

Students' Comprehension of the representation of African American Vernacular in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

A B S T R A C T This article was prompted by observations in tutorial lectures on African American Literature and reports on a subsequent pilot study. It explores students' responses to African American Vernacular (AAV) as used in the novel *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. A questionnaire was used to explore students' comprehension of AAV. The results indicate that although students were confident of their understanding of AAV, most could not correctly translate it into Standard English (SE). The findings have implications for the field of Applied Linguistics, in terms of the way linguistic features affect the reading and teaching of a literary text, and suggests that students will benefit from guidelines for interpreting Walker's representation of AAV.

Keywords: African American Literature, African American Vernacular, dialect, Standard English (SE), literary text, reading, teaching

1. Introduction

The critically acclaimed novel *The Color Purple* won Alice Walker the Pulitzer Prize. However, Trudier Harris, an African American woman herself, criticised the novel mainly on the basis that it reinforces negative stereotypes in terms of the morality, or lack thereof, of African Americans (Harris, 1984). It is therefore surprising to note the praise with which Harris (1984:156) refers to Walker's use of African American Vernacular (AAV) in the novel.

During English literature tutorial classes at the University of the Free State, discussions on the novel *The Color Purple* revealed the different reactions that students had to the novel. Some found it difficult while others experienced it as stimulating. A number of students also had difficulty understanding certain idiomatic expressions, while others had no difficulty with

these at all. This led to the question of how different students experience the reading of AAV in novels, specifically *The Color Purple* in this case.

This article explores the affects AAV has on readers on a cognitive level, and is aimed at exploring the extent to which students have difficulty in reading and understanding the dialect, as well as identifying factors which may influence this. Its focus is students' comprehension of AAV. Thus, a working assumption is that correct interpretation of AAV contributes to students' understanding of the novel.

The investigation was conducted by means of a questionnaire, which students were required to complete during tutorial classes. Analysing some of the results proved problematic, as some responses were ambiguous and contradictory. However, the findings hold definite implications for the way African American literature is taught. More specifically, it serves as a pilot study for future endeavours, by pointing to specific research areas.

2. Research on the Use of Dialect in Texts

The manifestation and use dialects in written form have been approached from both a literary and linguistic perspective. The former is mainly concerned with thematic issues, especially race relations, as well as using AAV as an effective means of characterisation (Ives, 1958; Minnick, 2001; Wright, 2008). The latter concentrates on its influence on the acquisition of Standard English (SE) and the representation of its phonetic elements in written texts.

According to Griffin (2004), since the Civil Rights and Black Power movements there has been an increase not only in the production, but also the distribution of African American literature. It is also increasingly taught at academic institutions. Thus, research is necessary in order to determine how students receive and understand the literature, in order to teach it more effectively to students less familiar with the dialect.

Research on the use of AAV in African American literature is divergent. Bunton (1990) researched the effect African American literature has on students of differing backgrounds in terms of racial issues. The results were divergent as some texts caused negative racial tensions to surface, while other texts led to positive changes in perspectives and attitudes. A similar study by Walker-Dalhouse (1992) indicated that incorporating African American texts into the reading list of a fifth-grade class allowed the teacher to broach the topic of ethnic differences with students in the class. Walker-Dalhouse (1992) seems to have succeeded to some degree in creating an understanding about ethnic differences among the students. Both studies show that African American texts have a definite impact on readers. These studies are, however, concerned with the content rather than the actual form that AAV takes.

Other studies investigated AAV speakers' performance at school as they learn SE as a second dialect. These studies look at factors such as phonemic awareness and spelling (Apel, Bahr, Bryant, Kohler, Silliman & Wilkenson, 2007), and differences between the dialects which affect the acquisition of SE phonology (Bryant, Charko, Pearson & Velleman, 2009). Stockman (2010) also investigated the increase in sensitivity with which language and cultural differences are being approached in schools, especially with regard to support for African American students' language learning needs.

Many linguists have also concerned themselves with the written presentation of dialect in various texts, such as the studies by Macaulay (1991) in transcribing “normal discourse” into written language, Preston (1982) concerning dialect in folklore, and Cohen (2007) with regard to dialect in poetry. These studies however, focus on the correct method for transcribing dialect and vernacular in specific types of texts and are thus not directly related to its use in literature and how it affects the reader. .

Burkette (2001) and Barry (2001), however, researched the degree to which AAV is presented accurately and consistently in novels. Barry (2001) analysed the use of AAV in the works of Zora Neale Hursten, determining the degree to which the use of AAV is consistent and authentic. Burkette (2001) measured the accuracy of employing dialect in characterisation using quantitative linguistics. Their results proved that from a linguistic point of view dialect can be presented accurately in literature, but this cannot be generalized to all texts containing AAV and also do not explore the extent to which readers understand it.

As mentioned before, the use of dialect has been discussed in detail by Dennis Preston (1982) where he severely criticises the use of dialect in transcribing folklore. Although folklore and fiction are two different fields with different purposes in using dialect, Preston claims that writing in dialect has a negative impact on the reader in terms of assumptions made about the characters with regard to education and economic status (Preston, 1985:336). He states that “the negative responses are attached to the spellings themselves and not to the pronunciations represented. Totally unwarranted demotions of social status are brought about by honest attempts to imitate in writing something of the impression created by rapid, casual speech.” (Preston, 1985:336). Elizabeth Fine (1983) provides a critical view of Preston’s initial claims in her article *In Defense of Literary Dialect: A Response to Dennis R. Preston*. She states that even if the use of writing in dialect does result in readers assuming that the characters are of a lower status than themselves, this does not necessarily indicate negative attitude towards characters. Preston goes further in saying, “Writing is a poor, secondary system when compared to speech. No tone or quality of voice can be represented; no helpful and delightful accompanying body language is seen; and no dramatic or embarrassing pauses or rapid tempo can be provided.” (1982:304). Fine however, counters by saying that on the contrary, it is able “to capture the rhythms, tones, and dialects of a variety of speaker” to great effect and proceeds to name just a few authors who succeeded in doing just that (Fine, 1983:324). Preston (1983) responds by saying his article was concerned with folklore and not creative writing, and presents the results of a research project which indicates that using dialect in writing does cause the reader to make assumptions about the characters. Preston continues to state that he is opposed to the use of respellings and nonstandard forms of words in writing because it often causes confusion for the reader in interpreting what is said.

Although this article deals with fiction rather than folklore, it supports Preston’s claims that transcribing dialect in writing can lead to erroneous interpretations on the reader’s part. As far as exploring the cognitive responses of the reader is concerned, Lang’s (2009) research on the novel *Small Island*, by Andrea Levy, is particularly relevant to this study. Lang uses “academically untrained” readers for her analyses, seeking to “disentangle real readers from

ideal readers” (Lang, 2009:125, 126). The study shows that “real” readers experienced the text with both pleasure and difficulty due to specific literary features, but mentions briefly the difficulty some readers had in interpreting the dialect. This paper then aims to investigate the difficulty student’s encounter when reading AAV in *The Color Purple*.

3. Methodology

This study proposes to explore the factors which influence the experience of AAV in literature by means of a qualitative pilot study. The research took the form of a questionnaire (see Appendix A.) given to second year English Literature students at the University of the Free State. *The Color Purple* was one of their prescribed texts. There were no scheduled tutorials on *The Color Purple* due to time constraints, but tutors were asked to briefly discuss certain thematic aspects of the novel in one tutorial, although this did not include the use of AAV in the novels. Lectures did include some information on the use of AAV as a means of characterisation, but did not deal directly with the interpretation or understanding of AAV.

Twenty-eight questionnaires were completed anonymously and handed in. Information from the tutors after the questionnaires had been completed revealed that the vast majority of students were English Second Language speakers, most of whose mother tongue was Afrikaans although a few students had an African language as their first language. The remaining minority had English as their mother tongue. Future research should investigate whether the student’s proficiency in English plays a role in their understanding of AAV. Their competence as literature students was all approximately on the same standard and they were between the ages of 18 and 21 with two exceptions. The questionnaire consisted of eight questions and an extract from the novel. Six of the questions consisted of two parts, where the students were first asked a closed ended question and then asked to explain the reasons for their answer as an open ended question. The remaining two questions required the students to read an extract from the novel and to first translate the underlined section from AAV into SE. Secondly, the students were asked to discuss whether or not they found this specific extract difficult to understand and to indicate an example in the section that was problematic. The answers to the open ended questions were then analysed by identifying the patterns and irregularities and categorising them (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989:205).

4. Analysis and Discussion of Data

The results of the closed ended questions are provided in the tables below with a discussion of their implications.

Categorisation of Questionnaire:

Question 1.	
Able to spell out	14
Had Difficulty Understanding	1
Had Some Difficulty, but Mostly Understood	13

Question 2.	
Understood All	14
Difficulty Understanding Some	10
Other	4

Question 3.	
Correct Translation	12
Incorrect Translation	16

Question 1.

Question 1 explored the cognitive level in terms of the difficulty presented by the actual grammar and spelling. This question was prompted since some students indicated in the tutorial that they had no trouble reading the text and were actually able to “hear” the characters speaking in their minds. Other students said that they found it difficult to read and had to concentrate on each word, phrase and sentence in order to make sense of the story. Most students claimed they either understood it easily or that they found it difficult initially, but became accustomed to it after a while. A few students made comments such as, “The spelling made it better to ‘hear’. One gets more intrigued into the story. Picturing and hearing the events.” (retained students’ grammatical errors) This would indicate that this method of writing enhances the reading experience.

On the other hand, there were some students who found that although they could “figure out” what was going on, it did not necessarily make the reading experience better. For example: “Yes the language was clear, but I found difficulty understanding some of the images.” This seems to indicate that although students were generally able to decipher the grammar and spelling, this does not necessarily mean that they correctly understood the event. Unique aspects of AAV, such as idiomatic expressions, were particularly problematic. Question 2 and 3 pertain more directly to this and supports this student’s comment.

Question 2.

Question 2 is focused on ascertaining whether or not students actually understand AAV in the novel, as opposed to their perception or belief that they understood it. They were asked to read the extract provided and comment on the manner in which language distorted the meaning. Half of the students claimed they understood the language without any problems, however their answers to question 3 casts doubt on this confidence. Also, five of the fourteen students, who stated they understood the extract without any problems, incorrectly translated the underlined section. This seems to indicate that even though many students claim they understood the text, few in fact did. The only two students from this category who offered examples of what they found difficult in the extract provided the same piece. The one providing, “Nettie she finally see the light of day, clear. Our new mammy she it too. She in her room crying. Nettie tend to first one, then the other.” while the other student provided the sentence,

“Nettie tend to first one, then the other.” A third student who provided this as an example fell into the category of students who had difficulty understanding the language. This suggests that even those students who generally understood the language had some difficulty. The way the action is portrayed through language makes it ambiguous and students seem unsure of what is really occurring.

The ten students who stated that they understood the extract, although with difficulty, mostly commented that it took a great deal of concentration and rereading to understand what was happening. Few of these students provided examples from the extract they found difficult to understand. One student stated that the first paragraph was hard to understand. This paragraph narrates the sexual abuse the main character suffers. Another student indicated that she was shocked by the fact that such a subject matter was narrated. This could indicate that it is both the difficulty in reading AAV and the unpleasant subject matter which renders the reading of the novel problematic. So not only is the actual use of AAV difficult to decipher for students, the issues Walker present to the reader intensifies the difficulty of the reading process. As stated above, one student from this category mentioned the section, “Nettie she finally see the light of day, clear. Our new mammy she see it too. She in her room crying. Nettie tend to first one.” Two other students from this group also refer to this paragraph as problematic. One student attempted to explain why this paragraph was hard to understand, “One area where I struggled and had to refer to again, however, was in the second paragraph where the ideas were put into separate sentences. Made it difficult to find a flow in the narrative.” Thus students seem to find it difficult to understand the sentence fragments, a technical means by which Walker presents AAV, and have trouble interpreting what the language implies. Two other problem areas in the extract pointed out by a student were, “Don’t know nothing but what you tell her.” and “And she big already.” In the tutorial classes, a number of students had mentioned the latter expression, used to indicate a woman was pregnant, as a phrase they had difficulty interpreting.

The four responses classed under “other” for question 2 did not give direct answers to the question, yet provide noteworthy responses. One student explained that the language in this extract, as in most of the novel, reveals a child who does not completely understand what is happening to her, which is reflected in the ambiguity of the manner in which she writes about the situation. The other three answers merely provided examples from the extract they found difficult to understand. Two of these answers are related, one having trouble with the section, “She ain’t fresh tho, but I specs you know that. She spoiled. Twice.”, and the other providing the sentence, “I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time.” This specific section narrates how her father is trying to persuade Mr.----- to marry Celie instead of Nettie. He is referring to the fact that although Celie is no longer a virgin, she may still make a good wife. The fourth answer in this category again stated they had difficulty in understanding the phrase, “She big already.” This was the only answer that offered an explanation of what the section they struggled with actually meant. It is unclear whether the other students understood the pieces they had difficulty with, but further research should be done to clarify this.

Question 3.

Question 3 provided significant results since twelve students translated it correctly, while the remaining students failed to do so. Nine of the twelve students who correctly translated the underlined section stated in the previous question that they had no difficulty in understanding

the text, while one student stated they had some difficulty in understanding, and the other two did not offer an answer but merely provided an example from the text they had difficulty with. Significantly, six of the sixteen students who translated the section incorrectly had claimed in the previous question that they had no difficulty in understanding the text. Two of the remaining ten fell into the 'other' category; while the remaining eight had answered that they had had difficulty in understanding the use of AAV.

The section the students were asked to translate from AAV into SE was,

“Mr.----- say, Well Sir, I sure hope you done change your mind.

He say, Naw, Can't say I is.”

This chapter deals with Mr.----- who is coming to ask for Nettie's hand in marriage a second time, and Alfonso, their father, is yet again refusing to allow the marriage. The correct translation would then be,

“Mr. ----- said, ‘Well Sir, I hope that you have changed your mind.’

He replied, ‘No, I can't say that I have.’”

As already indicated above, twelve of the twenty-eight students translated it correctly. Note however, that a 'correct' translation does not mean that it was necessarily accurate in terms of grammar, but they 'correctly' interpreted that Mr.----- was asking Alfonso if he had changed his mind, Alfonso then replying in the negative. There was only one slight variation in terms of a 'correct' translation as just explained, where the student translated the section as,

“Mr.----- said, ‘Well Sir, I really hope you will change your mind.’

He said, ‘No, I can't say I will.’”

The main error here is that it is translated into the future tense, where the text is in the past tense.

There was a definite pattern in terms of the way the remaining sixteen students 'incorrectly' interpreted it. Five students translated it as, “Well Sir, I sure hope you are done changing you mind.” It seems that the use of “done”, which indicates that he “has” changed his mind, was taken quite literally. Seven other students alternatively interpreted it as, “Well Sir, I sure hope that you do not change your mind.” A quarter of the students had interpreted it to mean something quite different from the intended meaning, indicating a complete misunderstanding of the actual conversation taking place. At least three of them had claimed in the previous question that they had no problem in understanding the text. The remaining four 'incorrect' translations were variations of the above, with one student simply stating they do not understand the underlined sentence and one translating only the second sentence and doing so incorrectly. The other two students provided the following answers,

“Mr.----- said, ‘Well Sir, I hope you have not gone and changed your mind.

He said, ‘No, can't say I have.’”

“I hope you will not change your mind. He: No, I can't say that I am.”

The first two interpretations are quite the opposite of the intended meaning. It could be seen as a positive thing that only two out of the twenty-eight students had in fact translated it as quite

the opposite, but it is significant that sixteen out of the twenty-eight had in fact misunderstood the meaning in some way. One possible explanation for this is that you need to have read the preceding chapters to understand the interaction between the two men, and it became apparent after the study that although the students had discussed the novel in class, some of the students had not actually read the novel. As the questionnaires were anonymous, there was no way to determine exactly which students had or had not read the novel, although future research should take this factor into account as this could possibly account for the misunderstanding of the section. The results to this question do seem to indicate however, that more than half of the students had some difficulty in interpreting the text.

5. Conclusion and Implications

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker uses AAV effectively, as even one of its staunchest critics (Harris, 1984) have commented. The question has to be asked though, whether all readers understand AAV. The results of this study showed that first of all, the majority of students found it challenging to read AAV. While approximately half the students had no real difficulty in 'hearing' the language as they read, the other half had to put effort into understanding the unusual use of language. The difference in the number of students who claimed to understand the text and the number of students who were actually able to 'correctly' translate the indicated section seems to show that students do not completely understand the text. It is uncertain though, to what extent the students misunderstood the text, and what the main causes were. Therefore, the findings hold implications for the teaching of African American Literature, by indicating the importance of testing whether students interpret AAV correctly and to what extent this distorts their understanding of the novel as a whole. Research (Burkette, 2001 & Barry, 2001) has shown that although AAV can be accurately presented in literature, there is no standardised method of doing so since the writing of AAV is dependent on the author. However, in teaching novels by Walker, guidelines for correctly translating AAV in her works could be developed and made available to students to aid their interpretation and understanding of the use of AAV, and thus the novel.

Further research should be done to test the accuracy of these findings. Firstly, research should be done in terms of the cognitive processes involved in understanding AAV. There are various factors that may allow certain students to 'hear' the language in their minds while they read it, while others find it difficult. The home language of the reader, as well as exposure to other forms of AAV, for example in television programs and movies, could be contributing factors. If exposure to AAV in the media enhances understanding of the text, then a screening of the movie may improve students' interpretation of the dialect. Secondly, it should be investigated whether the subject matter, that of sexual abuse, could contribute to reading difficulty. Lastly, the specific aspects of AAV that students find problematic, such as the sentence fragments and idiomatic expressions, need to be identified. This could provide the necessary information for designing guidelines for the interpretation of AAV by students of literature. This study has provided preliminary information with regard to the experiences of readers with the use of AAV in literature. However, more research is needed to establish a clearer picture of the factors involved, how they play a role in the reading process and what would be the most effective means of teaching AAV in literature.

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Appendix A. (Revised Version of Questionnaire)

The Color Purple

Age: _____

Home language: _____

Year of Study: _____

How much of the novel have you read? A) nothing, B) half, C) more than half, D) the entire novel: _____

1. Were you able to spell the words out phonetically (could you hear the language in your head as it would be spoken), or did you have difficulty understanding the spelling and grammar:

Could "Hear" it _____ Much Difficulty _____ Some difficulty _____

2. Read the attached extract and comment on the manner in which the language presents the content. In other words, did you understand what exactly was happening when you read it the first time, or did the language obscure the meaning:

Understood Clearly _____ Meaning was Unclear _____ Other _____

If *the meaning was unclear*, give an example from the text that you found difficult to read/understand:

If *other*, explain:

3. Re-write the underlined section in the extract in Standard English:

Extract:

Dear God,

I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick. But he just ast me what I'm talking bout. I tell him I can fix myself up for him. I duck into my room and come out wearing horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high heel shoes. He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway.

Mr.----- come that evening. I'm in the bed crying. Nettie she finally see the light of day, clear. Our new mammy she see it too. She in her room crying. Nettie tend to first one, then the other. She so scared she go out doors and vomit. But not out front where the mens is.

Mr.----- say, Well Sir, I sure hope you done change your mind.

He say, Naw, Can't say I is.

Mr.----- say, Well, you know, my poor little ones sure could use a mother.

Well, he say, real slow, I can't let you have Nettie. She too young. Don't know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I specs you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already.