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Linguistics 442

African American Slang

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May 17, 2001

African American Slang has had many other names: Ebonics, Jive, Black English, and more. The Oxford English Dictionary defines slang (in reference to language) in three different ways: 1) the special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character; language of a low and vulgar type 2) the special vocabulary or phraseology of a particular calling or profession; the cant or jargon of a certain class or period 3) language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense. Whatever one's perspective on slang, it is a natural and inevitable part of language. In this paper I will discuss examples of current slang being used that some people may not understand.

The African influence of American English can be found as far back as the Seventeenth century. Although its influence may have began that far back, the influence of African American slang has arguably reached its peak (so far) in the last half on the 20th century. Evidence of this can be seen in magazines, music, television, and films. Perhaps more importantly, evidence can be seen in the way that people of ethnic groups, other than African American, have changed their speech due to this influence. The Equal Rights Movement lead to a paradigm shift in African American linguistic consciousness due to Black intellectuals, scholars, activists, artists, and writers deliberately engaging in a search for a way to express Black identity and the particular circumstances of

African American life. Although there had been strides in Black pride in the past, this was the first one to call for linguistic Black pride. (Smitherman 4)

As the definitions of slang from the OED imply, most people have a negative perspective on what is labeled as Slang. The most common argument against it is that slang is a result of an inability to communicate effectively in the standard of a language, but in some instances slang words are created in order to fill a linguistic need that the standard does not fulfill. The use of the word floss is a good example of this, in short floss refers to personal possessions that display one's wealth, as a native speaker of English, I am unable to think of a Standard American English word that could replace that usage of floss. So in this case, the word floss as it is used in Ebonics plays fills a linguistic need.

Slang also can act as a means of self-defense against the mainstream or outside groups. Slang is created out the will to survive on the terms of the group. Those who create, cultivate, and use slang have a desire, and sometimes a need, for secrecy or privacy from the mainstream. It also creates and reinforces group identity. Many scholars have discussed these uses of slang, but none quite as explicitly and eloquently as Clarence Major in this following passage:

"This so-called private vocabulary of black people serves the users as a powerful medium of self-defense against a world demanding participation while at the same time laying a boobytrap-network of rejection and exploitation. Afro-American slang is created out of the will to survive on black terms. Black slang stems more precisely from a somewhat disseminated rejection of the life-styles, social patterns, and thinking in general of the Euro-American sensibility. ...the

subculture always has a proportionately larger impact upon a dominant culture, rather than vice versa." While it may seem merely interesting to study, slang, and more particularly African American slang has a deliberate social function behind it. (Major 1970, 6)

The words used in Ebonics are derived by many different means. Sometimes it is just a shortening of a phrase: *The Man: referred to the white man, or the white man's enforcer, the policeman. Today, of course, it is used to refer to any male of distinction and power.* (Smitherman 39) Other times the speaker has decided to label an object based on one of its characteristics: *Benjamins: is the 1990s Hip Hop term for money, from the picture of Benjamin Franklin on the \$100 bill. Other Hip Hop terms "Franklin faces" and "big faces" (a reference to the enlarged "Franklin" and presidential images on currency issued around the mid-1990s, particularly on the \$20, \$50, and \$100 bills. Benjamins comes from the phrase "Dead presidents" which is a reference to money, derived from the U.S. government's practice of printing pictures of U.S. presidents (dead ones only) on various denominations of paper currency. This phrase was popular from the 1930s through the 1960s.* (Smitherman 39) Other times a speaker might decide to use a synonym of a word that is already a slang word itself: *Applause: Gonorrhea. Derived from older term "the clap".* (Smitherman 55) *From the OED: The Clap: [Of uncertain origin. Cf. OF. 'clapoir, bosse, bubo, panus inguinis'; 'clapoire, clapier, lieu de débauche, maladie q'on y attrape'.] a. Gonorrhia. 1587 Myrr. Mag., Malin iii, Before they get the Clap. a1605 MONTGOMERIE Flyting 312 The clape and the canker. 1851 MAYNE*

Exp. Lex., *Clap*, vulgar name for the disease *Baptorrh* a. **1881** in *Syd. Soc. Lex.*
1919 *Wine, Women & War* (1926) 306 Physical exam crabs, cooties and clap.
 Scared to death, but O.K. **1967** A. DIMENT *Dolly Dolly Spy* iii. 34 Rocky Kilmarry
 is about as good for you as a dose of clap. Other times the brand name of a
 product can lead to a variation of it in Ebonics: *Blunt: Marijuana rolled in cigar
 paper, creating a large marijuana cigarette that has the look of a cigar.*
 (Smitherman 73) *Blunt: originally, a joint made by emptying out a Phillies Blunt
 cigar and stuffing it with pot.* (Scotti 128) *Philly: a cheap cigar used for smoking
 crack or marijuana. Also Philly blunt* (Smitherman 228) *Vega: brand of cigars
 used for smoking marijuana.* (Smitherman 290)

In the Ebonics community, the terms **slammin'** and **jammin'** are used almost interchangeably. However, they have different etymologies and ultimately a slight difference in usage. **Jammin'** is currently used to signify something is good, but so is **slammin'**, but when the two are used together **slammin'** is considered a higher compliment than **jammin'**. The first form of **Jammin'** is an adjective from the 20th century. It originated in the West Indies/ West Indian and Rasta cultures. It means, "having a good time, dancing calypso/soca". It is derived from a form of the verb **jam**.

The form of **jam** that influenced **jammin'** is a verb from the 1930s and is believed to be from a West Indies/ West Indian and African American origin. This form of 'jam' means "to play or, of an instrument or of music in general, to be played so as to encourage vigorous dancing: thus jamming, dancing in an abandoned manner". The second definition of this form of **jam** is also from the

1930s, originates in the U.S. and refers “to musicians playing together without set scores or arrangement for the pleasure and the spontaneous music thus created”. The third definition of this form of **jam** comes from the 1970s, originated in U.S. campuses and means “to dance, to have a good time, and to perform well”. (Cassell 653)

Those forms of jam had an apparent influence on the word, **jammin’**, from the Rasta culture. However, in the Cassell Dictionary of Slang there is a separate entry for a word, **jamming**. **Jamming** is described as an adjective from the 1980s that originated in the African American Culture, which means, “exciting pleasing, excellent, the best”. According to the Cassell Dictionary of Slang it, like the Rasta **jammin’**, is a variation on the word **jam** as well, but is from a slightly different variation of the word jam. This form of **jam** is a verb from the 1970s that originated in the African American and drug culture as well as U.S. campuses; it means “to have fun, a good time, also by taking drugs”. The second definition of this form of **jam** means to do very well and came from U.S. campuses in the 1980s. (Cassell 653)

Most speakers who have been exposed to the mainstream African American culture have heard the use of the word **jammin’**. Though the Cassell Dictionary of Slang refers to it as **jamming**, with a ‘g’ at the end, most, if not all, speakers would agree that it is usually said, “jammin’ ”. While the first example of the word **jammin’** presented in this paper is said to come from the Rasta culture, it is more reasonable to conclude that the Rasta form is not intended as often as the other form. However, many speakers, even those only moderately

familiar with the word jammin' are aware and even have used both forms of the word. (Cassell 653)

The word **slamming** is an adjective that was originally used in the late 19th century to the 1900s and then later was used again in the 1980s to the present. It is " a general intensifier, overwhelming, extraordinary, the best, the most fashionable, attractive etc". Clarence Major defines **slamming** and slamminest: as adjectives from the 1980s-1990s "fashionable; first rate; beautiful; wonderful; the best' delicious". He says the term is loosely used as a superlative. An example in the music world is from the Rap duo Black Sheep who used the word in a son titled "Flavor of the Month." Some examples of slamming and slamminest are: "That's a slamming dress," or "He has the slamminest car in the hood." (Cassell 1086) Again, it should be made clear that **slamming** with a 'g' at the end would never be spoken, and really shouldn't even be written. Like **jammin'**, **slammin'** is always spoken without the 'g' at the end. A common practice among African American teens is to use a word that usually has a violent or negative connotation as a positive adjective. The words 'hard' and 'bad' are both examples of this but both are older terms and not used as often now. It is reasonable to conclude that this practice of using violent terms as positive adjectives is how the term slamming came about having the meaning of 'excellent'. (Cassell 1086)

The other form of **slamming** is a noun from the 1980s and it originated in the African American culture. It is defined as "fighting, either with fists or knives; thus slamming and jamming, of the Guardian Angels group, raiding a crack

house or similar establishment to smash it up, rough up the patrons and take away the drugs”. This form of **slamming** comes from **slam**, which is a noun originating in the U.S. in the 1930s that means “a violent blow given to a ball”. And later became used as a verb at some point in the 20th century that meant “to beat up, to hurt badly”. (Cassell 1086) This use of **slamming** as fighting may have also been influenced by the use of **jamming** as a noun from the 20th century in the West Indies meaning “severe criticism, physical assault”. (Cassell 653)

Floss

Floss: noun from the 1990s in the U.S. meaning “money” etymology not known. It is unclear where the researchers of this book came by the definition “money”. It may be possible that they misunderstood a situation or an informant. A more suitable definition for the word floss used within the African American community is that of “possessions used to display one’s wealth”. So examples of floss would be: gold chains, jewelry, nice cars, even expensive cell phones. It has become an important status symbol particularly in the Hip-Hop culture. One might argue that it is necessary to have some sort of floss in order to be a part of the culture. It is not uncommon for someone to spend all of his disposable income on one flashy item just to receive admiration from his peers. (Cassell 433)

How the term came about is not such a mystery. The last documented usage of the word “flossed up” shows a rather close usage to the modern day Ebonics’ usage the word **floss**. Here are the definitions of similar words from the Cassell Dictionary of Slang:

Flossed up: adjective [1960s+] of a woman, made up, dressed up.

Flossy: adjective [late 19C+] (U.S.) showy, slick, saucy, impertinent, ostentatious.

Here is what the OED had in reference to **floss**:

Flossy, *adj*

Resembling floss or floss-silk; floss-like. Also (N. Amer. colloq.) fig. Saucy, impertinent, ‘fresh’; fancy, showy. 1839 BAILEY Festus xx. (1848) 266 Flossy, tendrilled locks. 1874 T. HARDY Madding Crowd I. xxviii. 306 A thick flossy carpet of moss. 1884 Daily News 10 Nov. 3/1 Chenille embroideries brightened by..the flossiest of silks. 1889 Road (Denver, Colo.) 28 Dec. 4/3 Phil, we have got it in for you if you don't quit being so flossy. 1895 W. C. GORE in Inlander Dec. 113 Flossy, beautiful, stylish. 1900 ADE More Fables (1902) 136 He'd show you if you could get Flossy with a Lady, even though she Works. 1903 A. H. LEWIS Boss 122 He's as flossy a proposition as ever came down the pike. 1922 H. TITUS Timber i. 14 Do you list that with your references? Your luck with these

flossy young petticoats? 1958 Fisherman (Vancouver) 15 Aug. 2/3 The flossy propaganda issued by the CMA.

*Hence **flossied up** ppl. a., dressed up.*

1943 Penguin New Writing XVIII. 63 There was a tremendous crowd going, all flossied up for a day out. 1946 F. SARGESON That Summer 57, I..was all flossied up. 1957 I. MURDOCH Sandcastle i. 10, I suppose I'll have to dress. She's sure to be all flossied up.

Floss was originally used as an adjective for silk, as in floss silk. Which came from the old French phrase soye flosche (French is soie floche), which literally means 'soft silk'. Old French flosche is derived from the Old French word, floc, which means 'a small tuft of wool'. That came from the Latin word, floccus, which means 'tuft of wool or hair'. (Klein 601)

So apparently, a dress of high quality was made of floss silk and therefore showy. So anything associate with floss silk became considered showy, and when the adjective of floss was taken away from silk, so was the connotation of showiness. So then, anything considered showy was labeled as **flossy**, and since in English if the 'y' is removed from the end of most adjectives you have the noun. Therefore the adjective **flossy** with the 'y' taken off is the noun **floss**.

Wack

Wack: adj. [1980s+] (U.S. Black) used in reference to someone or something that is not right or unfair. For example: “That ‘F’ is *wack*, I studied all night. I know I deserved an ‘A’.” or “That guy is *wack*, I wouldn’t trust him if I were you.”

Here are the earlier definitions for **wack** and its ancestor words:

Whack: noun [1980s+] (U.S. Campus) a fool.

Whacko: noun [1970s+] an unstable or mentally ill person.

Whacko: adjective [1970s+] crazy, insane, eccentric.

Whack: noun [1940s+] (US) a crazy or weird person.

(Cassell 1271 & 1272)

Here is the info from the OED online:

Wack: *slang* (orig. *U.S.*). An eccentric or crazy person; a madman, a crackpot.

1938 ‘E. QUEEN’ *Four of Hearts* (1939) i. 9 All you wacks act this way at first.

Them that can take it snaps out of it. **1951** E. PAUL *Springtime in Paris* xi. 198

The show place, the rendezvous of eccentrics, Bohemians, playboys, sightseers and international whacks is the St. Germain des Prés quarter. **1959** R. GRAVES

in *Lilliput* Dec. 48/2 ‘I don’t get the joke,’ Len grumbled. ‘That wack gave me the creeps! One of those ‘creative artists’ who create chaos’.

1982 G. F. NEWMAN *Men with Guns* xi. 81 The cop shrugged. ‘Some wack with a grudge.’

APPENDED FROM ADDITIONS 1997

wack, *n.*1 and *a* .Add: **B.** *adj.* Bad; harmful; unfashionable, boring. Esp. in the anti-drug slogan ***crack is wack*** and *varr.*

1986 *N.Y. Times* 19 Sept. B3/5 Keith Haring, creator of the 'Crack is Wack' mural in East Harlem. **1989** *Chicago Tribune* 22 Oct. IV. 1/1 A brightly colored mural painted on a handball court carried the succinct message, 'Crack Be Wack, Jack.' **1990** D. GAINES *Teenage Wasteland* vii. 183 Suburbia is filled with second-generation Deadheads, twenty wack years after. **1992** *Vibe* Fall (Preview Issue) 45 That was what sparked us to start the band: seeing all these wack people getting paid.

Wacko: *a.* and *n.* *slang* (orig. and chiefly *U.S.*) **A.** *adj.* Crazy, mad; eccentric.

1977 J. WAMBAUGH *Black Marble* (1978) ix. 182 What if he doesn't always go whacko when you make him remember the bad old days? **1977** E. LEONARD *Unknown Man* v. 46 You never know, the guy's fucking wacko. **1978** C. BLACK *Asterisk Destiny* iii. 58 Without a sense of balance..and a touch of humor, you could go whacko. **1981** D. UHNAK *False Witness* iv. 39 She's gone slightly wacko politically. **1984** *Miami Herald* 30 Mar. 3E/2 'Anyone in this business relishes the pressure,' Hazzard, 41, said. 'Maybe I'm a little wacko, but I love it.'

B. *n.* **1977** *Telegraph* (Brisbane) 24 Mar. 4/1, I am not a weirdo, a wacko or an

eccentric for wanting to do good, honest work on a day to day basis. **1980** *Washington Post* 22 Aug. A1 Billy Carter, the president's brother, testified yesterday that he is not 'a buffoon, a boob or a wacko'. **1982** R. LUDLUM *Parsifal Mosaic* xiii. 197 'They catch a whack-o now and then.' 'Whack-o?' 'Someone who's crossed over the mental line, thinks he's someone he's not.'

wacky, *a. slang* (orig. U.S.). [f. *n.* + cf. *out of whack* s.v. *whack* *n.* 4. For earlier uses ('a fool; left-handed') see *Eng. Dial. Dict.*] Crazy, mad; odd, peculiar. **a.** Of persons.

1935 J. HARGAN in *Jrnl. Abnormal Psychol.* XXX. 365 *Wacky*, insane. **1938** J. DIGGES *Bowleg Bill* 28 They all want to know why he done it, and is he gone clean whacky. **1942** *Sun* (Baltimore) 25 July 8/1 Her grandmother, wackier than she is, haunts the place. **1950** 'S. RANSOME' *Deadly Miss Ashley* xv. 172 She might..leave..her kids to that wacky aunt of theirs. **1964** *Economist* 13 June 1242/2 Departed, prostrate or, in former President Eisenhower's recent phrase, 'a little bit whacky'. **1978** J. IRVING *World according to Garp* xix. 420 It did much to drive the Ellen Jamesians even wackier or simply away. **1984** *Observer* (Colour Suppl.) 18 Mar. 7/2 She plays the wacky mother of Debra Winger.

b. Of things or abstract concepts.

1937 *Sun* (Baltimore) 19 Aug. 8/1 This picture is described as 'the wackiest'. **1941** B. SCHULBERG *What makes Sammy Run?* i. 14 The whole office was afraid of him. I know that sounds wacky. Hardened newspapermen being afraid

of a..little office-boy? **1959** S. H. COURTIER *Death in Dream Time* x. 141 Your cousin's death was wacky why go to the trouble of staging an accident? **1969** L. HELLMAN *Unfinished Woman* iv. 37 The office was a wacky joint in a brownstone house on 48th Street. **1975** D. LODGE *Changing Places* v. 191 A characteristically whacky, yet somehow endearing tenderness for individual liberty. **1984** *Listener* 24 May 39/3 In his fear of death Betjeman's hand shook, and lines were created more from wacky fright than profound or energising contemplation.

Hence **wackiness**, the state or quality of being 'wacky'; craziness, oddness.

1941 *Sun* (Baltimore) 1 Oct. 10/2 Maybe the majority won't think that 'the wonderful bums' [*sc.* the Brooklyn Dodgers] can win, but they will be out by the thousands..hoping that wackiness will be more than its own reward. **1980** R. L. DUNCAN *Brimstone* iv. 80 For all her wackiness, Annie knew how to live.

APPENDED FROM ADDITIONS 1993

wacky, *a.* Add: **wackily** *adv.*, in a 'wacky' or crazy manner.

1961 in WEBSTER, *Wackily*. **1974** E. BRAWLEY *Rap* (1975) xxxvii. 358 Setting the sparrows to flying wackily about in the rafters, beaning themselves on the walls. **1988** *Arena* Autumn/Winter 33/2 No cuts, no rewrites just a squib of disinformation in *Pravda* wackily indicting Orwell for stealing his book from an essay by an obscure 19th century Russian literary critic.

Ebonics is a language that does intentionally try to be different from the mainstream. Only if and when the African American community feels completely like a part of the U.S. mainstream culture will the desire or the need to develop its own dialect end. Of course this is not to say that this is a desired result. Ebonics is a fun variation on the standard, and as stated in the beginning of this paper, Ebonics has an influence; many would say a positive one, on the mainstream dialect.

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