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AFRICANISMS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

Africanisms in contemporary English (CE) may refer to direct modern borrowings or loans from African languages or intergenerational inheritances from past borrowings. Culturo-linguistic contact is at the root of Africanisms in contemporary English and may occur in areas including, but not limited to, syntax, morphology, phonology, phonetics, and pragmatics. This entry will focus on Africanisms in contemporary English, with particular focus on Ebonics, both as inheritances from the past as well as more recent imports, to gain a broader understanding of the interrelated processes and manifestations of African cultural retention and continuity within the North American context.

In what follows, examples from African languages and CE are provided to show parallels between the two. With regard to CE, the focus is on Ebonics for two primary reasons. First, Ebonics, derived ultimately from African languages, shows the greatest degree of Africanisms by virtue of this fact. Second, Ebonics, through vehicles such as rap and hip-hop, rhythm and blues, jazz, the blues, rock and roll, country, field songs, and ring

shouts, has been and tends to be one of the most innovative and influential (voluntary and involuntary) documented contributors to what ends up eventually being incorporated into CE or mainstream Standard American English (SAE). Some of the examples of Africanisms in CE deal with syntactic structure, such as

- preposition-final interrogatives,
- resumptive pronoun structures,
- resumptive *with*,
- multiple negation,
- genitive marking structures, and
- agreement marking (or lack thereof).

Examples touching on morphology will include lexical items borrowed or loaned from African languages

Syntax and Semantics

One of many often-discussed aspects of Ebonics has tended to deal with its syntactic structure deriving from various African languages. Thus, a comparative look at the syntax of Ebonics juxtaposed with the syntax of several African languages will shed light on the nature of the tributary relationship between these African languages and Ebonics.

Preposition/Locative-Final Interrogatives

One of the first such structures considered here is preposition/locative-final interrogatives such as the following:

Ebonics

1. Where she at?

This usage parallels structures in African languages such as Akan, Yoruba, and Wolof:

Yoruba

2. Níbo l'ó wà?
 where FOC'3SG.SUBJ at/be located
 "Where he/she at?" (Where is he/she?)

Akan

3. Ehefa na ɔwɔ?
 where FOC 3SG.SUBJ-at/be located
 “Where he/she at?” (Where is he/she?)

Wolof

4. Fan moo nekk?
 where 3SG.SUBJ at/be located
 “Where he/she at?” (Where is he/she)

In this example, one can readily see that the structure of Ebonics, often regarded by grammarians of SAE as “incorrect,” is actually in line with correct syntactic structures of various languages of West Africa. It becomes apparent that this structure is not an aberration or a coincidental divergence from SAE but rather an Africanism or retention of an inherited syntactic ordering preference common to several African languages.

Resumptive Pronoun

Next, look at what may be termed resumptive-pronoun structures in Ebonics:

Ebonics

5. Tyrone, he always be gettin’ in trouble (, him).
 “Tyrone always gets into trouble.”

The addition of the optional *him* to the end of the utterance is something found to be particularly regular among Texans in the United States, for example. It is most directly correlated to Wolof-type structures such as those shown in (9) and (10) below.

Akan (Fante)

6. ɔbanyin no ɔ-yɛ edwuma papa
 man DEF 3SG-do work good

“The man works very hard.”

7. ɔpanyin no ɔ-nom nsa
 elder DEF 3SG SUBJ-drink wine
 “The elder drinks (wine).”

Yoruba

8. Ọba ó dé ilé
 king 3SG.SUB arrive house
 “The king arrives at the house.”

Wolof

9. Bintu, naan na attaya (, moom)
 B. drink 3SG. tea (3SG.SUB)
 SUB-PST

“Bintu drinks tea.”

10. Man, Ndakaaru laa dëkk.
 1SG.SUB Dakar 1SG.SUB live
 “I live in Dakar.”

In each of the above examples we see a resumptive pronoun that is co-referential with the stated and overt subject of each sentence in question. The Akan examples are interpolated from Fante data, and it appears that these types of resumptive pronouns while possibly once common throughout Akan, have now come to be largely restricted to dialectal regions.

Yorùbá (Yoruba) provides a similar example, where the resumptive pronoun itself is no longer favored, yet suprasegmental traces of the high-tone associated with the third person singular (3SG) are grafted, if you will, onto an adjacent vowel. This is the case in the name, *Ọbádélé*, where the tones on the noun *ọba* are both mid, but the context of the name, due to the retention of the high tone of the deleted vowel *ó*, gives it its pronunciation *Ọbádélé*. This is extremely common in Yorùbá names and is even found in Yorùbá sentences where the 3SG-denoting vowel is deleted but its high tone is retained. This, again, gives us a view into a syntactic phenomenon that was commonplace in the past but has taken on more of a prosodic identity in the present. For this feature to be present in Ebonics, it

is likely due to Africans being stolen from Africa during the time when this type of structure was more prominent.

Resumptive-With

Next, consider examples of resumptive-with in CE, with their root in African Languages. In these types of constructions, clauses after resumptive-with in both Akan and Ebonics contain information that may not contribute to the truth value of the statement in the matrix clause. Further, in both languages, the post-resumptive-with clause tends to be spoken in a low flat tone. Examine the following:

Ebonics

He always be tryna holla at somebody wit his hot breath.

“He’s always attempting to speak to/pick up a girl despite his bad breath.”

Akan

11. ɔ-be-srɛ-ɛ me sika ne
 3SG.SUBJ-INGR-beg-COMPL 1SG.OBJ money with
 ne se a a-hye
 3SG.POSS teeth REL PERF-burn

“S/he came begging me for money with his/her rotten teeth.”

While resumptive-with constructions may tend to be negative, there are also positive uses:

Ebonics

12. You betta gon' head, witcho fine/sexy self.

Akan

13. obiara pɛ n'asɛm ne
each like 3SG.POSS'word with

n'anɪm fɛfɛ bi
3SG.POSS'face beautiful some

“Everyone likes her with her beautiful face.”

Resumptive-with can also be used to assign blame or responsibility. When the pronominal

possessor is the subject of the sentence, the subject is understood to be responsible in some way, shape or form for the action mentioned in the sentence.

Ebonics

14. See there? That's why you tripped, witcho stuck-up self.

Akan

15. W-a-pira ne
 3SG.SUBJ-PERF-injured with
 n'asooden.
 3SG.POSS'hardheadedness

“S/he got hurt with her/his hardheaded self.”

In such instances, responsibility entailed may be by virtue of direct or indirect causation via a type of cosmic justice. In such instances, a person's ill behavior is thought to be the causative mechanism for subsequent punitive actions taken by the world itself. This type of causative mechanism speaks a bit toward shared cosmological underpinnings as expressed in Ebonics and African languages.

Multiple Negation

Examples of multiple negation abound in CE, particularly in Ebonics, and African languages. Consider the following examples:

Ebonics

16. Cain't nobody tell me nuttin' 'bout no spades.
 "No one can tell me anything about spades."

(Spades is a card game, played throughout the Black community in the United States.)

17. Don't nobody go nowhere.
 "No one should go anywhere."
18. Ain't nobody sayin' nuttin' new.
 "Nobody is saying anything new."

Akan

19. Esi a-m-ma Kwaku fufuo a-n-di
 E. PST-NEG-give K. fufuo PST-NEG-eat
 a-n-da koraa
 PST-NEG-sleep at all

“Esi did not give Kwaku fufuo to eat and sleep at all.”

Wolof

20. Xamul dara
 know-3SG.NEG nothing
 “He/she does not know anything.”

Genitive Marking/Agreement

Next, examine genitive marking. In various African languages, there is no overt marker of possession. Other prosodic methods such as tone are used, sometimes marking concepts as alienable versus inalienable possession. Following are several examples of genitive marking in CE and in African languages.

Ebonics

21. Dat girl head biiiig (den a mug).
 “That girl’s head is (very) big.”

Akan

22. ɔbaa no ti so pa ara
 Woman DEF head big very EMPH
 “The woman’s head is very big.”

23. Kofi ne mpaboa atsew.
 K 3SG.POSS shoes PERF-tear

Yoruba

24. Orí rẹ̀ tóbi púpò
 head 3SG.POSS big very
 “His/her head is very big.”

As readily observable, in the African languages exemplified above, there is no overt marker of possession as we would see in Standard English. This feature is carried over into CE. Similarly, there is no overt marker of subject-verb agreement in African languages as shown below:

Ebonics

25. Here he come wit dat ol’ bullsh*t again.
 “Here he comes again with his regular nonsense.”

Akan

26. ɔde ne gyimisem no nyinaa na a-ba
 3SG-take 3SG.POSS foolishness DEF all CONJ PERF-come
 bio
 again
 “S/he has brought her/his foolishness again.”

Yoruba

27. Ó ra oúnje l’òjà
 3SG.SUBJ buy food PREP’market
 “He buys food at the market.”

Wolof

28. Dafay dem (ci) ja ba.
 3SG.SUBJ go (to) market DEM
 “S/he is going to the market.”

Another of the prominent features of Ebonics is the use of *be* to connote iterativity as in the following:

Ebonics

29. She be trippin’
 “She acts inappropriately.”
 30. He be wil(d)’in
 “He acts recklessly.”

One can find a direct parallel to this in Yorùbá:

Yoruba

31. Ó má a ń jeun l'áàárò
3SG.SUBJ HAB eat PREP'morning
“S/she eats in the morning.”

32. Mo máa ń kàwé nílẹ̀
1SG.SUBJ HAB read-book PREP-house
“I read at home.”

Another feature of Ebonics is the use of *fint ta*, *finna*, or *fixin' a* to connote an action that will be taking place in the immediate future.

Ebonics

33. I'm fint ta go.
“I'm about to go.”
34. We finna eat.
“We are about to eat.”

A similar feature can be found in Akan.

Akan

35. Ɔrebeka n'asem
3SG.IMMFUT-speak 3SG.POSS'word
“He's about to say his piece.”
36. Merebedidi
1SG.SUBJ-IMMFUT-eat
“I'm about to eat.”

The last major syntactic feature to be discussed in this entry is what has been termed *zero copula* or *copula deletion*. In African language studies, these types of structures contain what may be called adjectival verbs. Examples in Ebonics are as follows:

37. He ugly (denamug)
“He's is (very) ugly.”

38. He smart
“He is smart.”

Similar phenomena can be found in African languages as shown below:

Wolof

39. Dafa ñuul
3SG.SUBJ black
“S/he is black.”

Yoruba

40. Ó tóbi
3SG.SUBJ.INAN big
“He/she/it is big.”

Akan

41. Ɛso
3SG.SUBJ.INAN big
“It is big.”

The Lexicon/Morphology

The focus of this section is the lexicon, a list of words in CE that have been borrowed or loaned from African languages. Although not exhaustive, the list includes older as well as more recent borrowings and loans.

42. adinkra–Akan *adinkra* “Akan stamped symbolic printing system”
43. ashe–Yorùbá *àṣẹ* “power to make things happen”
44. ashoke–Yorùbá *aṣọ-òkè* “Yoruba woven cloth”
45. banana–Wolof *banaana* “banana”
46. banjo–Bantu *mbanza* “banjo”
47. basenji–Bantu *basenji* “Congolese hunting dog breed”
48. bembe–Yoruba *bẹ̀mbẹ̀* “spiritual ceremony/festival”

49. bogus–Hausa *boko-boko* meaning fake or fraudulent
50. bomaye–Lingala *boma ye* “kill him”
51. buckra–Efik and Ibibio *mbakara* “white man or person”
52. bwana–Kiswahili *bwana* “mister”
53. capoeira–Kikôngo *kipura* “cockfighting movements”
54. chimpanzee–Tshiluba *kivili-chimpenze* “chimpanzee”
55. cola–Temne *kola*, Mandinka *kolo*
56. dashiki–Yorùbá *dànşíkí* “large sized traditional Yoruba shirt”
57. dig (understand or appreciate)–Wolof *dég* “hear”
58. djembe–Bamanakan *djé be* “gather peace”
59. fufu–Akan *fufu(o)* “pounded plantain/cassava/yam”
60. funk–Kikôngo *lu-fuki* “bad body odor”
61. grand boubou–Wolof *mbubb* “large flowing attire”
62. gnu–Bushman *!nu* “gnu”
63. goober–Kikongo and Kimbundu *nguba* “peanut/groundnut”
64. Gullah–Gula *gula* “name of ethnic group in Liberia”
65. gumbo–Kimbundu *ngombo* “okra”
66. impala–from Zulu *im-pala* “impala”
67. jazz–Mandinka *jasi* “to become unlike oneself,” Temne *yas* “to be extremely live/energetic”
68. jive–Wolof *jëw* “gossip”
69. jollof (rice)–Wolof *jolof* “region in Senegal”
70. kente–Akan *kente* “colorful woven cloth”
71. Kupi gana ngumi–Kiswahili *kupi gana ngumi* “diasporan martial art with kung-fu animal styles given Kiswahili names”
72. Kwanzaa–Kiswahili phrase *matunda ya kwanza*, “first fruits”
73. kwashiorkor–Ga *kwashiorkor* “swollen stomach”
74. macaque–Bantu *makaku* “macaque”
75. mamba–isiZulu *imamba* “mamba snake”
76. mojo–Fula *moco’o* “medicine man”
77. mumbo jumbo–Mandingo *maamajombo* “a masked dancer”
78. mwalimu–Kiswahili *mwalimu* “teacher”
79. obeah–Efik *ubio*, Twi *ɔbayifoɔ* “witch”
80. okay–Wolof *waaw kay* “okay”
81. okra–Igbo *ókùrù* “okra”
82. orisha–Yorùbá *òrìṣà* “spiritual force personified”
83. rafiki–Kiswahili *rafiki* “friend”
84. samba–Kikongo *sâmba* “to open a path”
85. sambo–Fula *sambo* “uncle”
86. shule–Kiswahili *shule* “school” (ultimately from Arabic)
87. simba–Kiswahili *simba* “lion”
88. tango–Ibibio *tamgu*
89. tsetse–Tswana *tsetse* “tsetse fly”
90. ubuntu–Bantu *ubuntu* “African philosophy of humanism and interdependence”
91. uhuru sasa–Kiswahili *uhuru sasa* “freedom now”
92. voodoo–Ewegbe and Fongbe *vodun* “spirit”
93. watoto–Kiswahili *watoto* “children”
94. yam–Fula *nyami* “eat”

Conclusion

Of the numerous Africanisms in CE, this entry has presented a few. Other aspects include speech acts such as “the dozens” and gestures such as eye-rolling (Akan *anikyibuo*, *anikyeɛ*, “eye-back-breaking”; Yoruba *ìmójú*, “stick-eye”; Ga *o-kpɛ-mi*, “you cut-eye me”; Ewe *tɛŋku* “seal eyes”); and teeth-sucking (Akan *atwee*, *atwoo* and Yoruba *pípòsé*) is found in African culturo-linguistic contexts both on the continent and the diaspora. African languages have influenced CE in various ways, particularly Ebonics, which, to some degree, has been appropriated by mainstream society in North America. As such, Africanisms are part and parcel of the manifestations of African cultural retention and continuity in North America.

Obadele Kambon

See also African Languages, Acquisition of; African Languages and American English; African Linguistic and Communication Continuities in the Caribbean Diaspora; Africanisms in African Names in the United States; Creoles as Pan-African Languages; Ebonics; Ebonics: The Retention of African Tongues; Louisiana Creole

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AFRICINITY

In the 1970s, Hoyt W. Fuller, managing editor of *Black World*, used the magazine’s back cover to pose an intriguing question: “When is a Black man (or woman) not an African?” This entry focuses on Africinity as the shared cultural unity that exists within African humanity from antiquity to the present.

Defining Africinity

A number of scholars have offered definitions of Africinity. It is useful to examine some of them in order to gain as clear a picture as possible of Africinity as a seminal concept.

Nobles and Goddard

Wade W. Nobles and Lawford L. Goddard define Africinity and Afrocentricity synonymously as the

intellectual and philosophical foundation used to develop the political, scientific and moral criterion for authenticating the reality of African family processes. It is the utilization of the African experience as the core paradigm for human