

Words, phrases, and meanings of African American provenience in General American: A corpus-based study

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Recent decades have witnessed an acceleration of the linguistic crossover or, in other words, the absorption of certain traits of African American Vernacular English by General American English (Smitherman 2005: 108). The roots of this linguistic process may be traced back to the times of enslavement when the lexicon of Ebonics contributed to white vocabulary, preponderantly to White Vernacular in the South. The process continued through the Harlem Renaissance and is very much operative today especially due to the significant attraction to Black Culture. It would not be an exaggeration to speak about the phenomenon of at least partial 'afroamericanization' of present-day Standard American English which can be seen on a number of levels – syntax, phonetics, and lexicon; the biggest impact exerted by AAVE on American English, however, is visible in the realm of the latter: in fact, a substantial number of lexical entries or meanings which quite recently were frowned upon as uniquely Black slangish terms have crossed over into the White American mainstream. With such words and phrases as *groovy* and *chill out* or the 'unorthodox' meanings of *bad* (the negative used to mean the opposite), *chill*, *dig*, to name but a few, used so readily and frequently, the boundaries between Standard English lexicon and what was formerly known as Black English seem to have become less and less discernable.

The aim of the present paper is to establish the degree of recent influence of the AAVE lexicon on its Standard American counterpart. The authors focus on a selection of words/phrases/meanings of African American origin which were 'transferred' to American English in the course of the second half of the 20th century in order to determine their frequency of appearance, distribution across spoken and written media as well as their presence in various text types and semantic fields. The list of lexical items and denotations of AAVE provenience was compiled on the basis of various sources ranging from subject literature (among other sources, Green 2002 and Smitherman 2006,) to the *Dictionary of American Regional English* and Smitherman's 2000 dictionary. The material chosen for the study is the second release of the *American National Corpus*, comprising to date approximately twenty-two million words of written and spoken American English.

References

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