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Metaphysics and Justification of Rhetoric in the African American Vernacular Tradition

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Abstract:

A look at the underlying metaphysical, philosophical and rhetorical themes that can be found in the language of the African American Vernacular Tradition. This paper traces rhetorical and performative language from Africa through to mainland American in several forms including tropes and rhetorical method, syntax, vernacular and signifying.

Introduction

Some traditions are criticized for their self-dependence, the fact that they can be self generating or the idea that they are not part of a larger hegemonic or dominant tradition. This is a dangerous way of thinking. If one must ascribe to the overarching culture and the standards that they imprint, then it is possible to miss out on many rich and important subcultures and traditions. One such tradition that has come under some scrutiny is the African American vernacular tradition or more simply put "Black English". Many linguistic and anthropological scholars have critiqued this tradition for the way that it has come about, claiming that it is a simple bastardization of Standard English or that it is the lazy pronunciation of words that have developed into a slovenly form of the dominant language or the artists are unable to do anything original and thus mimic poorly the dominant culture's method of discourse (Morgan 1994, 326 and Tamura 2002, 18, 21).

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This paper seeks to draw attention to the rich cultural matrix from which these afro-centric speech patterns have arisen, tracing this black rhetoric from western Africa in the form of classical oratory to the western world's contribution of traditional classical rhetoric through to the re-discovery of the signifying monkey and its rhetorical tropes and to the current view held by many linguistic scholars of the acceptance and understanding of the African American Vernacular Tradition (AAVT) as a linguistic phenomena. Some object to the idea that this tradition is self-dependent, but when one looks at the history of African Oratory and the use of Black English in the modern world, one can see a connection that is not easily dismissed. This paper seeks to show that those who think that this tradition is not self-generating are misguided because the tradition has remained strong and continues to thrive in much the same manner as it has for the last two centuries.

The most effective way of understanding the contemporary view of any tradition is to trace its history in the form of a genealogy. By taking such a systematic and close look at the tradition, one is able to investigate the particulars that constitute it, including the historical contributions and modern influences. This paper will start with the history of the African American Vernacular Tradition, from here known as the AAVT, moving from its oldest conception in Classical African and Classical Western Rhetoric through to the re-discovery of the signifying monkey in American black literature. This historical aspect of the tradition not only grounds it as something that is fundamental, but it also shows that this tradition is much older than the interpretations that have been offered for it , showing it to be an historic and self generating tradition.

Why Rhetoric

Before one can give a reasonable account of what the tradition is and where it comes from, one must make the case for what the tradition is made of. First the distinction between the wider conception and narrow conception of rhetoric must be explored. The wider definition encompasses the notion that rhetoric is the effective use of speech. Speech can be used well or badly, effectively or inefficiently, when one uses language effectively and well it can be called rhetoric. Good speech is integral to communication and expression. The AAVT uses this notion of rhetoric in that it is very expressive, to the point that much of the language has not been mastered by outsiders, a kind of performativity inherent in the conception. The masterful/performative use of language encapsulates this wider notion of rhetoric. The narrow definition is the one that most people are familiar with, the idea that rhetoric is language that is used to persuade or "trick", a way to get you to buy into something. While this is certainly one definition of rhetoric it is important to realize that this is not the only meaning it has. The use of language to trick and persuade is important in its own context, but for this paper we will attempt to concentrate on the broader definition. One in which the speaker is not trying to persuade the listener to do something foolish or to enrapture the audience with specious arguments. When rhetoric is used here, it will have the connotation of its wider definition. Rhetoric will not simply mean the use of persuasive speech (though that will be part of it), but it will also mean the effective use of speech, performative speech and speech that embodies and carries culture. One can present an articulate argument and call it rhetoric, but one may also be particularly adept at making speeches or presenting themselves in a bombastic way. It is this idea that is employed when we speak of rhetoric in this paper. But this is merely a definition, why is it so important that we even use the word rhetoric? The term "Black English" has come under enough scrutiny

in the past few years and may more properly be left to the linguist, when one speaks of Black English one is seemingly making a statement about the syntactical and grammatical structure that differentiates Black English from Standard English. This paper seeks to look at the justification of the tradition and as such wishes to err on the side of morphology and not just syntax. All language is made up of two parts, the phonemes, or how it sounds, and the morphemes, units that comprise the language (Hickerson 2000, 85). Morphology is the study of the morphemes while syntax is the study of both categories combined. Morphology is the structure of words, what makes them up and in a limited way how they are used. It is the internal structure, things like plurals and past tense as well as sounds, meanings and related words (Finegan 1999, 35). Syntax on the other hand is the actual structure of the language, the overall laws of language so to speak. This is how morphemes are organized in a sentence to give it a coherent meaning. Syntax uses morphemes to give language a creative aspect. (Finegan 1999, 142). Surely, it would be impossible to carry out the discussion without the exploration of some syntax, but what is behind it all is the recognition of the dynamism that is inherent in the vernacular tradition. This dynamism is the effect of morphology; it is the creation of words and the structure of the words themselves that have lent itself to the rhetoric of the AAVT. There is a definite connection between the shape and form of words and the creation of an effect in the audience. It is for this reason that this paper will spend more time looking at the morphological features of the language than the syntax. This is the rhetoric that is being discussed, the dynamic and creative use of speech in an effective manner as it pertains to the AAVT its speakers and its listeners. Many authors take the alternate approach, Smitherman, Knowles-Borishade and to a degree, Gates, all look at the syntactical features to draw a connective string between the old world and the new and they often forget about the rhetorical aspect of the language. This paper wants to

concentrate on the rhetoric that has continued in this tradition by looking at the way that words are not only formed but spoken.

Why Now?

To this point we have discussed what the tradition is, why it is important to study and why we have chosen rhetoric as a springboard for the discussion, but one more question remains, and that is why it is important to look at this now. African language and rhetoric have given rise to various studies that have treated African rhetoric as a distinct feature from the language that it is part of (AAVT). What we are arguing here is that the African Rhetoric encapsulates a culture that is oral and expressive and as such the rhetoric and the language cannot be separated. When one studies the language that is used in the vernacular tradition they are looking at the rhetoric that has been part of that tradition before the modern conception of it had ever come around. As Gates says about signifyin(g), the rhetoric is inseparable from the language that it uses. This is not a commonly held view, but it is this new view that will hopefully clear up many of the issues that have surrounded the study of Black English. Perhaps it would be better to put it this way, the cultural use of the language is rhetoric, whenever something is uttered in a cultural context (signifying, rapping, calling out etc.) that is rhetoric, Because the rhetoric of the ancient orators was so culturally specific and grounded in a particular worldview which gave rise to the AAVT, the AAVT is itself that rhetoric, shaped and changed to a certain degree by centuries, but continuous and strong as a viable source of rhetoric, language and culture.

African Origins

It is necessary to continue this discussion by looking at the history of African oratory. Black English undeniably has its roots in the languages of Africa, these languages had to be adapted and restructured but the speakers retained aspects of their culture that were meaningful.

Music, myths/folklore, expressive structures, metaphysical systems of order and even the forms of performance were all preserved (Gates Jr. 1988, 3-4). To this list we can add the structure of or penchant for rhetoric as well. Together, we can conceive of music, metaphysics, mythic symbolism and structure as part of the rhetorical tradition, that is to say how these categories were used to inform and influence the African populace. All of these rhetorical devices had their beginning in Classical African culture in various forms, but most importantly they were part of the oral tradition. This tradition, while African, did share some common features with the intellectual development of other cultures, most influential would be that of the Mediterranean world in the form of Classical (Western) Rhetoric, therefore this discussion will start with a few particulars of the African sort.

What makes it African?

African Oratory comes from a different part of the world and as such it is based on conventions that are not those of the most commonly understood forms of Western culture. African oratory was based on particular metaphysical worldviews, symbols, structures and performance techniques which are rarely seen outside of western Africa. Knowles-Borishade goes so far as to say that it is not possible to analyze the contemporary African American rhetorics if one does not understand the particular set of beliefs and history from which it comes (Knowles-Broishade 1991, 488). To her, Classical African Oratory must be seen as historical, or having a rooted, traceable history, it must conform to African cultural expectations which means it must be traditional. Thirdly it was (and is) an art form that can be analyzed with a set of traditional standards and lastly it must have some sort of cohesion or be codified (Knowles-Borishade 1991, 488). When we take a look at these categories we can begin to see the importance of the systematic and deliberate nature of African rhetoric. However, one must be

cautioned, Knowles-Borishade seems to treat these metaphysical aspects of the tradition as something that is separate from rhetoric. What we have stated so far is that one cannot cleanly find that divide, we may even go so far as to say that you cannot divide it, because of this we use Knowles-Borishade as a guide in the general sense to help make clear distinctions about the categories that are needed to analyze the tradition as a whole. However, when it comes to the actual rhetoric that is embedded within the language we must depart from Knowles-Borishade's notion of separate entities and once again think of the rhetoric as running throughout these categories unbroken. To trace the genealogy of the AAVT we will follow these categories more properly to see what it is to partake of the African Oratorical tradition. While one category that we will explore is the historical, it may be noted that all of these subcategories can be considered historical, each of them taking a position on the classical version of the rhetoric which will help guide the reader to the contemporary world and the use of the AAVT.

Historical

The practice of classical rhetoric on the African continent goes back to the ancient world, practiced all over but having a functional center in Egypt (Crawford 2004, 111), it was a practice that was reserved for a particular caste of people. Much like the conception of the Western world's rhetoric, not everybody was skilled in the use of persuasion and word play or the mastery of symbolic language. One of the more prominent users of rhetoric were the West African Griots. These poets, musicians, singers and magicians were eloquent and could enrapture an audience with their abilities (Campbell 2005, 30). They served an important function not just as entertainers, but it is speculated that they would be able to incite enemy combatants on the field of battle (Campbell 2005, 27). This term was reserved for a set of artists who were (and still are) observers of affairs, commentators (political and social) or councillor on

past or passing scenes (Kaschula 1999, 56). It was their mastery of language that allowed them to fulfill many different positions and gave them the power to develop rhetorical tropes that are still with us. If one looks at the history of the Griot, we can begin to see the beginnings of rhetorical tropes that have been defined in our time as Signifying and even the African American toast. This is not the place for the description of those devices, but we will return to them in a later section. It is these historical roots that connect the modern conception with the classical one. While the Griot is only one particular example, it is one that is still with us. One can imagine the African Orator in the Egyptian courts referring to symbols and making gestures just as grand as their Greek counterpart. Modern Griots serve many of the same functions as their ancient namesakes and preserve the traditions that have crossed over to the North American world. While it is rare to see a Griot performing in the Americas they do continue to exist in Africa. There they serve more of an entertainment purpose but are still worthy court entertainers and poets. They comment on contemporary matters in a traditional style (Kaschula 1999, 56) and lend this same type of performance to those that have come over from their homeland. The Griot's art is one that is pervasive and has continued to exist almost unchanged in Africa for centuries and has been passed on for generations, even to those that have since come across the oceans. It is because of this that the Griot is seen as a grandfather to the oral poetry and vernacular tradition that is apparent in many African American communities today. This history is the necessary knowledge that we must have before going on to examine contemporary examples of the rhetoric that is widely used today. What was once reserved for a particular people, so informed by the worldview of the ancients, is what exists in a similar form for the modern speaker. One can imagine that it is the colourful and metaphysically relevant speech that would have survived through the ages as something that would keep the culture alive. It is the

essence of folklore and folk wisdom, the cultural nexus of language and the most transmissible of text. It is because of this that we still have the rhetorical tropes of the rhetoric that was employed by the particular speakers, disseminated throughout the wider modern culture of today.

Cultural Expectations

Cultural expectations are sets of beliefs and traditions that inform the worldview of the speaker. To understand classical African Oratory, one must first look at concepts and symbols that are pervasive in the tracing of its history. Two such symbols are the trickster god and Nommo, or the Word. The trickster god exists in almost all cultures in some form or another. This figure is one that Gates calls upon to show the unbroken lineage of the oral tradition from the old world to the new. The Trickster god plays such an integral role in the understanding of language in both time periods that he is used as a catalyst for further discussion. Nommo, in much the same way, is a pan African symbol that is part of the fabric of the culture and a good representation of why the ancients were an oral tradition and why so much emphasis is placed on the orality of the modern speaker as well.

Nommo is a Pan African concept for Word, used largely in the same sense as Logos in Greek. It is the word that is filled with the meanings drawn from the African experience as well as the value system that is in place (Knowles-Borishade 1991, 495). This word draws on the mental and physical power of the speaker. The more upstanding and ethical the speaker the stronger the word becomes, this goes for the physical presence of the speaker as well. Nommo has the possibility to capture the audience and draw them into the oratory that is being used. Nommo is an especially important word in the Egyptian and Kemet systems of rhetoric. Here it is conceived of as part of good speech or Medew Nefer, again something that can be closely associated with the Greek Logos (Crawford 2004, 115). African culture is largely based on a

system in which the spiritual and the physical work as one, although the spiritual is always given importance over the merely material. From this standpoint, it is the speakers and the leaders that are closer to the spiritual that will be of more importance and in a certain way, be in possession of more power (Smitherman 1977, 76). To the Africans, written texts are limited, they do not have the same variation and influence that the spoken word does. One can teach others about life and survival not by having them read a static text, but by having them participate in the dynamic world of speech. Those who have the ability to captivate audiences or who have the ability to perform feats of linguistic trickery or artistry will be valued more than those who lack this skill. The power of Nommo resides in the speaker and it grows with the ever increasing ability of the user. This is the one major aspect that will carry through to the modern world. The primacy that is placed on spoken word is incredible, but it is the value that is placed on the speaker that is culturally relevant. The metaphysical necessity of the recognition of Nommo was such that it transcended the tribal nature of classical Africa, so much so that one can speak of "African Thought" as something that is generally cohesive and backed by strong metaphysical underpinnings (Smitherman 1977, 75). It is this idea of Nommo as a cosmic force that gives rise to several of the practices that are used in the AAVT, without the strong focus put on the speaker, many of the games and tropes of classical and modern rhetoric would not seem to make sense. Only when we situate the use of effective speech in the context of Nommo do we begin to see that there is something more than just artistic flair to speech making, speech giving and the construction of the speaker. Not only is this a cultural phenomenon that is unique to African culture, but it is also something that shows just how important spoken word is to the participants. Without the spoken word (Nommo is mostly spoken, written Nommo is not dynamic and therefore much more rare) the world could not be formed, ethics could not enter the universe and

speech would have no meaning. It is the power of speech that will be carried over into the "new world" that will tie the concept of Nommo to the modern day AAVT.

Another culturally relevant concept that is used in African Oratory is that of the trickster god. Henry Louis Gates Jr. is well known for his work with the Signifying Monkey in a work by the same name. This monkey god is one of the divine aspects of Esu-Elegbara, the Yoruba god of trickery and textual interpretation, as well as incarnations of several other gods that appear in both the African cannon and the North American Pantheon (Gates Jr. 1988, 5). This aspect of the god not only tricks the other gods but he is also known to interpret signs for them and moreover to interpret signs from them for humanity, he gives oracles and is able to divine and define things for both the human world and the world of the gods. It is this power that lends itself to Gates textual interpretations and the African oral tradition. Esu or the Monkey, is always playing tricks with words. He does not play tricks in a physical sense, in that he is bodily involved in any form of trickery, instead the Monkey is always able to trick the less intelligent beasts by way of his use of language. It is often the case that the other animals take the monkey literally when he is speaking figuratively, which is itself a trope and an expression of the power of Nommo. Without the strength gained from Nommo, the other animals would be able to understand him and his tricks would fall on deaf ears, so to speak, or they would simply not work. While he certainly is a trickster, it is the fault of the other animals that they do not take the time to clarify what the monkey is doing nor do they take the time to understand that the Monkey is a trickster and that he is filled with the power of Nommo, the Word is with the Monkey and as such his figurative rhetoric is part of a cosmic fabric, a metaphysical structure that is in place to keep order. Without the tricks of the Monkey, the world would become devoid of dynamism, speech would simply be literal and if that were to happen all things would cease to have

creativity and significance. The Monkey is the embodiment of tricky and interpretive speech. Even more important is the idea that the Monkey is the embodiment of differences. The simple things and the complex things that make individuals different, our nuances and idiosyncrasies are all part of the power of Nommo, it is dynamic and creative, without it the sameness just spoken of would wash over humanity and gods alike rendering them functionally equivalent and very much 'plain'. Much of the literature of the African world about Esu is about the "origin, the nature, and the function of interpretation and language 'above' that of ordinary language" (Gates Jr. 1988, 6). He is the maker of literal and figurative (tricky) speech. Again this shows the persuasive and pervasive power of speech in the African tradition and how it is able to justify the use of its own terminology and interpretations. This factor draws attention to the ability of the AAVT to be bidialectic[1] in that it may at once be both literal and figurative. The Monkey may indeed be insulting the lion so as to make him angry as well as passing commentary on the lion's station in relation to himself (the Monkey).

Traditional Standards

There are standards that are built in to the above mentioned cultural phenomena. As has been stated, the idea of Nommo has an ethical and creationist aspect of it that makes it powerful and all encompassing in the traditional world view. It also has the ability to draw on the powers of the orator to influence the crowd. These are the standards that Knowles-Borishade has in mind when we are judging and justifying the African classical tradition. As for the Monkey, it is not inherently ethical or moral but it does have the trait of being interpretive. Accordingly, the Monkey does not have to be ethical or play by the ethical rules, he is the meta-narrative of the

Comment [Unknown A1]: metanarrator?

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[1] Bidialectic here meaning in possession of two dialects, the dialect of the standard language spoken and the dialect that belongs to the unique vernacular tradition, these are called dialect because the same words are being used in each and as such cannot consequently be called languages. They differ only in ascribed meaning and context not in form and function

dialogue, the interpreter of speech and the giver of interpretation, he is there to see it through not to be a part of it. That is a standard by which many of the African versions of the Monkey were judged. It is the power of speech, Nommo, that the monkey has and which he is able to use to get what he wants, to interpret texts and to give the divining power to both humans and gods. It is his masterful use of Nommo and his ability to speak figuratively and with such authority that by-passes the ethical character of Nommo. The Monkey operates outside of the ethical tradition because he is the interpreter and the interpretation, the signifier and signified, he himself, is rhetoric. The last category that Knowles-Borishade says must be filled is that the African tradition must be cohesive in some way. As we have seen the most effective way that this is done is through the use of language, we have seen that the language and more importantly the words that are used to create a language are powerful and filled with meaning. It is an oral tradition, one that is not about the power of what is written, but the power of the speaker using words to affect the audience. What we see then, are that the categories that are used to designate African Oratory as classical are all verbal in nature and they are the same categories that can be used to trace the AAVT. The modern conception of his tradition will vary in context, but it still holds true to many of the conventions that are used in the ancient world. The next section of this paper will explore the modern vernacular tradition, not as something that arose out of necessity due to slavery or something that came about through chance, but as something that is a cultural layover and more importantly as something that is partaking of a long historical tradition

The modern notion of the African American Vernacular Tradition looks very different than its classical counterpart. Just as the modern Western world views today's rhetoric as a source of propaganda as opposed to the recognition of means of persuasion that Aristotle mentions (Kennedy 2007, 1.1.14), the modern AAVT conceives of different rhetorical tropes that

constitute and thus promulgate the rhetorical tradition. Many authors have written on this subject making reference to African semantics, traditions and modes of operation as reasons for the tradition. This paper will be no different in looking at what constitutes the tradition, but it will also situate it in the larger historical context that has been described above. The AAVT is a dynamic and changing body of rhetorical tropes and speech variations that take its cues from the classical African world. Through understanding where it comes from we are more readily able to view it as something that is not only useful, but something that is part of the fabric of a cultural expectation that carries with it its own traditions and history, cultural standards and cohesive practices that allow it to continue as a strong linguistic presence.

Semantics

Semantics, loosely stated, is the study of the meaning of language. This is a modern convention that has lent itself to linguistics in a very important way. Through semantics we are able to trace the history of words and word meanings. Although for many years the study of Black English was only cursory and relegated to the background it has now become an accepted practice to study it and publish on it (Dillard 1975, 9). Geneva Smitherman takes up the semantic approach to language to look at the Black English of America. This area of language had been hotly contested for some time as to whether Black English is a real language or not, that is whether or not it has a number of accepted speakers and a set of rules to codify what is being spoken. Unlike slang, Black English is used across generational boundaries and is used by a group of people that have a (generally) common linguistic and cultural history (Smitherman 1977, 43). As we have seen this paper agrees with the notion that this is a real language, though it is not as widely spread as some of the bigger languages (English, French, German) it still belongs to a group of individuals and has rules and laws that must be followed for the speaker to

be understood. Appealing to history has been the major foundational claim of Black English linguists, one has to appeal to historical explanations of the language when considering this variety of speech, and it is almost as if the language itself is a carrier of its own history (Dillard 1975, 91). Smitherman's investigations found that much of the AAVT that we hear today actually can be directly connected to the language of West Africa. The words that are used are of three types, direct origin, loan translations and inflated vocabulary (Smitherman 1977, 43). The fact that the language can be traced by history back to its original form is one of the characteristics that show the tradition to be self generating. It also shows how one can see that Black English is indeed a variety of English and a language. It has a long and traceable history, in which many of the words have even remained unchanged. We have already seen the history that accompanies the more rhetorical aspects of the language (cultural specifications) and the discussion will continue to show that many of the words are of this same type, directly being taken from the African or being set in an African linguistic frame[2]. Direct origin are generally unimportant, they are used by both Blacks and Whites and are not necessarily readily recognizable, it is the calques (loan translations) and inflated vocabulary that are germane to this discussion. Calques are loan translations, words that lend themselves to particular understandings. When one thinks of this type of language they can think of things like bad meaning good, as in "he is one bad dude" which translates into he is one good/cool/decent guy. These loan translations are often thought of as being street lingo, usage of words that one has to be "hip" to, but in the African oratorical tradition and languages this is not slang, it is something that is commonly used (Smitherman 1977, 45) this makes the language more expressive and it adds a dimension to the rhetor's appeal. It is also something that colours the languages of West Africa, making it more than just slang; in fact it is an acceptable and encouraged practice that is

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[2] See Smitherman p. 43-45 for a list of words and phrases that have been taken directly from the African.

part of the modern tradition. This translates over to the North American culture. It is not uncommon to hear these loan translations being used in things like hip hop or rap, and it certainly is common to hear them being used on the streets in everyday parlance. It is hardly the case that this is purely coincidental, this must be a cross cultural phenomenon at the least, with a great probability being centered in the notion that this is directly correlated to the African tradition. The other linguistic phenomenon of inflated vocabulary is used in much the same way, this is the practice by which a speaker uses inflated or enlarged word choices in an everyday situation, showing the size and depth of the vocabulary, this has survived the African tradition in Black North America in the form of exaggerated language or high talk (Smitherman 1977, 46). One need think of the rhyming schemes and impossible word combinations used in rap as an excellent example to demonstrate this or perhaps the long, lilting and thrilling preacher sermons of Baptist churches. These forms of semantics are but a few possibilities that could be cited here, Gates adds many more to this short list citing things like rapping, marking, loud talking[3], sounding, playing the dozens and Signifying[4] (Gates Jr. 1988, 52). This semantic list could go on almost indefinitely , each trope having a particular definition and type of use between particular people, unfortunately space does not allow for an in depth discussion of these but they all serve functions that are translated from the African classical tradition to the modern usage. What we have seen here is that the study of this language is something that is important to not only linguistics but also philosophy. When one speaks about culture and what constitutes a people they speak about a part of identity and what it means to have something that is unique and separate from the rest of the world. The languages of Africa have given rise to this tradition and

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[3]   Loud talking is the term used in North America while it is also known by the name of "dropping remarks" in Barbados. Both of these terms refer to the same practice of talking loudly to a second party while making reference to a third that is within earshot, a type of insult by way of association. For more see Fisher, Robert. ""Dropping Remarks" and the Barbadian Audience" *American Ethnologist*. 3.2 1976: 227-242

[4]   Gates will call this the trope of tropes and in it is considered all of these other semantic games

so it is necessary to give credence to the speakers and practitioners and draw attention to the reality and substance of this tradition. So how did all of these come to be? If one accepts the notion that they have come from Africa and are still being used in the AAVT, then how is it that they came to be so central to the language of the Black English speakers? Perhaps this will be the time to take a look at a bit of history of how these tropes came from Africa and landed on North American shores.

Slavery and the Creation of a Language

As near as most linguists can tell, Black English has its roots in slavery when African slaves would intuitively place the rules of African languages onto the words used in Standard English, causing a stilted and odd sounding language that would allow them to communicate with each other and with the Standard English speaking Masters (Smitherman 1977, 7). This caused a rudimentary form of language to be created that could be shared amongst slaves as well as masters, giving rise to communication. This meeting of languages has always been in a curious relationship as defined by not only semantics but also politics (Gates Jr. 1988, 45), a politics that is defined in terms of the dominant culture and a large subculture. The subculture of the slaves would take African rules and impose them on English and by doing so they would change the meaning and setting of these words, while the dominant culture, having control of the rules of Standard English would be able to define different settings for such language usage (Riegel and Freedle 1976, 28). Of course this would lead to misunderstandings and as such the two groups would have their own languages (Standard English – White, Vernacular English – Black), and they would be forced to share in the rules of both causing conflict and causing both groups to adapt their languages. The adaptation of language would occur on both sides with the whites adopting black vernacular word usage so as to communicate with the slaves and the

blacks adopting Standard English words so that they could be understood. Lasting the test of time the Vernacular Tradition of the blacks survived not only out of necessity but also out of the tradition from which it was gained. Keeping the African rules of grammar imposed on the English structure, continuing the tradition of rhetorical devices and restructuring the conventions of Standard English are all decisions that allowed the Blacks to keep hold on part of a culture that they had to leave behind. It is through this need to communicate that the African Rhetorical tradition found a foothold halfway across the world. But this is not where it ends, it is not just a case of rhetorical tropes being left over from the days of slavery, it is also a conscious restructuring of a language to make it friendlier to the speakers. Blacks did not just adopt this slavery speech; instead they created a fluid language that has lasted the test of time by defining different contexts where particular words may be used.

Language or Dialect

The differences between language and dialect have been a topic for linguists to discuss for many years. What is important here is how we are using these words. As it has been stated before this paper takes up the mantle of calling the AAVT a source of language, with the idea that the speakers can be bidialectical. Language has been variously described as a "collection of dialects that are usually related to one another historically and are similar to one another structurally and lexically" (Finegan 1999, 371). This encompasses much of what we have been talking about. Though there are differences between the use of the words and phrases of the AAVT, many if not all of them come from the same source or more accurately come from the same history. This is what roots the AAVT as a source of language. However, many still disagree and think it to be a dialect, where a dialect "[is] used by different social groups who choose to say that they speak the same language" (Finegan 1999, 371). This of course is also the

case, one would surely not say that the AAVT is not speaking English; just that it is a different form of English. So what is it? It is a language, a language that has a similar history and syntax, similar morphology and lexicon and more importantly, it has a similar cultural matrix that is *not* shared by the dominant culture. This is what sets it apart as a language. Within this language there are dialects, the type that are regional. The same AAVT has a very different look form in Toronto than it does in New York, though they share the common history.

The Modern Speakers

Modern speakers of Black English are often thought of as possessing two distinct dialects (Riegel and Freedle 1976, 28) one of which is the Standard English that one can find in any dictionary, this allows the speaker to move and function in the dominant cultural setting. It also allows for words to be plugged into the form of African orality that was explored in the last section. Without Standard English words it would be difficult to conceive of communication to take place at all. The other dialect is that of the AAVT, or more specifically this is the dialect that Gates calls Signifyin(g);

> The Afro American rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) is a rhetorical practice that is not engaged in the game of information giving… Signifyin(g) turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified (Gates Jr. 1988, 52)

Gates explicitly states that this dialect[5] *is* rhetoric; its rhetorical foundations are assumed in the way that it is used and the way that it interacts with other members of the community. So the bidialectical nature of the AAVT comes through again and we see that the Standard English and the rhetorical Black English blend into one functioning language. Just as we have seen in the classical world, the language is the conveyor of the culture, the culture is one of dynamism and oral traditions and those traditions are enriched, encapsulated by and handed down through the use of rhetoric. In a way then, the language is rhetoric and if the language is rhetoric than the

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[5]   Signifying is a "dialect" of the language which is the AAVT

culture is rhetoric. In reference to this Gates brings up the toast of the Signifying Monkey, that attribute of Esu-Elegbara the trickster god that survived the Diaspora. Almost unexplainably this Monkey god arrived on the shores of North America and continues to exist almost unaltered in its form. This toast of the Signifying Monkey is oft repeated by members of the Black community, ripe with African symbols and vernacular language the toast is a legacy of the language and rhetorical abilities of the classical African variety. Gates uses this to support the notion that there are two types of Signifying. One is the Standard English version, in which the word is defined in the common way, referring to something that is indicated, pointed to or marked; the other version of signifying (variously Signifyin(g)) is the black version which is the change of the signification of words (Gates Jr. 1988, 45). This Signifyin(g) is based on identity, as a relation of difference manifested in the signifier (the speaker) (Gates Jr. 1988, 45).

This notion of Signifyin(g) is uniquely Black, based on the identity that is African in nature and is passed on to subsequent generations. Smitherman remarks that this tradition is fluid and dynamic, it changes as the generations change and for good reason, historically, if the Whites adopted words that were exclusively black then the Blacks would have to change the meaning of that word (Smitherman 1977, 71). They would change them for various reasons, perhaps to keep their subculture in-tact, to disallow whites to be part of their culture or simply to exercise the rhetorical ability to define words as they see fit. Gates echoes this by saying that the Black rhetoric of Signifyin(g) is double voiced, it allows the subculture to create what a word means whenever it is spoken (Gates Jr. 1988, 51) both in its own context (AAVT) and in the broader context. This is telling of the veil that DuBois spoke of, how the Negro has double consciousness, that of Being a person and being a black person (DuBois 1999, 11). The *person* is allowed to move freely in the dominant culture using the language meanings as they "ought"

to be used in a wide context while the *black person* is the one who masters the rhetoric of classical Africa, who uses the words as secret and clandestine codes as only those who are aware of them may use them. If this should have to change, then they change them and because the communities are so close this new meaning never takes long to catch. These substitutions may seem arbitrary, and certainly to a large degree they are, but that is what it is to Signify. To be able to take the accepted status of a word and turn it on its head is an ability that belongs almost solely to the Black community. While it is not at all the case that Standard English cannot change meanings of words, it does not do so as frequently or as quickly as the AAVT can do. Nor are these new meanings so widely used as those of the Black community. Therefore Gates says, rhetoric supplants semantics in a literal meta-confrontation (Gates Jr. 1988, 47).

Oral Poetry and the Use of the AAVT

Understanding the linguistic aspect of a language and its history is not all there is to a complete picture of its importance. The AAVT encompasses many traditions into one and generates itself by means of the history that it has and continues to create, it also continues to use the rules that it has set out in a semantic context but it is a spoken language and as such it has a type of life, a living and changing aspect that makes it more "real" that simply its history and rules.

The establishment of the AAVT comes from an oral tradition that is largely comprised of oral poetry. Oral poetry is not just something of "far away and long ago", American Negro verse, popular songs and preaching style are all part of an oral tradition that started with the Griots (Kaschula 1999, 57). These are the rhetorical tropes that Gates speaks of and that were mentioned in the above sections. This definition is something that should be kept in mind when one thinks about what it is to be part of an oral tradition. It is not always about a literate versus

illiterate community or cultural group; sometimes it is about the effective use of speech in particular settings or in the hands of a particular people. Speech can convey so much and the subtle use of it is something that can make the difference between the written communities and those that can be considered oral. The AAVT is now considered part of the larger oral tradition; while this does not mean that it is illiterate it does mean that most of the history, traditions, and information are passed from generation to generation through the spoken word. The classical African oratory has left the indelible mark of orality on the modern speaker. But as we now know, this has not always been the case, for many years the AAVT was considered something of a deficient form of English, replete with missing consonants, inappropriate elision and simple mispronunciations. According to Harrison's *Negro English*[6] this was the case (Tamura 2002, 18). The history of the AAVT is not just about the traditional markers that are seen by the modern audience, it also tells of a long struggle to gain recognition. Smith points out that there wasn't even any interest in the study of Black English until there was an influx of rural southern blacks into northern cities (Kaschula 1999, 24). When the post-slavery era took hold people became enamoured, if you are optimistic, or obsessed, if you are pessimistic, with the ways that blacks were speaking. There is no need to restate the history that has been given above, but what is germane to the current discussion is the way in which the language has developed from a pidgin to a creole and beyond. A pidgin is widely known to be a language that belongs to a people that do not have a native language. It comes about in situations where persons of different backgrounds are forced to cohabitate and where there is a socially subordinated class (Traugott 1976, 59). One can of course read slavery as such a situation. Many thought that the blacks were speaking an unintelligible language and when it was studied it was demarcated from

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[6]   A work that is very hard to find today due to the racist nature of the content. However it has left a mark on many scholars and is often times quoted, sourced, mentioned or glossed.

the rest of the Standard English speakers by calling it a pidgin. This was one of the first instances in which Black English was taken seriously and consequently the first instance in which the modern version of the AAVT started to become codified. Now the development of a language from a pidgin to a creole is not something that happens over night, nor is it something that happens due to a particular set of preset rules[7], this distinction started the academic community on a new path in which they wanted to understand what and why the language was the way that it was.

Barring the racist and patently ridiculous methods of describing the language, linguists started to turn their attention to the people themselves. They recognized that slavery put people together in a forced situation in which they had to communicate; this in turn forced them to create a protolanguage that developed beyond its bonds. With more and more attention being paid to the speakers many linguists sought a cultural explanation. They eventually came to the conclusion that Black English is just behaviour of black culture that is situated in a larger framework (Smith 1974, 28). It is this explanation that has been used throughout this paper to justify the tradition. Many more linguists and psychologists are starting to take up this mantle as well as many rights activists. Many see this as a viable explanation to why the language has persisted and why it means so much to so many people. The previous attempts to explain the language sought to set blacks aside and to call their language into question. This more modern approach sought the value of black's culture in the wider sense of North American culture; it also brought it up to a level in which one could study it as a viable source of communication. But why is it that one should study this language? Well one could say that it addresses the notion

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[7] What is meant here is that while there are certain criteria that must be met to distinguish a language from being a pidgin or creole or a full on language, it is not something that is placed on a check list. One cannot just simply make a language and fit it into a pattern and hence make it fully realized. There are many factors, including academic study, that factor into the titling of a language.

that the black subculture has independent justification for being treated as different from lower class culture (as it had previously been assumed to be) which means that the linguistic variations that were apparent in the language were not just something that were contextual (based on amount of education etc.) or purely stylistic (artistic licence) but that it was inherent in the system (Smith 1974, 30). While context and style do have much to do with it, there is an equal amount of information that can be used to support the notion that the language is something that comes from a long tradition and as such it is something that is just inherent in the subculture itself. This definition is not just an all encompassing one, but it is also one that allows equal integrity to be granted to the oral tradition of the AAVT. This brings us back to the original notion that was brought up at the beginning of this section the distinction between pidgin and creole. While both are a simplified form of a language a creole is a more stabilized language, one that has a set vocabulary (that may be changeable) but does not have set rules and is generally made up of different languages. When one looks at the language of urban blacks, one can see that it is no longer a simple pidgin, it is not a forced language, instead it is a language that is developing and is made from the combination of West and South African languages as well as Standard English. This puts it firmly in the area of a creole. But many modern linguists do not stop there, they want to go one step further and call this set of words and syntax a vernacular.

A vernacular is a localized language, a language of a people that (normally) do not constitute a dominant group. Therefore it is foolish to speak of one cohesive Black English (Traugott 1976, 86) but instead one can speak of an African American Vernacular English, or, a set of words and sentences that mean something to a particular group of people at a particular time in the position of a subculture. The vernacular tradition of the blacks of downtown Toronto

may not be the same as that of the blacks of downtown New York. They develop in different areas with different people. However, the language may still have a common origin and a common general structure. This is the point of this essay, that while there may not be a cohesive Standard Black English there is a vernacular tradition, one that follows the same rules and same origin, if not following the exact same use of the lexicon and phrases.

Conclusion

So what does this all mean? Well it certainly draws attention to the fact that Blacks are still double voiced, this time in a much more literal sense. Also it shows that the African American Vernacular Tradition is self generating and not based on the way much of the Standard English world views and judges it. Modern speakers of the AAVT have used it in various ways, changing and adding on meanings to various words, creating uses for them like rap and hip hop and using them in powerful and emotional speeches (Human Rights) showing the versatility that was inherent in the Classical African oratory. While it may have been informed by the Classical Western concept of rhetoric put forward by Aristotle, or better yet, it may be studied in the context of Aristotelian rhetoric, it nonetheless survived very much unchanged and continues to do so. The very nature of the AAVT allows for words to be changed and used in various contexts without ever jeopardizing the structural integrity of the tradition itself. It is a mastery of a language, which affords a power that one cannot have if they are dominated by the standard dominant culture (Fanon 1967, 18). This tradition has lasted a very long time and has traversed half of the world without ever falling apart. It is amazing that it ever was considered to be a flawed or bastardized version of English, it has proven itself to be more than just that, enjoying now the status of a creole or a vernacular if this paper is to be believed and continuing to be used not only by the youth but also by generations gone by. The divine guidance of Esu-Elegbara,

Nommo and the Signifying monkey place this tradition in a metaphysical context. But the use of Signifyin(g) and the practical application of language to the world, place it in a concrete ontological setting, justifying its use and its self generating status

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