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Semantic Set of N-Word Choices in Afro-American Fiction: A Corpus Analysis of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God

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Abstract *This study explores the linguistic selection focusing on the use of N-word choice by African-American fiction writers. This study explains the basic concepts of language and language use, language as a text and discourse, and also the function it plays within the context. With Halliday and Hassan's semantic set of choices, this study argues that Zora Neale Hurston does not seem aware of consciously using N-words in her novel, but her use of N-word linguistic choice to communicate the theme of race is in line with her true reflection of the society and culture she is born and bred in. Hurston might have used N-word deliberately both to appropriate lexical choice with that of characters' roles as many of the Harlem Renaissance writers did and to establish a kind of community building and collective cultural solidarity, the major determinants of Hurston's use of the N-word in Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

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Introduction

When a text is written, it appears to be made of words and sentences in a logical manner, but in the real sense, it is made of meaning that is expressed and encoded in words and structures. Hence, the text is a form of exchange, and the fundamental form of a text is that of dialogue or of interaction between and among speakers. A literary text employs creative use of language between and among characters that are embedded in the immediate context of utterance, situation and culture. It is both an object and instance of social meaning within a particular context of situation and culture. Linguistic criticism focuses on language by also looking beyond words and structures to interpret a literary text both as a product and a process that relates to language as a whole.

The language of fiction is also discursive. The use of certain linguistic choices than others not only provides the readers with thoughtful insights into the author's life but also reflects the dominant socio-economic conditions and political trends of the time. It is generally argued that writers living in an age of political upheavals absorb the attitudes and dominant trends of their time. Literary writers, sensitive to the themes and happenings of their time, try to reflect those elements in their narratives. Themes and concepts related to sensitive and political issues also need conscious efforts of the authors to reflect an aspect of the fictionalized reality of their time and the setting of their characters' lives and some interesting interpretations for the reader. This phenomenon is reflected in an author's preference or choice of certain linguistic items over others, which they have to make during the creative process to communicate what they intend to communicate.

Literature Review

According to Roger Fowler (1996):

The meanings of the words in a language are the community's store of established knowledge. A child learns the values and preoccupations of its culture largely by learning the language: language is the chief instrument of socialization, which is the process by which a person is, willy-nilly,

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moulded into conformity with the established systems of beliefs of the society into which s/he happens to be born. Language gives knowledge and allows knowledge to be transmitted from person to person. (p. 30)

Fowler's quote refers to the idea of a shared belief system among members of the same speech community. Words carry meanings according to the society's "store of establishing knowledge". Fowler's idea of shared linguistic knowledge intends that words carry not only a set of semantic loads but also different strands of meanings attached to them, like putty within and in relation to the cultural norms of the society. Coulmas (2013) also believes that "[s]ociety is built on language. There is no society that does not speak and use language as its central instrument of the organization" (Coulmas, 2013, p. 4). Ferdinand de Saussure (1959), a twentieth-century linguist, defines language as a "social fact" (p. 6). He argues that language is a social fact as every language is a collective product, an artefact created by its speakers, which, at the same time, enables higher forms of social planning and cooperation to evolve. Social facts can be studied only if we look at how "people associate to form groups, how they communicate and how they act collectively" (Coulmas, 2013, p. 5). Coulmas (2013) also supports the viewpoint of de Saussure when he says: "Social facts are historical facts. They have many contingent features. Biolinguistics ignore the historicity of language because it is interested in invariance however, for sociolinguistics, the historical dimension of language is central" (p. 5). Coulmas relates both "the historical character of language" and learnability of a language within its social and cultural context. Although it is true, human beings also have different abilities for language learning and acquisition. Coulmas argues: "There are good learners and not so good learners" (p. 5). Similarly, no two speakers and writers have the same choice and expression even they are exposed to the same environment and experience.

Theoretical Frame

Halliday and Hassan (1989) argue that a text is both a product and a process of the environment of the society the writer or author lives in. It is a product in the sense that it is an output, something that can be represented in systematic terms. It is a process in the sense of a continuous process of semantic choices, "a movement through the network of meaning potential, with each set of choices constituting the environment for a further set" (Halliday & Hasan, 1989).

These concepts are as follows:

Field

It refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place: what is that the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component?

Tenor

It refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles; what kind of role relationship obtained among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved?

Mode

It refers to what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation; the symbolic organization of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context, including the channel (is it spoken or written or some combination of the two?) and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like (Halliday & Hasan, 1989, p. 12).

Analysis

Hurston's (2011) literary work – short stories, essays, and fictions centre around the themes of identity, love, sex, and freedom of black women, besides focusing on the need for building a black community. Her seminal work *Their Eyes were Watching God*, reflects these themes and issues in a different way. In the novel, Janie, a black woman, is struggling in search of freedom and true love and her identity within a "colored town" she lives in and the American society in general. Her use of language and the narrator suits the socio-economic, political and broader cultural aspects of their society they live in and against what they are struggling for. Jennie's linguistic choices, especially "lexical", also reflect her bent

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of mind and attitude towards the existing social system and society she was brought up in and against what she revolts. The major setting of the novel is small-town Eatonville. Eatonville, which is a black town established by the free blacks and where Janie spends most of her time as a mistress, also reflects the culture and socio-economic conditions of black folks. The choice of language in accordance with the theme, setting and characters are also reflected through the prevalent use of certain linguistic choices Hurston made during the writing. Hurston represents the socio-economic conditions and plight of African people within an "all-black town" by referring to "socially, economically, or politically deprived group of people" (Harcourt, 2019).

N-word Concordances in *Their Eyes were Watching God*

N-word: nigger*
Frequency: 6

Table 1. N-word (nigger*) frequency and concordance in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

1	'se different from me. Ah can't stand black	niggers.	Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin'
2	much and dey laughs too loud. Always singin' ol'	nigger	songs! Always cuttin' de monkey for white f
3	'? Ah don't know. Don't bring me no	nigger	doctortuh hang over mah sick-bed. Ah done
4	but dat one—and ain't never had uh	nigger	tuh even feel mah pulse. White doctors alwa
5	gitsmah money. Ah don't go in no	nigger	storetuh buy nothin' neither. Colored folk
6	us, dat'swhut. He wuz uh white folks'	nigger."	According to all Janie had been taught t

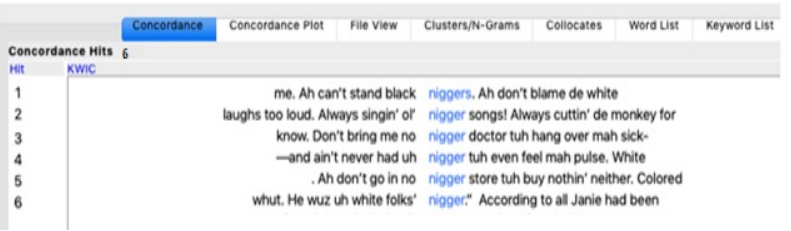

Figure 1: N-word concordances in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Use and Function of N-word in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Utterances 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6

"You'se different from me.(11) Ah can't stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'emmahself. 'Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid 'em. Usoughta class off."

"Us can't do it. We'se uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks. How come you so against black?"

"And dey makes me tired. Always laughin'! Dey laughs too much and dey laughs too loud. (2) Always singin' ol' nigger songs! Always cuttin' de monkey for white folks. If it wuzn't for so many black folks it wouldn't be no race problem. De white folks would take us in widdem. De black ones is holdin' us back."

"You reckon? 'course Ah ain't never thought about it too much. But Ah don't figgerdey even gointuh want us for comp'ny. We'se too poor."

" 'Tain't de poorness, it's de color and de features. Who want any lil ole black baby layin' up in de baby buggy lookin' lak uh fly in buttermilk? Who wants to be mixed up wid uh rusty black man, and uh black woman goin' down de street in all dem loud colors, and whoopin' and hollerin' and laughin' over nothin'? Ah don't know. (3) Don't bring me no nigger doctor tuh hang over mah sick-bed. Ah done had six chillun—wuzn't lucky enough tuh raise but dat

one—and (4) ain't never had uh nigger tuh even feel mah pulse. White doctors always gitsmah money. (5) Ah don't go in no nigger store tuh buy nothin' neither. Colored folks don't know nothin' 'bout no business. Deliver me!" (pp.188-189)

"He didn't do nothin' but hold us back—talkin' 'bout work when de race ain't never done nothin' else. He wuzuh enemy tuh us, dat'swhut. (6) He wuz uh white folks' nigger." (p.191)

Analysis/Critique

Race: A mulatto woman (Mrs. Turner) to a black woman (Janie)

Relationship: Neighbors in Everglade

Setting: Janie's home in Everglade

Context: Mrs. Turner at Janie's home is talking too loud about her thoughts for black folks. She does not like Janie's attitude toward other black folks. She is quite different from Janie and does not like black folks hanging around her home unlike Janie. She wants Janie to feel the responsibility to "lighten up de race".

Discussion

The sentence "Ah can't stand black niggers" reflects Mrs. Turner's attitude and approach towards other black folks. She considers herself "class off" and acts like other white folks who do not want to get themselves mingled up with black folks. She is acting too racial in her words and gestures. Her choice of linguistic expression "Ah can't stand black niggers", not only shows her verbal hatred but also reflects her feelings and attitude towards black folks. Using "black" as an adjective with a highly racial N-word reflects her view that only "blacks" could be "niggers" but not mulatto like her. Her milky skin becomes the core source of her prejudice and racial attitude towards other black folks for "class off".

The word "black" has been used as an adjective with a highly racial noun word "nigger". The elements of hatred are reflected in the first half of the sentence "Ah can't stand". It shows Mrs Turner's inability to bear even the presence of black folks. She could have made a linguistic choice of "folk" instead of "nigger" to make her statement less racial. But the use of N-word choice instead of "black" reflects her inner state of mind and emotions.

Mrs. Turner then talks about other common black folks' characteristics and the reasons why she dislikes them so much. Besides talking about black folk'sbehavior, she comes up with another reason and argument that they are usually associated with nigger songs. She says, "Always singin' ol' nigger songs!" In the words of Mrs. Turner singing old "nigger songs" makes her hate black folks. In her view, all black folks should behave like white folks to earn respect and position in society.

Here the actual understanding of Mrs. Turner is not that they sing songs but they sing "ol'nigger songs!", which is unbearable for her. Here the word "nigger" has been used as an adjective of head noun "songs". Songs have different genres and forms, such as classical songs, rock songs, etc. but singing "old nigger song" undermines the overall culture of black people and people of African origin. Black folks are known for their folk culture and folk music, which is being denied here by Mrs. Turner's remark. It is as if white people are not as against black people and culture, as black themselves. People of their own race do not want to see their fellow beings excel in different fields. They are the most severe critics of their own culture by undermining it when comparing it with white culture. The argument is that black people have their own language and culture and ways of living and thinking, but when looked at it through white prism if compared it with white culture, then one culture looks secondary to the other one. Mrs. Turner tries to justify whites' behavior with black folks by criticizing black people and their resistance to not being white in their behavior and attitude.

Janie then tries to balance the situation and argues that it is poorness that matters for whites. Mrs. Turner denies the fact that it is not poorness that does not let black and white people go together but "it's de color and de features". But at the same time, she argues about her own behavior against black and comes up with the very strong and taboo word "nigger" again and again. Her attitude towards black folks is reflected in her talk when she does not even want a 'nigger doctor" to examine her for her sickness. She further argues that she didn't let any "nigger" feel her pulse. She paid money only to white doctors for her diagnosis and treatment thereafter. Mrs. Turner's remarks show not only her attitude towards blacks but the general attitude of the people belonging to mixed-race and whites. In the eighteenth N-word utterance instance, the word "nigger is used as an adjective with the headword "doctor". It is as if we use a

gender-specific doctor when we use the word "lady doctor'" by separating both. Here race specific modifier has been used to identify the race of the doctor. But this could have been done by referring them as "black" instead of "nigger". The word "nigger" here not only reflects Mrs. Turner's hatred but also race conscious attitude against the people of their own race. Moreover, the use of the N-word serves the function it intends to communicate. Besides communicating about race specific doctors, the N-word also adds social and racial meaning to the utterance by making the doctor low grade and less expert as compared to the white doctor.

In the nineteenth instance of the N-word, Mrs. Turner uses it generically to refer to the previous N-word instance as a "nigger doctor". Here the N-word "nigger" is being used as a noun whereas the modifier could be understood from the context of the previous sentence where she refers to a black doctor as "no nigger doctor". The whole sentence "…ain't never had uh nigger tuh even feel mah pulse" reflects Mrs. Turner's attitude within the overall context of the argument. The last phrase of the sentence clarifies the meaning of "uh nigger" that it is not just a common noun but a specific one and is referring to not just any nigger but a nigger doctor. Moreover, not even allowing a black person to feel her pulse reflects her racial attitude based more on color and appearance than of origin. Her repeated focus on her appearance in the form of thin lips and pointed nose, and of her brother's appearance in the form of having straight hairs is reflective of her reaped struggle for class off.

The twentieth instance of the N-word is used within the same context as a modifier to refer to a kind of store owned and run by a black man. The expression "no nigger store" refers to any store owned and run by any black person. Mrs. Turner's reason for not visiting any such store is quite apparent from the previous context that she hates to a mix-up with blacks and tries to behave like whites. The major reason for such behavior is her skin color and more white features. The arguments for not visiting black stores come in the lines to follow.

This also shows and reflects the overall attitude of the black people and their ways of dealing with customers and doing business. In Mrs. Turner's words, black people do not know how to do business and behave being a storage organizer. The whole sentence reflects her attitude towards blacks and her feelings of being superior to black people. Her argument, "Ah don't go in no nigger store tuh buy nothin' neither" reflects the general attitude of people of her appearance. But Janie feels quite different and never even thinks in such a way. In the phrase "no nigger store" the N-word is used as a modifier to the head noun "store". But this referring expression does not refer to any particular store run by a black person. The utterer does not have a specific referent in her mind by the referring expression "no nigger store".

Mrs. Turner is conscious of her race and features. It's her white-like features that do not let her come out of the superiority complex over other black people. She thinks that she is a "class off". In the twentieth utterance, the N-word use could be taken as a reaction to her being ignored by the whites. So, she has to stay with people of her own race – black. Also, she does not want to be identified as black and, like whites, does not want to a mixup with black people. But she cannot do anything to avoid this situation except living with them. Her frustration is reflected in the repeated use of the N-word in her speech. She hates black people so much that she could not control her use of N-word linguistic choices for them. It seems quite apparent from the social context of the whole argument that the N-word not only has negative connotations but elements of hatred and anger to the extent of being highly offensive and thus also have a social significance of being a taboo word.

In the twenty-first instance of the N-word use, Mrs. Turner is shifting the direction of her argument towards her brother intentionally. The reason for her intention is to offer Janie a good match if she is not married to Tea Cake. In the wake of her argument and anger of not being included in a different class than the other black people, she presents her brother as a severe critic of Booker T. Washington. Janie tries to present Booker T. as "a great big man" that Mrs. Turner does not like. Mrs. Turner presents Booker T.'s character as a slave working for whites and doing all the herculean tasks to please his masters. It reflects Mrs. Turner's anger for being not included in a separate race as she says that Booker T. was the one who held them back. In her view, Booker talked more about work but did nothing to uplift the race. In Mrs. Turner's words, he "was uh enemy" to them. At the height of her argument, she comes up with a highly racial word "nigger" for Booker T. in the following words "He

wuz uh white folks' nigger."Referring to Booker T. as a "white folks' nigger" reflects her approach towards other fellow black folks or people of her own race. Here the N-word is used as a noun but in a possessive case. Instead of phrasing her structure as "a nigger of white folks", she comes up with a possessive case – "uh white folks' nigger", which also functions as more close association with whites. The N-word is already negative and using it with the white folks in a possessive case also makes it more negative as it does not only carry its own trait features but also supplementing it with more negative traits of white folks. This highly racial talk in anger and disgust also places Mrs. Turner's character and purpose in the limelight.

The overall function of Mrs. Turner's whole argument is more racial than social. Her use of N-word linguistic choices and their contextual meanings are quite apparent in the social settings for the home and town where people have nothing more to do but to earn livelihood and talk. Certainly, they have to pick up topics of their own choices and use language accordingly in relation to race, class, age, gender and social settings. Mrs. Turner's age, gender and arguments suit the class and race of her own people.

Her use of N-word linguistic choices such as "common niggers", "ol nigger songs", "no nigger doctor", "uh nigger", "no nigger store" and "uh white folks' nigger" clearly reflects her state of mind and her hatred and anger towards other fellow black people. She represents a class that does not exist, and she wants it to exist so she can exist. Within a single setting, she uses six N-words in a series and other racial remarks about black folks. The use and functions of these words by Mrs. Turner are reflective of the kind of people she is and their general attitude towards fellow black people in an effort to get "class off". The character of Mrs. Turner is best understood and interpreted in the words of Tea Cake when he is talking to Janie about Mrs. Turner. He says, "Her look lak uh white woman! Widdatmeriny skin and hair jus' as close tuh her head as ninety-nine is tuh uh hundred!"

Looking at Mrs. Turner's racial views through a linguistic lens yields interesting results. Mrs. Turner produces only about 750 words of direct speech in the novel. But even within this relatively small sample, her frequency of six N-word uses is significant. All of the six N-words are used as a racial slur and function racially to communicate Mrs. Turner's behaviour towards the people of her community. Later, it is this community, which finally rejects her for her overt racism. It is also reflected in Mrs. Turner's speech. For her, class is more important with subtle shades of skin than social inequality with wealth and influence.

Instances of the N-word and its context of use in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Table 2. N-word Instances and its contextual use and function in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

S. No	N-word Utterance	Race	Relationship	Contexts	Remarks/ Function
1	Ah can't stand black niggers	A black woman (Mrs. Turner) to a black woman (Janie)	neighbours in Everglade	Janie's home in Everglade	More of hatred, racial and economic than social Used as a racial slur
2	Always singin' ol' nigger songs!	//	//	//	Used as a racial slur with elements of cultural backwardness
3	Don't bring me no nigger doctor tuh hang over mah sick-bed.	//	//	//	Used as a highly racial slur
4	ain't never had uh nigger tuh even feel mah pulse	//	//	//	Used as a racial slur
5	Ah don't go in no nigger store tuh	//	//	//	Used as a racial slur

S. No	N-word Utterance	Race	Relationship	Contexts	Remarks/ Function
6	buy nothin' neither. He wuz uh white folks' nigger." (p.191)	//	//	//	Used as a racial slur with elements of hatred

Conclusion

This study traces the use of N-word linguistic choice that African-American author makes communicate different functions of language. All N-word instances were collected and analyzed within the context of situation, culture and reference. The quantitative results presented in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2reflecthow the linguistic approach of Hurston weaves the social and cultural embedment of the Afro-American community.The finding shows that the N-word instances in *Their Eyes were Watching God* reflect different meanings within different situations. These N-words are used within different contexts and situations to communicate how different meanings serve different purposes. Moreover, the use of the N-word could be taken as an art and craft of the author to reflect the social and economic conditions of the society and also of the community that uses the N-word according to their involvement in the given situation. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the delimited six N-word instances are uttered by mulatto women Mrs. Turner. The uttering instances explore the racial consciousness (Loomba, 2006) of the mulatto wo/manwho used N-word to conceal her inferiority complex (Fanon, 1952) in a white community.

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