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The Syntax of Slavery: A Linguistic Analysis of "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave."

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Capstone Abstract

To date, no attempts at a linguistic analysis of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* exist; much of what does exist fails to examine Douglass' syntactical choices within the framework of functional linguistic theory and AAVE. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) should be applied in order to better understand Douglass' views on Christianity and the function of the master/slave relationship within the constraints of the "religion of the South." Thus, a micro-analysis of a sentence from Chapter X of the *Narrative* acts as the central focus of my argument; Ken Hyland's understanding of SFL is applied to this particular sentence, and it serves as the base to compare other linguistic and semantic patterns present in the *Narrative*. By using Hyland's notion of *stance strategies*, the interpersonal meta-function in SFL, Douglass' use of *boosters*, *attitude markers*, and *hedges* give modern-day readers new insight into the benefits of applying linguistic theory to Frederick Douglass' literature because of Hyland's emphasis on the writer and his stance. Thus, Douglass' writing shows a pattern of booster words such as "most" and the superlative forms of adjectives when describing the despicable conditions of slavery as well as the hypocrisy of those who own slaves and still consider themselves to be "christian." Likewise, Douglass parallels his own sentence structure when discussing religion with the structure of several biblical verses; this not only shows his knowledge and awareness of the Bible, but it also

demonstrates what Smitherman and others refer to as “Punning” and “mimicry.” These are strategies often employed by black religious speakers or even rap artists who are trying to convey a message that “flies under the radar.” He does this not only in the structure of his sentences, but with the words themselves which mirror and parallel different names for Christ throughout the Bible.

His self-taught education from books he read on classical rhetoric’s emphasis on the canon of delivery parallels the “oral” aspects of AAVE which Smitehrman and other scholars emphasize greatly. Because Douglass was operating within the confines of slavery and was not privy to sharing his voice and speaking out verbally against his captors, it is my arument that he utlzied these oral aspects of AAVE, combined with the stance strategies from Hyland to express his deep concern for those who continued to justify their actions with religion and loose morals. This conclusion can only be understood from these various linguistic perspectives.

Without a proper examination of Douglass and the ways in which he utilized these various syntactic structures throughout his Narrative, modern-day audiences would not be able to fully comprehend his literary abilities, and therefore would fail to truly grasp his concept of achieving freedom through literacy.