s) to behave similarly and to have shared, negative evaluations of epithets, that is, according to Brontsema's (2004) and my predictions? The answer to this question lies beyond the scope of this thesis and the evidence in my data. Nevertheless, it may very well be that, while these groups are not far apart in years, their life experiences—during and directly following *de jure* segregation—were divergent enough to impact how they perceive “the N-word”.

## 5.5 EMIC VERSUS STANDARD NORMS AND CONVENTIONS

In addition to deviating from the semantic norms of Mainstream American English, semantically reanalyzed words “break” a number of other rules. *Baddest*, for example, may appear to be an overgeneralization of the application of *-est* affixation in order to form the superlative of *bad* (i.e. *worst*). However, in addition to being a nonstandard word for *worst* (e.g. participant 263), *baddest* also means the opposite (inverse) of *(the) worst*, e.g. being ascribed meanings like “the

best” (participant 230) and “great” (participant 220). In other cases, it becomes harder to say that the meaning of *baddest* has merely been “flipped” or inverted<sup>16</sup>, as we find definitions that are more than just antonyms of *worst*. Thus, for example, we see specific meanings regarding physical appearance, including “fine” (participant 211); “good looking (participant 212); “the girl looks good or have a nice figure” (participant 225), “she got it all, she look good, she dress good” (participant 229); and “sexy” (participant 243).

Thus, from the word, *baddest*, we can see one way in which AAE acts as an autonomous system, following its own rules regarding word meanings and even grammar and correctness. Aside from having their own grammatical rules, a number of AAE words are written according to emic conventions and with phonemic spellings. These emic spelling conventions may help designate which referent is intended by the form, i.e. the AAE or the MAE meaning, but it might also be a way of demonstrating Black language’s independence of Mainstream American English. Among these phonetically spelled words are a number of semantically reanalyzed forms. Compare, for example, **dog** “canine” and **dawg**<sup>17</sup>, which means “main man” (participant 260). There is as **gangster** “hoodlum” and **gangsta**, meaning “super fly, cool looking” (participant 254) or “hard, fresh” (participant 254). As discussed earlier, there are also different spellings for words, like *nigger* and *fat*; however, the meaning and connotation of the form is not always predictable by spelling, as was the case with *dawg* and *gangsta*. In the next section, I delve into this topic further.

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<sup>16</sup> Smitherman (1997), for example, discusses semantic reanalysis as *semantic reversal* and *semantic inversion*.

<sup>17</sup> When asked to define or give a synonym for “your boy”, participant 211 even spelled out his answer as “d.a.w.g.” His on-the-spot spelling suggests that, in his opinion, in order for /dɔg/ to mean “friend”, it must be spelled <dawg>.



## 5.5.1 Contrastive Spelling?: Are <fat> and <nigger> identical to <phat><sup>18</sup> and <nigga>?

### 5.5.1.1 <fat> versus <phat>: Depends on how you spell it

In Section 5.1, I discussed the semantic reanalysis of <fat> and <phat> among select participants of this research. For those participants, the meanings of <fat> and <phat> were identical, that is, “positive/complimentary” irrespective of spelling. Thus, participant 211 defined both forms in the same way, that is, “fine and tender” and “pretty, hot and tender” for both. Participants 212 similarly said that both mean “she looks good.” There were also a number of participants who were not familiar with semantically reanalyzed or complimentary use of the word, [fæt]. Thus, they found both <fat> and <phat> to both “negative/offensive.” Such participants include participant 213, who said “gained weight” for both; participant 214, who said “overweight”; participant 225, who said that <phat> and <fat> meant that “girlfriend needs to lose some weight”; participant 256, with “heavy”; and participant 263, who defined both as “big as a house.”

Yet, for some other participants of this research study, the MAE and AAE versions of [fæt] may have identical phonetic shapes but it seems that they do not have identical mental representations for such speakers. Thus, one spelling, <phat>, can be complimentary while the other, <fat>, is offensive. Additionally, for some of these participants, it seems that the semantically reanalyzed form, <phat>, has undergone further semantic changes, specifically, semantic bleaching. Semantic bleaching<sup>19</sup> is one of the three main processes of grammaticalization, and is when the original meaning of a form is weakened. Thus, for some

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<sup>18</sup> Brackets enclose the English orthographic spelling of words.

<sup>19</sup> In cases of semantic bleaching or *desemanticization*, Heine (1991: 40) explains that “complex (source or original) meanings are reduced to less complex but more grammatical contents.”

AAE speakers, the meaning of <phat> does not relate to (body) weight or even physical appearance, whereas its root, i.e. <fat>, did.

For example, when asked to define the following underlined, bold words from the Identification task, “Man, I just saw Trisha at the store. She **fat/phat**, ain’t she?”, participant 259 found “**fat**” to mean that Trisha was “overweight,” whereas “**phat**” meant that Trisha was “looking good” , with the earlier definition evaluated as “negative/offensive” and the former as “positive/complimentary.” Similarly, participant 258 also defined and evaluated the forms in this contrastive way, that is, “big” or “overweight” and “negative/offensive” for “**fat**”, versus “stylish” or “looks good”—and a “positive/complimentary” evaluation—for the form, “**phat**.” Consider also participant 255, who answered “she is too fat” for “**fat**” (“negative/offensive”), versus “she looks good”, which she considers “positive/complimentary.”

Other participants gave more hints about their contrastive conceptions of these terms. Participant 254 explained that the definition “depends on if talking about size (fat) - negative or looks (phat) – positive.” Thus, she found that the terms designate different referents, i.e. size for one and looks for the other. Another participant, number 221, explained that the meaning “depends on spelling.” Thus, <**fat**> was “big, huge, large” and “positive/complimentary”, whereas <**phat**> meant “cool, hip, likable” and had a “negative/offensive” evaluation<sup>20</sup>. Below in Tables 5-5 and 5-6, you can see other select participants who also found a semantic distinction between the two spellings of [fæt].

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<sup>20</sup> Notably, participant 229 did not consider <fat> and <phat> to have contrastive connotations. Rather, she evaluated both as “positive/ complimentary” even despite the definitions she provided, i.e. “obese” and “looks”, respectively.

**Table 5-5 Conceptualizations of <phat> by Definition and Evaluation**

Participant Number	Definition Given	Evaluation
P229	looks good	Positive/complimentary
P231	nice [phat]	Positive/complimentary
P239	looks good	Positive/complimentary
P242	phat like nice appearance	Positive/complimentary
P243	sexy, thick, not too small, just right	Positive/complimentary
P249	Fine	Positive/complimentary
P258	stylish, looks good	Positive/complimentary

**Table 5-6 Conceptualizations of <fat> by Definition and Evaluation**

Participant Number	Definition Given	Evaluation
P229	obese	Positive/complimentary
P231	fat	Negative/offensive
P239	heavy	Negative/offensive
P242	fat as weight	Negative/offensive
P243	sloppy, a mess	Negative/offensive
P249	overweight	Negative/offensive
P258	big, overweight	Negative/offensive

For participants, like those in Tables 5-5 and 5-6, who find the denotations and, in many cases, the connotations of <phat> and <fat> to be contrastive, *fatness* and *phatness* are two separate entities (lexemes) and thus may have different mental representations. Recall the Identification task sentence used in the elicitation: “Man, I just saw Trisha at the store. She **fat/phat**, ain’t she?” In this sentence, there is no contextual difference between the syntactic environments of these forms nor were there phonetic cues, as this task was written and not oral. Thus, one might suppose that it is the spelling difference, and not necessarily the context, that triggers these separate definitions and contrastive evaluations for such participants.

Rather than relying solely on this supposition, I tested this claim—i.e. that the evaluation or connotation of [fæt] is related to spelling—using chi-square tests of independence.

**Table 5-7 Community-wide Evaluations of [fæt]**

	Fat	Phat	
Positive	10	24	34
Negative	40	26	66
Total	50	50	100

Pearson's  $X^2 = 8.734$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.00312331$  ( $p < 0.05$ )

Yates'  $X^2 = 7.531$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.00606462$

Table 5-7 displays the number of participants that evaluated <phat> and <fat> as negative or positive. There are 100 evaluations, 50 for each word, because one participant (out of 51) was unfamiliar with the terms and, therefore, did not evaluate them. Two chi-square tests were performed: Pearson's chi-square test and Yates' correction for continuity. Although the Pearson test is sufficient for answering our question, showing that the difference in the response is statistically significant, performing the second test makes us even more certain that there is, indeed, a relation between spelling and evaluation. This is because the Yates' chi-square test uses a formula in order to reduce the chi-square value obtained in the Pearson test, thereby increasing the p-value and preventing Type I errors. Because both p-values (Pearson's  $X^2 = 8.734$ ,  $p = 0.00312331$ ; Yates'  $X^2 = 7.531$ ,  $p = 0.00606462$ ) indicate statistical significance well below the alpha level (or significance threshold), we can confidently reject the Null Hypothesis and assume that there is indeed a relation between how [fæt] is spelled and how it is evaluated. <fat> was evaluated negatively 40 out of 50 times, where as <phat> was thought to have an offensive connotation 26 out of 50 times, which is almost half. Thus, the <fat> spelling of /fæt/ predicts a negative evaluation, while <phat> goes either way. It was interesting that there was also some degree of implicational scaling, as a person, who is unfamiliar with semantic

reanalysis, can identify both <fat> and <phat> as “negative/offensive”. Thus, participant 216 said that someone who is *fat* or *phat* has “gained weight, gotten heavy”. Similarly, participant 219 found that the meanings of the words did not contrast, providing one definition: “put on weight, heavy”. For participants who are familiar with the semantically reanalyzed forms of these words, there are two possibilities: 1) that both <fat> and <phat> are complimentary; 2) that <fat> is negative and retains its MAE meaning while <phat> is positive is the reanalyzed form. Thus, participant 257 thought both meant “looks good”, while participant 244 said “overweight” and “bangin”, respectively. Notice, however, that no one evaluated <phat> negatively and <fat> positively.

#### **5.5.1.2 <nigger> versus <nigga> and other semantically reanalyzed epithets**

The claim about spelling-dependent meaning can be made for <nigger> and <nigga> just as it was for <fat> and <phat>. Discussing the word, *nigger*, Smitherman (1977: 62) writes: “Whereas to whites it is simply a way of calling a black person outa they name, to blacks it has at least four different meanings as well as a different pronunciation: nigguh.” Smitherman then goes on to elaborate on the different connotations of “nigguh” for blacks that cover a range of connotations between positive and negative, and a number of meanings, including “black folks—in general” and “my best friend” (p. 62). Our data confirmed the wide semantic range for [nɪgə], with 33 participants evaluating it as “positive/complimentary.” Among such participants, I found definitions like “soul mate, friends” (participant 224), “my homeboy from the hood”, and “friend, my man, boyfriend” (participant 259). Among the 17 participants who considered /nɪgə/ “negative/offensive”, I noticed definitions like “scum” (participant 232) and “black person” (participant 248). If the emic spelling, i.e. <nigga>, does not have fixed connotations and

denotations—even after semantic reanalysis—then what about the standard, rhotic spelling, <nigger>.

Following the Identification Task, I asked participants to elaborate on their answers and thoughts about the words in the task. In order to answer this question about <nigger> and <nigga>, let me first discuss several of the responses of selected participants. Participant 244, a male member of the *Pryor* generation, defined *my nigga* as “my homie” and evaluated it positively; however, he said that <nigger> has a “racist spelling” and that you have to be black to use it. Likewise, participant 245, who is also a male from the *Pryor* generation—born in the very early 1990s, specifically—defined *my nigga* as “homie” (with a “positive/complimentary” connotation), but said that *my nigger* “is a slave term” and gave it a “negative/offensive” evaluation. We know that participant 244’s evaluations of <nigger> and <nigga> were based on spelling, but what about participant 245’s? Well, in fact, the participant does say that he is unfamiliar with the <nigger> spelling of the word, while this was not the case for <nigga>. In addition to spelling, there are other factors that affected meanings and evaluations for these two participants. For example, like participant 244, participant 245 also indicated that White people would not use *my nigga*, explaining that it would be “racist” if they did. A Black person can, however, use both [nɪgə] and [nɪgə̃], although you will see that use of the latter form, in general, is not preferable among the *PR* generation. Thus, for these participants, it looks like meanings and evaluations are constrained by the spelling, the user (e.g. a White person versus a Black person) and the context (i.e. in-group versus inter-race) of the “N-word”. Further, we know that these meaning constraints have historical bases.

Now let us consider another participant from another age and gender group. Participant 246 is a female who was born in the mid-1920s. Because of the font size used on

some of the research measures and related issues of legibility, it was necessary for me to administer the Identification Task orally to this participant. Thus, she did not read the task and so her responses are related to my pronunciation and not to spelling. Nevertheless, such responses can contribute to the present discussion about what constrains the reanalysis (i.e. positive connotation and complimentary denotation) of a word. So although we cannot discuss how spelling factored into her evaluations and responses, we can talk about how context and user impacted her responses. For participant 246, reanalyzed racial epithets, like *nigger*, do not have static meanings. Thus, while they can be highly endearing, in the “wrong” hands or context, they are offensive. In the Identification Task excerpt that follows, you will hear participant 246’s feelings on [nɪgə] for both in-group and inter-group use:

- (5.5) AW: If someone says “That’s my nigga right there. We used to ball together.” what do they mean by that?  
P246: “A friend.” [pause] Like, “buddy friend.”  
AW: Ok. Do they mean it in a good way, bad way?  
P246: Good.  
AW: Who uses um um “my nigga” to mean “friend”?  
P246: Uh, Black people.  
AW: Um do White people use it in that way?  
P246: No  
AW: What does it mean when used by um white people?  
P246: “Lynch.” [chuckles] “Servant.”  
AW: “Servant”?  
P246: “Not not my equal.”

Participant 246 sees the positive or complimentary use of *nigger* as dependent on the race and the person using the form. For her, one needs to be African American in order to use *nigger* affectionately. We were not able to consider her evaluations of the spelling differences (as she took an oral test) so let us consider the responses of the other community members, who read through the task.

**Table 5-8 Community-wide Evaluations of the “N-word” Based on Spelling**

	Positive	Negative	
Nigga	30	17	47
Nigger	39	19	58
Total	69	36	105

Pearson’s  $X^2 = 0.134$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.71432023$

Table 5-8 reveals that, in general, it does not matter how you spell “the N-word”, as it is still evaluated as positive or negative by community members; however, does this hold for all generational groups? To answer this question, I tested the four age cohorts as individual groups (see Table 5-9).

**Table 5-9 Connotative Differences in the “N-word” According to Spelling and Generation**

Within Group Comparison	Numbers <sup>21</sup>		$x^2$ value	df	p-value
	Pos	Neg			
JC : nigga vs. nigger	4	6	0.202	1	0.65311132
	5	5			
BVB : nigga vs. nigger	9	4	0.867	1	0.35178718
	11	2			
BP : nigga vs. nigger	11	6	0.134	1	0.71432023
	12	5			
PR : nigga vs. nigger	9	1	8.927	1	0.00280985 ✓
	2	7			

What we find from these series of chi-square tests (shown in Table 5-9) is that spelling does in

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<sup>21</sup>The *Numbers* column shows how many participants in each generational cohort evaluated <nigga> positively (in the upper left box) and negatively (in the upper right box). The lower left box contains the number of positive evaluations for <nigger>, while the lower right box shows the number of participants that evaluated <nigger> negatively.



fact matter to the youngest generation,<sup>22</sup> the *Pryor* cohort. Thus, to the *Pryor* cohort, <nigger> and <nigga> are separate lexemes: the former a white word, the other black; the first racist and offensive, the latter positive.

(5.6) P254: “He’s my niggER...niggER for life”. That sound to me like somebody who doesn’t...although I disagree with Tupac’s analysis that, you know, black people use n.i.g.g.a. versus n.i.g.g.e.r.

AW: Uh huh

P254: Cause, you know, uh, actually, you know, the newspapers at the turn of 1900 show that whites were calling us n.i.g.g.a.h. So even they was calling niggas “niggahs” before us. So I disagree with that but that, to me, when they say “he’s my niggER for life” sounds like...um...somebody tryna use that and not understandin...

This negative evaluation of <nigger> is due the fact that its standard or MAE spelling represents mainstream culture. More specifically, <nigger> represents rhoticity, which is a style that has come to index White, out-group /ɹ/ pronunciation. Since—as indicated by participants—epithets should only be used by Blacks (see e.g. participants 244, 245 and 246), the spelling that represents a non-Black using a racial epithet is necessarily offensive. If you look at the distribution of the positive and evaluations for these forms in the following table, these spelling-based connotation contrasts become very obvious.

**Table 5-10 “N-word” Connotations According to the Pryor Generation**

	Positive	Negative	Total
Nigga	9	1	10
Nigger	2	11	13
Total	11	12	23

<sup>22</sup> Because the expected frequency was low in 20 percent of the cells of the table, I employed the Yates  $\chi^2$  test in order to ensure that we were not overestimating the significance of the test. The results indicated that spelling is definitely contrastive for the *Pryor* cohort ( $\chi^2=6.363$ ,  $p=0.01165244$ ).

For the three other generations, on the other hand, these racial and connotative distinctions do not hold consistently. In addition to distinguishing between meanings by spelling, the *PR* group had some degree of implicational scaling: a person could identify both words as positive; both words as negative; or one word as positive and the other as negative. If the latter scenario occurred, then the positive word would most certainly be <nigga> and <nigger> would be the negative one. The reverse, therefore—i.e. a negative evaluation of <nigga> with a positive evaluation of <nigger> did not occur in this generation; however, it did in the other three. Thus, participants 211 (*BVB* cohort) and 222 (*BP* cohort) evaluated <nigger> negatively but <nigga> positively.

What causes these differences regarding spelling, which sets the youngest group apart from the earlier, pre-1970 ones? If we attributed this difference to participation in hip hop culture, which did conveniently begin in the 1970s, then we would need to know that our *Pryor* participants do, in fact, listen to hip hop. This hypothesis, however, is one that I have not explored and that I will not prejudicially on the basis of age—and possibly race—alone. Furthermore, in the case of <phat> and <fat>, we tested all of the age groups together and found that knowledge of the spelling contrast applied for the sample population as a whole. Thus, it would be inaccurate to reduce this the “hip hop” generation.

In order to accurately and sufficiently discuss what causes this generational contrast regarding spelling, it would be necessary to conduct further research involving interviews that ask participants about spelling specifically. Such research might reveal the origin of this spelling contrast, be it hip hop or some other cultural phenomenon. Although this kind of research would be informative, it is beyond the scope of the present research.

## 6.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

My thesis has addressed a number of questions pertaining to semantic reanalysis in the African American English community. I began by asking whether we can factually say that semantic reanalysis is a pervasive phenomenon or that it is employed to the same degree across the (entire) African American English community. The idea that there are heterogeneous speech communities, like the AAE community, that are just as complicated and multifaceted as the societies they represent is important because linguists (e.g. Gumperz, 1982; Hymes, 1972) tend to assume that normal speech communities behave uniformly.

Aside from looking at semantic reanalysis familiarity across the whole sample population, I wanted to see if certain social categories (i.e. socioeconomic classes, genders, and generations or age cohorts) favor and/or disfavor semantic reanalysis familiarity more than others. The result of the best Rbrul mixed effects regression model revealed that the two younger age cohorts, *Black Power* (1950s and 1960s) and *Pryor* (1970s through 1980s), favored reanalysis in the Identification Task. However, semantic reanalysis familiarity was not stratified by gender or socioeconomic status.

After determining that there was a pattern of generation stratification in this sample, I discussed this patterning as it pertains to a select group of reanalyzed words. I considered the perception of epithets, represented by “the N-word”, across the four generations of African American English speakers. I also discussed the significance of different emic spellings, like

<phat> and <nigga>, for the whole AAE community and/or generational sectors of it. We learned why certain spellings, i.e. <nigger>, infrequently bear positive connotations for members of the *Pryor* generation, as the spelling represented a rhotic pronunciation that is commonly associated with the pejorative, out-group (or White) use of the word.

Now let me briefly return to the discussion of the generation-stratified pattern of reanalysis familiarity and elaborate on the implications of the Rbrul results for the Identification Task. This discussion will segue to possible directions for future research.

Recall that the Identification Task was a test of awareness that assessed the test-taker's familiarity with the forms in the contexts of sentences. That is to say that one need not use semantically reanalyzed forms regularly—or ever—in order to answer questions “correctly” and prove her awareness. Instead, she need only know what the lexemes mean, perhaps from exposure to users of the forms. Thus, we should not misinterpret the Rbrul results as indicating something about usage of semantically reanalyzed forms, as the Identification Task did not gauge use. It simply implies, for example, that the younger generations are more familiar with reanalysis, in general, and irrespective of the era (i.e. newness versus oldness) of terms. In order to determine more about which speakers or sectors of the community use reanalyzed forms the most, more observation would be necessary. Therefore, for future research on reanalysis in the AAE community, I recommend that more observation accompany quantitative measures.

Before concluding, there is one issue that I wish to return to: the strategy motivating the use of semantic reanalysis in this sample population. In section 6.1, I address several possible motivations.

## **6.1 IS SEMANTIC REANALYSIS EMPLOYED AS A MEANS OF DIFFERENTIATION AND DISTINCTION?**

A number of participants have discussed semantic reanalysis in exclusionary manners, suggesting that differentiation and gate-keeping are two motivations for the use of semantic reanalysis in Rankin. For several participants, competence in semantic reanalysis highlights (racial) boundaries and situates a person as either a (AAE) community member or a non-community member. This is because many users of these lexemes see semantic reanalysis as a (form of) responsive discourse that derives from the (impermeable) social order that has separated Blacks and Whites and, ultimately, their language varieties. Some participants believe that only Blacks would use English in this (semantically distinct) manner. Perhaps this belief stems from the fact that a number of participants believe semantic reanalysis derives from Africa and/or African American traditions. Other community members believe that only Blacks ought to use some of these semantically reanalyzed words, namely epithets. Therefore, for all of these community members, competence in and/or use of semantically reanalyzed forms necessarily says a great deal about a person's relationship to the AAE community and her racial affiliation. Furthermore, these (allegedly) racial semantic differences can be manipulated or highlighted in order to maintain racial or communal boundaries.

In the next sections, I elaborate on these differentiation and gate-keeping (boundary maintenance) strategies through interview excerpts.

### 6.1.1 Reevaluating Norms and the Advent of Local Prestiges

*Covert agency* is “the use of distinct microlinguistic features to situate oneself as a member of a linguistic community” (Klein, 2006: 9). This term is pertinent to the discussion of differentiation because when a group attempts to distinguish itself from another group by means of language, then they may be exploiting the marked nature of linguistic elements in order to accomplish this differentiation. While using language to establish themselves as members of particular communities—i.e. ethnolinguistic or other—such communities may also be using language as a way to create solidarity with fellow group members. In cases of racial differentiation, it is significant that the markers that give covert agency be racialized. Thus, particular forms will be labeled as Black(-sounding) and the users of such forms will become identifiable as Black or will at least be associated with particular social groups. This racialized characteristic enables the language user to exploit the feature and take advantage of its (racial or ethnic) situating abilities.

Bailey (2002: 111) describes the “local valuation of solidarity forms” (or *covert prestige*) as “non-dominant ethnic/racial/class communities...using forms that are disparaged by dominant groups.” It is relevant to discussions of AAE semantics—i.e. a nondominant variety—because its speakers are using linguistic features that hold stigmas within the dominant culture. Notice, however, that these cultural elements do not necessarily bear stigmas according to the standards of the nondominant populations, as they are reevaluated outside the Mainstream context. This reevaluation results, in part, from the unlikelihood of success in a rigid social system. Remember, the value (i.e. prestige and instrumentality) of mainstream norms is related to their (gate-keeping) abilities, which socially or economically advance those who possess the forms and hold back those who do not.

Without the presence of incentives or benefits (e.g. employment prospects, economics gain, et cetera) for the adoption of Mainstream forms (e.g. language, behaviors, et cetera), there is less incentive and little reason to adopt a dominant language variety. The reevaluation can also be thought of as a form of rebellion by the discontented nondominant culture against the dominant group, so that forms affiliated with the dominant group—which are typically prestigious—will be rejected and reevaluated (or even devalued) by the subordinate culture. Conversely, the nondominant group will possibly begin to view its own cultural forms as cultural capital, that is, competences that can be seen as assets or skills.

So to reiterate and connect the ideas of *covert agency* and *covert prestige*: the (in-group) value of a cultural form may stem from its covert agency and marked nature, which can be used to set a language user apart from the dominant community. The (local) prestige of the form may also stem from its ability to link or unite people who share in the use of a unique form, thereby creating solidarity and further highlighting them as members of a distinct community. Racialized varieties also become very instrumental and valuable (as cultural and symbolic capital) to members tossed into the “Other” group, as they allow for internal distinctions among minorities of a country. They have in-group prestige (within particular communities) because they allow their possessors to stand apart from people who do not utilize that variety (i.e. outsiders).

Let us briefly consider the different functions that languages, i.e. a dominant code and a vernacular variety, hold in Mainstream society and how these functions contrast with those held within the in-group context. We will consider Romaine’s (1992) research on Papua New Guinea during 1986 and 1987, just over a decade after the country gained Independence<sup>23</sup>. In discussing

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<sup>23</sup> Australian colonial and administrative rule ended in 1975 (Romaine, 1992: 319).

language planning and policy in Papua New Guinea, Romaine (1992: 319) names English—the language of European colonialism in Oceania—as a language with “gate-keeping” functions, “excluding those who do not know it.” The prestigious status and exclusionary function of English was directly related to the high value of English in Papua New Guinea’s linguistic marketplace and the fact that “the linguistic basis for advancement in society lies in English-medium education.” English, however, did not rank the same way in ethnic, in-group contexts, where indigenous, non-colonial languages had sovereignty. Thus Romaine (p. 337) writes, “At the moment, for many children in rural areas, English is a language which is used only at school, and there only to a very limited degree. They acquire literacy in a language which they will never use once they have left school.” Even the pidgin, Tok Pisin, which might appear a broken language or illegitimate code for a language purist, bears a high status when considered in its local context. Romaine writes about Tok Pisin’s ethnically neutral “attribute value”, integrative functions and unifying capabilities, which are important for such a linguistically diverse society as Papua New Guinea. Further, she adds:

At the same time as Tok Pisin was nobody’s first language, it has long had prestige as a language which symbolizes familiarity with Western culture and a world outside the village...While Tok Pisin was used for instrumental purposes by colonizers, the colonized created a full-fledged language from it and used it among themselves to express shared experiences. For this reason, while its colonial legacy is not forgotten, Tok Pisin is probably the only language capable at the moment of grass-roots support in the post-colonial struggle. (p. 330)

In short, Romaine’s research reveals that what applies for one context—e.g. regarding the prestige and currency of a language—does not necessarily hold outside of that context. Thus, the



value of English in mainstream (colonial) Papua New Guinean society is not the same status that the language holds among local, ethnolinguistic communities. Additionally, while onlookers from outside Papua New Guinea would most likely never identify Tok Pisin as a language of power, business, administration or government, Romaine says that members of the local cultures have appropriated Tok Pisin these formal functions and may even see it as “a White man’s language” (p. 326).

Romaine’s (1992) research, therefore, reminds us of *covert prestige* (Bailey, 2002), demonstrating that Mainstream cultural norms and ideas of prestige are often void outside the “jurisdiction” of the dominant culture. It also reminds that the *covert agency* of languages and/or linguistic forms is “in the eye of the beholder”, i.e. they are locally derived and culturally constrained. Thus, there is no universal conceptualization of what is “Black-sounding” or “White-sounding”, nor about what language is advantageous.

The following dialogs come from transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews conducted after the Identification Task. During these interviews, participants provided additional insights about the lexemes covered in the research. These dialogs reveal how some members of the sample population view individual semantically reanalyzed lexemes and/or the (semantic) strategy as a whole. For these participants, reanalyzed words are racialized as Black or even African words. These interviews substantiate my hypothesis about the strategy underlying semantic reanalysis, that is, that community members see the strategy as a response to mainstream culture and/or as a source of differentiation. For many participants, semantically contrastive language sets African American English apart from Mainstream American English and can be manipulated to serve gate-keeping functions. Thus, knowledge of forms situates you as a member of the community, while a lack of competence means you are “not down”, as

participant 254 put it. Additionally, there are participants who believe that only Blacks should use certain lexemes, e.g. racial epithets. In this way, such forms are exclusionary and can be used to reify racial and community boundaries.

### **6.1.2 Is it an African (American) thing?: Local perspectives on the origins and purposes of semantic reanalysis**

The first series of dialogs below are with participant 254. If you recall an earlier dialog (5.5), he discussed his feelings about the ungrammatical (and racist) use of ‘coon’ in isolation, which he found to contrast with the endearing use of the word in the phrase *ace boon coon*. Remember that, when asked “what...racial demographic do you associate these terms with?”, he replied:

- (6.1) Most of them...at least the ones I thought...fit in the sentence...I tend to think of it as African American. The ones that didn’t fit...I thought that they reminded me of a person outside of Black culture trying to be cool, you know, or even a Black person who’s quote “not down” trying to use these terms.

The next set of quotations supports the notion that semantic reanalysis is viewed as racialized, i.e. “black-sounding”, language to some members of the community. It demonstrates that language users perceive their language as distinctive and community-specific, whether or not this is actually the case. In my discussion with participant 254, shown below, you will notice that he views semantically reanalyzed lexemes as originally and uniquely African or African American. Furthermore, you will hear him describe these language forms as contrastive with those of the mainstream culture.

- (6.2) AW: Um so what do you think allows younger people to use that word [nigger] to mean something like... Let me see if I can find the page you had it on...Um...if you can remind me, how did you define...oh ok, “my man”? You said “my man”...For this one you said “my man”...you...mean like “friend” or something?  
P254: Yeah, yeah. “My homeboy”...uh, you know, “partna”. It’s just a older word.

AW: So what allows someone to take a word that might be offensive to some people and make it a friendly term...like to call their friend that?

P254: Well you know that's actually a umm...kinda a African American tradition. I mean they even do that in Africa where they taking words like "Clark", like "Clark Gable". They took uhh "Gable" and use that uhh to talk about somebody being a player. So really it's a a tradition in our community of how we've been able to take the negative things that are thrust upon us from mainstream culture and turn it into something positive

In order to factor in the responses of a participant from another age group, I decided to ask P246 from the *JC* generation to elaborate on her responses. Thus, each time she provided definitions or synonyms for the words in the Identification Task, I would follow up the prompt on the task with the question, "who uses that word?" Her reply was usually "Black people." In order to ask her about the demographic associated with the word, <dawg>—as in, "Dat's my **dawg**. We go way back"—I phrased my question a bit differently to see if it might render a new response.

(6.3) AW: Do white people use "dawg"?

P246: In in slang, I don't think it would...they would...when you use it like for a buddy and stuff? I don't think they could.

Thus we see that even this older participant attributes the use of reanalyzed forms (e.g. <dawg> to mean "buddy") to Black people, while limiting outsiders to the MAE meanings of forms.

Following the questionnaire portion of the study, another interviewee, participant 251, maintained this same idea about the covert agency of using semantically reanalysis. That is, the idea that the reanalyzed semantics of AAE words distinguishes speakers with communicative competence from those without this knowledge and/or situates people as either members or outsiders of the African American community.

(6.4) AW: Another thing about the "bad becoming good": Umm, so are you saying that things that used to be bad...can now become good? Is that what you mean by the "worst of the worst" thing? You were talking about "grimy" and things like that.

P251: Yeah

- AW: Ok so can you tell me...can you explain that more and then can you tell me...can you list some of the words that you think fit that bill?
- P251: Umm...yeah definitely. Like, there's a sentence on here that says uhhh "man, that girl's the baddest". And, you know, if it just a regular, you know, person was to read that like "Oh! Is she is she *bad*? Is she *bad* in actions? Is she *bad* in context?" Like but in our world that would just mean like she's the flyest girl out here. She's the sexiest girl. She...is the one that everybody's attention's on when she walks through the room, like, she's just who you need to be lookin at.

In participant 251's last quotation, you see her distinguishing herself from "regular people", and making this distinction based on their (lack of) knowledge of AAE semantics. Below, I ask her to explain what she means by "regular".

- (6.5) AW: And you said "the regular world". "People in other..." What do you mean by regular world?
- P251: Umm. [laughs] I believe there's two different worlds. I know that's crazy. I mean...
- AW: Well, what are they?
- P251: Umm. There's *my* world and then there's *the* world. My world umm...I feel is, you know, is just a little tougher. It's just a little more like a harder.

In order to better understand what contrasted these "two different worlds"—other than semantics and verbal behavior—I asked participant 251 to continue explaining their differences. She continues with her description below.

- (6.6) It's kinda like this world...in in whole, is actually starting to resent *the* world. Because people people...I just...a lot of people are just like...so tired of like scraping and working hard and then you have somebody on...over here who's just, you know, who's handed everything. And it's it's like that's what angers a lot of our our speech, our our talk, everything like...I think our our world is a more angrier world and and our words just just, you know, have changed just so we could live within our own. Like we are becoming like self-sustaining, you know. Like, I know a lot of people now who like, you know, wanted to be, you know, conform to *the world* but are...have become so content of just with all the new things going on in this world that, you know, they don't wanna even...they don't even care to look out and, you know, experience the things over there.

In the above sets of quotations, we hear about both *covert agency* and *covert prestige*. First, we learn from participant 251 that a "regular person" can be identified as such and distinguished from a person "in our world" (i.e. a Black person) by his knowledge of AAE forms

(cf. Bucholtz, 1999). Secondly, we learn about the reorientation of norms within the ‘world’ of this interviewee, as she states “and our words...have changed just so we could live within our own.” Regarding the notion of *covert prestige*, Bailey (2000: 110-111) explains: “linguistic ethnographic work in nondominant ethnic/racial/class communities invariably reveals that members use forms that are disparaged by dominant groups.” Recall that AAE is a variety that is conventionally stigmatized and which would be a stumbling block for anyone who is trying to “conform to the world” and its norms about language (e.g. a person striving for social mobility in the White public sphere). Participant 251’s contentment with her “talk” represents her knowledge of local forms of prestige that are advantageous in this context. She recognizes that her variety is a form of *covert prestige* (i.e. a skill and asset) and is, therefore, advantageous (i.e. cultural capital) to anyone wanting to be fully incorporated members of her AAE-speaking world. This value results from the fact that, without communicative competence in the variety, a person becomes external to the Black community. That is, identifiable as “a regular person”, according to participant 251, or even unAfrican American, as both interviewees relayed.

We also learn about the reciprocal nature of language—that is, on one hand, to result from an impermeable social order and marginalization, and then to reproduce that very social order on the other. Here, participant 251 discusses how the “speech” and “talk” of people in her “world” stems from the stark (socioeconomic) contrast between the ‘worlds’ and the experiences of people in her ‘world’. At the same time, we hear how this language that results from the status quo and social division, also contributes to it so that people have become “self-sustaining” and have lost their desire to “conform to *the world*”. Other than the stark contrasts of economics and verbal behavior, participant 251 goes on to describe another degree of differentiation by

saying “Umm...I I still think this world is...is a race-filled world.” This statement allows our discussion to progress into the domain of race.

(6.7) AW: So your world is what color?

P251: Umm of us African Americans and then it's like *everybody else*. It's it's crazy how the world is like just African Americans. We could might can even throw some Mexicans in, you know, in the African American side but, other than that, it's like upper white class suburbia.

Although linguists have noted several of the features that distinguish AAE from more Mainstream varieties (e.g. Wolfram, 1974; Labov, 1987), there are still other linguists who find these differences to be minimal and insignificant (Mufwene, 2001). The opinion of actual linguistics research, however, is not of interest to us, but instead, we are concerned with how language users perceive their languages. According to the opinions of participants 254 and 251, the language of African Americans is quite distinct from the language of people external to the community. In fact, to describe the degree of difference, participant 251 claimed “there's two different worlds.”

### **6.1.3 Creativity and Crossovers**

In the last fifteen years, since the publication of Smitherman's (1994) glossary of Black English terms and expressions, a number of new AAE words have emerged; some as products of semantic reanalysis. These words add an extra degree of distinction to the dialect as an autonomous variety (apart from Mainstream English) and to its users as a separate culture (apart from Mainstream society). Semantic reanalysis can, therefore, be viewed as a means of differentiation. Other words in the *Black Talk* glossary have long since “crossed over”, that is, they have been borrowed by Whites or incorporated into the language of Mainstream culture. When this incorporation occurs, the situating ability (covert agency) of the element becomes

diluted, so that the “markedness” of the word decreases (i.e. becomes less “Black-sounding”) and no longer spotlights its user as “unconventional” or outside the Mainstream. Because of the threat that crossovers pose to the autonomy/separateness that African American English speakers, like participants 251 and 254, aim for, the regularity and creativity of the semantic reanalysis process—along with other distinct features in AAE’s structure, e.g. copula deletion—becomes crucial to remaining distinct. Likewise, the exclusiveness of reanalyzed racial epithets—that is, as words that should only be used by community members as terms of endearment—also impedes the ease with which “African American” words crossover into Mainstream culture for regular usage, thereby ensuring that these alleged African (American) lexemes—along with their users—remain distinctive and African (American).

This exclusive, possessive view of semantic reanalysis seems to result from the fact that, as a form of differentiation and divergence, it can be thought of as reproducing or reifying barriers between the communities and securing the sense of separateness felt by the AAE-speaking unit. Thus, a surplus of distinct words in the AAE lexicon only cements the *diglossic-like* (i.e. complementary distribution) of the language domains, thereby safeguarding the variety and impeding cultural amalgamation.

## 6.2 FINAL REMARKS

I have acknowledged that the Rankin community in our sample represents a continuum as far as age and socioeconomic status (occupation, level of educational attainment and homeownership) are concerned, and also regarding language. Mixed-effects regression analyses revealed that there are degrees of community differences in terms of participants’ familiarity with semantic

reanalysis. I imagine that, had I investigated levels of awareness regarding this semantic phenomenon, I might have also found differences therein. After all, not all study participants knew that the highly complimentary term, *mama jamma*, was a substitute for *mother fucker*, or that *the ish* (i.e. “the best”) came from the dysphemism for feces, *the shit*. Also, not all participants could articulate why they knew the words in the Identification Task, just that they knew that they did. Finding that language users can use words without knowing exactly what (histories, meanings, strategies, indexicalities et cetera) underlies their language should not be a surprise, considering that other scholars of language have demonstrated differences in levels of awareness (e.g. Johnstone and Kiesling, 2008) and that a person can use language without necessarily understanding its ramifications (Gómez Calvillo, 2008). Thus, there may be multiple strategies driving semantic reanalysis in the African American English community—that is, in addition to differentiation and gate-keeping. Likewise, there may be some community members who use reanalyzed words without full or any knowledge of what meaning that lexeme holds for other community members. Further research on semantic reanalysis in the African American English community will be necessary in order for us to fully understand the many complexities underlying this phenomenon.

Through my research, I have presented differentiation and gate-keeping as two strategies in the African American English community. I have also rejected prevailing accounts of semantic reanalysis in AAE in favor of less ethnocentric models with more theoretical grounding and more universal applications. Furthermore, I utilized quantitative methods to study lexemes and semantics while not abandoning qualitative approaches from an emic perspective. I can only hope that this research will further the study of semantic variation in variationist sociolinguistics



and that it will lead to greater consideration of language use in nondominant language communities like Rankin.

## APPENDIX A

### RESEARCH MEASURES

#### SCREENING PROCEDURES: PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW<sup>24</sup>

Please answer the following questions honestly and to the best of your ability. The information that you provide will help to determine your eligibility as a participant and will help us to interpret the data from this research.

1. Where were you born?
2. What is your level of education?
3. What is your occupation?
4. How do you identify yourself ethnically?
5. Please provide your date and year of birth.
6. Check the appropriate box:       Male       Female
7. Are you or have you ever been a homeowner?
8. Please state your race.  
\_\_\_\_\_

<sup>24</sup> Participants who were born less than 18 years prior to the date of the preliminary interview will not participate in any additional research measures.

## INVESTIGATIONAL PROCEDURES: IDENTIFICATION TASK

We will now hear some sentences. We are interested in knowing how you define the **underlined**, **bold** words or phrases. There will be one phrase or word for you to define in each sentence. Please write a synonym and/or a definition for the **underlined**, **bold** part of each sentence in the space provided for letter **a**. If a sentence does not make sense or if something does not seem right about a sentence, please explain what you think is wrong with the sentence under letter **a**. Finally, decide whether each sentence sounds positive/complimentary or if it sounds negative/offensive, and check the box in **b**. that best matches your response.

1. Man, that girl is the **baddest**.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined**, **bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. **Girl**, I had to let him know.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined**, **bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. That game was **stupid**! I don't wanna play that anymore.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined**, **bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Dat's my **dawg**. We go way back.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined**, **bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. That concert was **grimy**. He da best rapper, hands down.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. That's my **coon**. We been friends since high school.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

7. You made straight As on your report card? I'm **scared o' you!**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

8. That's a **mean** dog right there! Has he ever bitten anyone?

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

9. **Chil'**, we both old enough to be they grandma.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. Me and Darnell been friends for a minute. That's my **ace boon coon**.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

11. That song right there's **the ish**.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

12. That's my **dawg**, Rover. I got him from the dog pound.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

13. That's **my nigga** right there. We used to ball together.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

14. His flow's **nasty**. Ima get that CD.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

15. She really dropped **da bomb** on them wit that news.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

16. She loves her man. No matter what he needs, **she's down**.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

17. That party was **dope**. Thanks for the invite.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

18. She too **phat** after having that baby. She need to lose some weight.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

19. Them **junks** cost like twenty-five dollars. I got ‘em at the mall.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

20. Man, I just saw Trisha at the store. She **fat/phat**, ain’t she?

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

21. That’s an **evil** song. That’s why he the best rapper alive.

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

22. Michael Jordan was a **sick** ballplayer! He was unstoppable!

- a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:
- b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

23. You see my rims? Them things is **gangsta!**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

24. That record was totally **thug.**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

25. You see that new car they got? That thing is **vicious!**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

26. Man, this music is **funky!**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

27. Man, he's **sick!** Did you hear how bad he was coughing?

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

28. That beat was **ill.** He's one a the best producers out there.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

29. Yo, I saw Ray's girl the other day. Man, she's **tough!**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

30. This is my room! **Get out of here!**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

31. I saw them new shoes you got. Them things is **tight.**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

32. You ever seen Muhammad Ali box? That **mama jamma** was the king in his day!

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

33. He **my nigger** for life.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

34. That's a **mean** suit, Karen! Is that the one you had on in church Sunday?

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_



35. I used to work with her. She **mad** cool.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

36. That's the **wors'** dress ever! I'm gone have to borrow that from you.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

37. Did you see? **Your boy** is the keynote speaker at the graduation this year. I know you wish you could be there.

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

38. That party was **stupid!** You shoulda been there!

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

39. Is that **your boy**? I didn't know you had kids!

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

40. You won the lottery? **Get out of here!**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive

41. I saw that cute dress you had on the other day! You were **def!**

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

42. How do you handle all the **ish** he puts you through? I wish I had your patience!

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

43. That dude's a **monster!** You see how he dunked that ball?

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

44. **Shut your mouth!** You mean to tell me you caught your son stealing money from your purse?

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

45. This here is some **bomb** catfish!

a. Definition/synonym of the **underlined, bold** word or phrase:

b. Check the appropriate box:  positive/complimentary  negative/offensive  
 other: \_\_\_\_\_

## POST-ELICITATION PROCEDURES: EVALUATION/REFLECTION TASK

You have finished all of the investigational procedures for this research study. At this time, we want you to reflect on the tasks you've completed and on the words you saw in Tasks 1 and 2. We are interested in learning more about the unique use of the words you've seen here today. For example, what motivates people to use words that are sometimes negative or offensive, like **bad** and **phat/fat**, in positive or complimentary ways? In the spaces provided below, please answer the following questions to the best of your ability:

1. Why do you think people choose to use these negative words and phrases in positive ways? For example, why do people use **my nigga** to mean **my friend**, **baddest** to mean **greatest**, or **mean** to say **very nice**?
  
2. Could people use plain English forms instead? For example, could people just say **my friend** instead of **my nigga**, **very nice** instead of **mean**, or **greatest** instead of **baddest** ?
  
3. In addition to the words you've seen in Tasks 1 and 2, can you think of any other negative or offensive words that can also be used in positive ways?

## APPENDIX B

### GLOSSARY OF IDENTIFICATION TASK LEXEMES<sup>25</sup>

1. **baddest** the finest; the best; beautiful
2. **girl** sista; friend
3. **stupid** dumb; a waste of time; boring; silly
4. **dawg** homie; (main) man; buddy
5. **grimy** hard; raw; gully; hot; the best
6. **coon** racial epithet
7. **scared o' you** congratulations; I'm proud of you; you go girl; good job
8. **mean** ferocious; dangerous
9. **chil'** girl; girlfriend; friend; sista
10. **ace boon coon** my main man; partna; best friend; soul mate
11. **the ish** the shit; hot; nice; on time; the best
12. **dawg** (four-legged) dog; pet; animal; not a thoroughbred; pup

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<sup>25</sup> This glossary is based on the definitions and synonyms given by participants. Glosses in gray are the definitions of filler forms, while those in black are the definitions of actual reanalyzed forms.

13. **my nigga** my pal; a very good or close friend; my #1 homie; buddy
14. **nasty** great; hard; nice; smooth; all that
15. **(dropped) da bomb** information; bad or good news; shock; laid it on the line
16. **she's down** supportive; got/has his back; cooperative
17. **dope** hype; off the hook; all that; tops; nice; the best; exciting
18. **phat** overweight; heavy; big; fat; out of shape; large (size)
19. **junks** joints; things; items
20. a. **fat** big; overweight; large; heavy **or** cool; looks good; stylish
- b. **phat** cool; looks good; bangin; stylish; attractive; fine; hot
21. **evil** not good; bad (or negative)
22. **sick** ill; all (of) that; the best; a beast
23. **gangsta** hip; sharp; hard; fresh; dope
24. **thug** criminal; hoodlum; underworld; ghetto; hardcore
25. **vicious** nice lookin; pretty; sharp; nice as hell; pimped out
26. **funky** nice or good beat; groove music
27. **sick** needs doctoring; doesn't feel well; unhealthy; diseased
28. **ill** pumping; great; nice; the best
29. **tough** good looking; head-turner; fox; sharp; attractive
30. **Get out of here** stay out; leave; scam; go away
31. **tight** fly; fresh; what is up; nice; soulful

32. **mama jamma** the man; great/exceptional man; dude; guy; top dog
33. **my nigger** racial epithet **or** friend; pal; buddy
34. **mean** fierce; nice; stylish
35. **mad cool** real or very laid back
36. **wors'** bad; ugly
37. **your boy** your baby; boyfriend; (best) friend; favorite personality
38. **stupid** great; the best; bomb; out of sight
39. **your boy** son; child; kid
40. **get out of here** go head; you go; congratulations; unbelievable; for real?
41. **def** lookin good; fine; beautiful; nice; sharp
42. **ish** shit; mess; problems; trouble; drama
43. **monster** a beast; hard; great; phenomenal
44. **shut your mouth** I can't believe it; stop lyin; stop playin; say what?
45. **da bomb** the best; tasty; good; delicious; all that; nice

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