

## SEMANTIC CHANGE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SLANG

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### ABSTRACT

Semantic change is an important part of African American slang and involves two mechanisms: figuration and shifting. Both are enormously productive and account for numerous slang expressions based on standard English. This paper presents these processes in detail. Partially drawing from the author's earlier publications, the presentation is based on lexical material from a sizable database of citations from contemporary African American sources collected through extensive fieldwork in the United States in recent years.

Keywords: semantic change, figuration, semantic shifting, American slang

### 1. Introduction

Semantic change is a well-established vehicle for language development. It quintessentially involves two main processes: figuration, which makes use of metaphor, metonymy and related figurative means; and semantic shifting, which includes generalization, specialization, melioration and pejoration. Although figuration is traditionally associated with poetry while shifting is commonly linked with historical change, both are productive in everyday speech and are as much a part of language as any other linguistic mechanism. Figuration and shifting are also important mechanisms of semantic change in African American slang. Their popularity and productivity disproves the popular claims of African American speech's alleged semantic poverty and expressive deficiency with regard to standard English (see Smitherman 1977).

This paper presents these semantic processes in detail, and thus falls within the spectrum of descriptive studies of African American lexicon (for instance,

see Baugh 1983, Dillard 1977, Folb 1980, Major 1994, Rickford 1999, Smitherman 2000). Partially drawing from my book *African American: A Linguistic Description* (forthcoming) and an earlier monograph on African American lexicon (Widawski & Kowalczyk 2012), the presentation is based on lexical material from a large database of citations which also served as the basis for these books. The idea was to get as much exposure to African American slang as possible and to record its usage in natural contexts from various contemporary sources. To that end, the citations have been collected from diverse contemporary African American sources including film, television, magazines, literature, Internet, and utterances by African Americans; however, non-African American sources were also included in the database to see the impact African American slang has had on the general slang used in America. The material was collected through extensive fieldwork in the United States in recent years, and research at academic institutions such as Columbia University, Yale University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Library of Congress. The methods used in data collection and applied in the creation of the database were varied, but largely traditional: data was recorded in the form of written notes or dictaphone recordings, which were systematically entered into the database. The Internet was used extensively, and a sizable portion of citations was copied directly from online sources. The reading, listening and watching procedures were extensive and represent several hundred hours of analyzing text, sound and images, which translated into almost 15,000 citations.

Let us first briefly explain the terminology connected with the type of language discussed here. The term *slang*, as used in the title of this paper, is especially troublesome and has generated many often discordant definitions and characterizations. This is due in part to its fleeting character, alleged vagueness, and very change of meaning over time. As a result, definitions of slang abound and, to quote Chapman (1986: x): ‘like proverbial blind men describing an elephant, all correctly, none sufficiently, we tend to stress one aspect or another of slang.’ Accordingly, some scholars such as Thorne (1990: iii) focus on the stylistic dimension of slang, especially its marked informality or colloquial character. Other scholars such as Chapman (in Kipfer 2007: xi) tend to emphasize its psychological element, principally the application of slang to convey emotions. Others such as Eble (1996: 11) emphasize the social element of slang with its function as a marker of group identification. Finally, scholars such as Dumas and Lighter (1978: 5-17) stress the rhetorical aspects of slang with its deliberate use for desired stylistic effects.

In an attempt to formulate a more holistic definition, one can integrate all of the above aspects and define slang as ‘the most informal and unconventional type of vocabulary. It is perceived as expressive, catchy, and undignified. It consists of standard expressions modified in some way or appended with new,

often figurative, meanings, and sometimes of entirely novel expressions. Slang is coined chiefly by members of social, occupational or ethnic groups which are typically separate from mainstream society, yet it is often adopted by larger social segments. It is employed in place of standard expressions to convey some extra information of a psychological, social or rhetorical nature. It thus provides alternative, highly informal synonyms for referents already named in the language, but sometimes gives names for referents for which there are no standard expressions, or which have yet to be named' (adapted from Widawski & Kowalczyk 2012: 18).

The above definition is especially important in the context of African American slang. Aside from defining the type, formation and functions of slang, it also specifies its coiners and users: 'members of social, occupational or ethnic groups which are typically separate from mainstream society'. It also mentions the dissemination of slang among larger segments of society. Such is the nature of nearly any type of slang, but it is especially applicable to African American slang.

The second term used in the title is *African American*. Alternatively termed *African American Vernacular*, it is a fairly broad and general term for the speech of Black Americans. Significantly, as Baugh (in Mesthrie 2001: 709) points out, the name suggests a direct relationship to the linguistic legacy of slavery in the United States: in that, the term refers exclusively to the speech of the descendants of African slaves rather than the speech of recent African immigrants to the United States. The addition of 'vernacular' suggests that it is used by ordinary working-class speakers rather by all African Americans. The term is a part of numerous compound phrases such as the one featured in title of this paper. In this sense, 'African American slang' means slang coined and used by African Americans in the United States.

Naturally, both terms could be discussed in a larger terminological context. For instance, *slang* could be contrasted with *colloquialism*, *non-standard language*, *vulgarism*, *taboo*, *euphemism*, *jargon*, *idiom*, *neologism* or *dialect*, while *African American* could be compared to *African American Vernacular English*, *Afro-American Vernacular English*, *Black English Vernacular*, *Ebonics* or *Gangsta Talk*. However, the confines of this paper prevent any such lengthy discussions. For a more detailed comparison of these terms, see Widawski (forthcoming).

## 2. Figuration

Figuration is a well-known process of semantic change. It involves a word gaining further, non-literal meanings, specifically through metaphor and metonymy. English lexicon abounds in meanings created in this way: *nature*

*spoke*, *living death* and *crown of England* are all instances of these. Although such figures of speech have long been salient features of poetry, they are also used frequently in everyday speech. In fact, as claimed and illustrated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: ix), figuration is central to thought, cognition and ordinary, non-literary language.

Figuration is an important semantic process in African American slang, and possibly the third most productive source of enriching slang lexicon after compounding and affixation. As has been already mentioned, the form of slang rarely differs from that of standard English, so figurative meaning is crucial. Literature scholars might take this to be surprising, but slang borders on poetry. Lighter (in Algeo, 2001: 225-226) neatly compares the two: very much like poetry, slang is highly connotative and defamiliarizes the mundane world, and it implies that ordinary language is not quite adequate for certain tasks. Interestingly, African American slang employs many of the same figurative devices found in poetic language: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, allusion, hyperbole, meiosis, simile and personification. Let us discuss them in detail.

### 3. Metaphor

Metaphor is the most well-known figure of speech associated with figuration. In a broader sense, it can be understood as the application of a word or phrase to someone or something where it is not meant literally, but is rather used to make a comparison. More specifically, metaphor crosses certain conceptual boundaries, often called domains, and names something by a different name. In this way, it brings likeness or analogy between things that are fundamentally dissimilar. For instance, a *snake* can mean 'a secretive, treacherous or dishonest person' because the behavior of such people is similar to what is commonly thought to be the behavior of snakes; the domains, however, are entirely different. In common consciousness, metaphor belongs to poetry, where for centuries it has been admired for its ability to cross the boundaries of human thought and experience.

Metaphor is by no means exclusive to poetry and is used extensively in African American slang as well. This is because of slang's tendency to avoid naming things directly on the one hand, and to evoke striking connotations on the other. Here is a modest selection of slang metaphors:

'Say, daddy-o, what **ax** [= musical instrument] do you play?' 'Piano' — Ray, film, 2004  
 That woman is a real **brick** [= sexually attractive woman, especially if curvaceous] — Birmingham Post, 2001

- He's an ordinary **cat** [= rap or hip hop musician] from outta projects — Wu-Tang Clan, 1998*
- George has enough **cheese** [= money] to pay ten men that type of salary — Bradenton Herald*
- He was **diesel** [= muscular and handsome man] 'til he started smokin' crack — Randy Kearse, 2006*
- Somebody told my **dog** [= friend] we were ranked 30th in the league — Sacramento Bee, 1998*
- He sells his **dust** [= any drug in powder form, especially PCP] up on the Lower East — Wu-Tang Clan, 1997*
- Bitch, don't ask me why I gotta a nice **grill** [= face]. This is just how my face is — Remy Ma, 2006*
- That Bobbitt dame took a sling blade to her husband's **love muscle** [= penis], did she not? — News, CNN-TV program, 2007*
- Trista used her delicate fingers to comb them out of her long **moss** [= hair] — Fan Fiction, 2009*

Allusion can be viewed as a form of metaphor. Many metaphors intensify their meaning by cultural allusions or via reference to an historical or literary event, person or place; quite often, allusion is based on popular culture and leisure activities such as sports, movies, television and popular music. They may be fully comprehensible or appreciated only if one has the specific knowledge to which they refer. Representative examples include such expressions as: *Alphabet City*, *Beam me up Scotty*, *City of Brotherly Love*, *get to second base*, *pull a MacGyver*, *king of soul*, *take the Pepsi challenge*, *Teflon Don* or *Volunteer State*.

Such use is especially important in African American slang. This is because slang often relies on shared knowledge that can serve as a sign of belonging to a limited circle of people, excluding outsiders who do not possess specific knowledge. In fact, allusion is sometimes so specific that it makes slang incomprehensible for those not familiar with African American culture and history. Such use is consistent with the characteristic of slang as an arcane and secret language. The following citational findings reflect this:

- While it is no longer **Chocolate City** [= city with a predominantly African American population] statistically, its spirit protects you — Ebony, 2009*
- It's going to cost a lot more **dead presidents** [= US dollar bills] this time around — Denver Post, 1998*
- African American men call it **driving while black** [= instance of stopping African American motorists for no apparent reason] — Fay Observer, 2010*

- Where's our **forty acres and a mule** [= symbolic reparations for enslavement]? — Tupac Shakur, 2000*
- Monfriez took the pistol back and demonstrated an exaggerated **gangsta grip** [= holding an object, especially a gun, sideways] — Patrick Duncan, 1996*
- Michael has lived in **Hotlanta** [= Atlanta, Georgia] since graduating from Georgia Tech — Englewood Herald-Tribune, 1999*
- This is the **Motor City** [= Detroit, Michigan], and this is what we do — Associated Press, 2011*
- She is a used **Oreo cookie** [= African American who has assumed the behavior and values of the dominant white society]. The white community used her and spit her out — Ebony, 2008*
- It's incessant rant about how much better everything is in the **Rotten Apple** [= New York City] — Sarasota Herald Tribune, 1999*
- I thought it was a **slam dunk** [= something or someone certain to win, especially with ease]. I really thought I had the job — News, KGBT-TV program, 2011*

Some of the above examples may require explanation. For instance, *forty acres and a mule* originated during the Civil War and comes from 'Union General William T. Sherman's order for each ex-enslaved family to receive forty acres of land in coastal South Carolina and Georgia, and for the army to loan them mules' (Smitherman 2000: 135-136). The allusion in *oreo cookie* is a little more understandable since it comes from a popular brand of sandwich cookies, still its full understanding requires certain cultural knowledge stemming from African American experience; Smitherman (2000: 221) defines it as 'An African American who is Black in skin color but white in thinking and attitudes; like the cookie, black on the outside, white on the inside.' These and many more similar terms are usually incomprehensible for those unfamiliar with African American experience.

#### 4. Metonymy

Metonymy is another productive figuration device employed in standard English. In metonymy, an attribute of something is used to stand for the thing itself. In contrast to metaphor, which crosses different domains, metonymy operates within a single domain and thus, as observed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 35), 'allows us to center more specifically on certain aspects of what is being referred to.' Examples of this productive figuration device include *brass* ('military officers') or *the stage* ('theatrical profession'). In synecdoche,

considered a kind of metonymy, the part stands for the whole or vice versa, for instance, *sail* ('boat') or *hand* ('helper').

African American slang also makes heavy use of this figuration device. As in metaphors, most slang metonyms operate on the same principles as in standard language: the meaning of one word must be associated in some way with the meaning of another. There is a profusion of words in African American slang which have acquired new meanings in this way. Consider the following selection:

- You got some **booty** [= woman considered as a sex object] in this house? — ATL, film, 2006*
- He gonna tell me to turn down my **box** [= large portable stereo player] — Do the Right Thing, film, 1989*
- He actually looked forward to getting back to his **den** [= apartment or house] for some quality television time — St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2005*
- The most asked question is how I got them **digits** [= telephone number]? — Jay-Z, 2000*
- Never thought I'd see a knight, Sir Ben Kingsley, smoking **herb** [= marijuana] with a member of the Wu-Tang Clan — Orlando Sentinel, 2008*
- Ladies and gentlemen, make some **noise** [= music, especially instrumental]! — Hair Show, film, 2004*
- I penciled a note stating that he had owed me **paper** [= money] — Orlando Sentinel, 1997*
- My **ride** [= automobile] can't be that much of a hoopty, if it caught your attention — Timothy Carson, 2010*
- I'm gonna bring my **steel** [= firearm] and pump bullets in your ass — Clockers, film, 1995*
- Get your **white ass** [= self, referring to a white person] away from that window! — Forrest Gump, film, 1994*

## 5. Other processes

Hyperbole is another important device used in figuration. It refers to exaggeration or overstatement, usually deliberate and not meant to be taken literally. In the English language, everyday idioms are often hyperbolic, for instance *flood of tears*, *tons of money* or *waiting for ages*. Hyperbole is normally used for effect and emphasis, however, frequency of use lessens its impact. Moreover, hyperbole as a means of expressing exaggeration is especially typical of male talk, as observed by Flexner (in Chapman 1986: xxv). It is productive in African American slang possibly because of the sarcastic

humor typically associated with it. Citational corroboration yields the following:

*We put our minds together, made the tracks clever. Now we're checking more **bank** [= money] than ever — Ice-T, 1991*

*Ebony had an opportunity to talk to him about his background, how he got into classical music and how hard work pays big **dividends** [= money] — Ebony, 2009*

*He was a jealous nigga and she was a **hoe** [= sexually promiscuous woman] — Antione Cunningham, 2010*

*Dude, we gotta **jet** [= depart or leave], or we'll miss the concert! — Urban Dictionary, 2012*

*Before we **kick the ballistics** [= talk], first a few ground rules — Los Angeles Sentinel, 1996*

*Then Miss Thing tried to **scream on** [= criticize and disrespect] my brethren — Dr. Dre, 1999*

*They've gotta know we're as **serious as a heart attack** [= very serious] — Youngstown Vindicator, 2011*

*He couldn't get a **slave** [= job]; he apparently drank all the travel money up — Scott Newhall, 1990*

*On top of gossip, guests got to hear some great live music from **Soul City** [= Harlem, New York] — Boston Herald, 1998*

*If you like her, **wife** [= make her your steady girlfriend] her and if you love her, smother her — Snoop Dogg, 2008*

The opposite of hyperbole is meiosis (alternatively termed litotes), another frequently used figuration device. It is an ironic understatement that dismisses or belittles, specifically by using expressions that make something less significant than it really is or should be, for instance calling a serious wound a *scratch*, or calling a stupid person *not exactly intelligent*. It is also used in African American slang, again likely for its sarcastic humor. Here is some citational corroboration from our database:

*I got biyatches. I got plenty of chedda, and a phat **crib** [= apartment or house] — Janet Perr, 2008*

*An armored car full of **dead presidents** [= US dollar bills] is on its way to the incinerator — Washington Post, 2000*

*The seventy-three-year-old Odessa Madre revealed part of her painful past that led her to despise the **e-lites** [= elite] — Sharon Harley, 2002*

*Bookhart grew up wanting to fly the **ghetto bird** [= police helicopter, often used in inner-city ghetto communities] — Pitch Weekly, 2006*

*When you go downtown, y'all wear your **ghetto rags** [= clothes typical of the*



- inner-city ghetto*]. Don't go down there with your Italian silk jerseys — Tom Wolfe, 1980
- 'I got some **paper** [= money] for you!' 'Now we're talking!' — Coach Carter, film, 2005
- A black man would never dream of talkin' to the **PO-lice** [= police] high — Chappelle's Show, WGN-TV program, 2010
- He just **wasted** [= killed] him, blew him away! And I went right along with it — Code of Silence, film, 1985
- It seems to be able to take more torque than manuals. Sounds like a cool **trans** [= automobile]. Any pics? — Lateral G, 2010

Simile is yet another figure of speech used in figuration. It involves a more-or-less fanciful or unrealistic comparison between one thing and another, typically using the words *like* or *as*. There are numerous expressions in English based on simile, for instance, *(as) cool as a cucumber*, *(as) red as a beet* or *(as) white as a sheet*. Simile is also employed in African American slang where it is normally used to strengthen or emphasize a given quality. Here are representative slang examples:

- It's brilliant stuff, and funky **as a motherfucker** [= extremely or totally] — Music Vice, 2010
- She was **as barefoot as a river duck** [= barefoot], my mama would say, complaining that her feet hurt, and she had started her period — Darnail, 2003
- We're going to get drunk **like motherfucker** [= extremely or totally] — Google News Archive, 2009
- We were on her **like white on rice** [= clinging to or following as closely as possible] to be sure her promises were not hollow — Belief Net, 2010
- I immediately detected the smell of marijuana wafting from the vehicle. He was **lit up like a Christmas tree** [= under the influence of a drug] — Sure Fire, 2010
- Let me start off by saying that this is strictly a rumor, so don't take this as **serious as a heart attack** [= very serious] or anything like that — Bleacher Report, 2011

Finally, there is personification, which is often regarded as an aspect of metaphor. It refers to the attribution of human qualities to objects or abstract notions, as in *Mother Nature*, *Old Father Time*, *one-armed bandit*, or *Uncle Sam*. African American slang employs personification, too, with much the same effect as standard English. Here is a handful of citational examples of personification found in our database:

- They'll keep coming back to drop a few more wads of **Benjamins** [= hundred

- dollar bills] for the benefit of our community — Alamogordo Daily News, 2010*
- To all y'all talkin' about dude bein' a junkie; he snorted girl, not **boy** [= heroin]! — World Star Hip Hop, 2010*
- She had a split at both sides of her dress and her breasts were **big mamas** [= big things] — Rick Van Dam, 2006*
- But without **Franklin faces** [= hundred dollar bills] you see who's your real friends — Rap Genius, 2011*
- I had watched him snort **girl** [= cocaine] and down a few mixed drinks — Robert Beck, 2004*
- A mixed signal is when you're saying 'no' but you got your hand on my **Jim Browski** [= penis] — Access Atlanta, 2009*
- We got one guy wearing **Jordans** [= gym shoes] all the time — Daily of the University of Washington, 2011*
- This thing is a **mother** [= something big or troublesome] to take apart by yourself — Macleans, 2009*
- We're building a house, the second story's looking good. We've got to put the roof on this **motherfucker** [= something big or troublesome] — Artist Direct, 2010*

## 6. Shifting

Semantic shifting is an established mechanism of change in the meaning of words. It involves such semantic processes as generalization, specialization, melioration and pejoration, all of which can affect both denotative and connotative meaning. Shifting is usually associated with the passage of time: in standard language, it is visible in historical shifts into new meanings, which are perceived as a series of increasing divergences from the older, established meanings. For instance, the word *gay* once meant 'merry' but shifted denotation to mean 'homosexual'.

Since much of slang is formed from old words which acquire new meanings, semantic shifting is strongly featured in African American slang. By way of analogy, the meaning of a slang expression can be described as a series of increasing divergences from standard meanings in a manner similar to changes in language throughout history. There are numerous expressions which changed their meanings in this way; for instance, the expression *Ann* was first used to mean 'a white woman' but, through shifting, came to be used for 'an arrogant African American woman who acts like a white person'. All these shifting processes are employed in African American slang.

Generalization (alternatively termed broadening or extension) widens the

denotative meaning of a word, rendering it broader or more inclusive over time. In English, many words have acquired their current meaning through this process. For instance, *novice* once meant ‘an initiate in a religious order’ but has widened its meaning and now can be used to refer to ‘any beginner in any field or discipline’.

African American slang expressions show generalization as well. The meaning is widened with regard to standard words that become slang in this way, but also with regard to words that are already slang and have acquired additional meanings. Here is a selection of expressions whose meaning became generalized:

*He’s got a **bigass** [= generally big, not just having big buttocks] peacock right here — Heat, film, 1995*

*It’s hard for him to **chill out** [= have a good time, not just be calm] — Showbiz Spy, 2010*

*Alexander looked **cokey** [= generally inattentive or sleepy-looking, not just under the influence of cocaine] tonight — Boxing Scene, 2010*

*With my nigs, **dividends** [= money in general, not just profit paid to stockholders] flow — Jay-Z, 2006*

*Your **funds** [= money in general, not just amount of money saved or invested] are tight — Hair Show, film, 2004*

*If a woman was promiscuous, she was a **ho**’ [= any sexually promiscuous woman, not just a prostitute], no explanation needed — Mary Morrison, 2009*

*She is totally my **homey** [= any close friend, not just a member of a criminal gang or a fellow African American person] — Los Angeles Times, 2010*

*Cookbook author Marlana Spieler has a **jones** [= any intense craving or desire, not just a drug habit] for cheese — Kansas City Star, 2006*

*Every hot **mama** [= any woman, especially older, not just someone’s mother] here was checking him out — 3rd Rock from the Sun, NBC-TV series, 1999*

*Bullets can’t kill a **ninja** [= any tough person, not just a Japanese martial arts expert]! — Urban Dictionary, 2010*

Specialization (or narrowing) is the opposite of generalization. It involves semantic change in which the denotative meaning of a word becomes narrowed, less general or less inclusive over time. Again, many English words have arrived at their current meanings through this process. For instance, *meat* once simply meant ‘food’ but has narrowed its meaning and now is used only to refer to ‘the flesh of an animal used as food’.

Many African American slang expressions can also be explained as instances of specialization. Again, the meaning is narrowed with regard to standard words that become slang in this way, but also with regard to words that

are already slang. Here is a selection of items whose meaning have become specialized:

*He had an **attitude** [= arrogant, condescending or uncooperative attitude, not any attitude], he was rude — Public Enemy, 1992*

*It's always five dollars a **bag** [= quantity of prepackaged drugs sold on the retail level, not just any bag] — Transamerica, film, 2009*

*Grab the **box** [= large portable stereo player, not just any box] and wait — Arrested Development, 1992*

*I need to get your **digits** [= telephone number, not any set of digits] — ATL, film, 2006*

*Did you **drill** [= have sex with, not penetrate a surface making a hole] her friend yet? — Randy Kearse, 2006*

*A lot of other motherfuckers snort **dust** [= drug in powder form, not any fine, powder-like substance] — Burbler, 2010*

*They still bring the **noise** [= music, especially instrumental music rather than vocals, not just any noise] — Ebony, 2009*

*I just want to be the one to **serve** [= provide sexual favors to someone, not just serve in general] you — Geneva Smitherman, 2000*

*I know killers in the street with the **steel** [= firearm, not just any object made from steel] — Snoop Dogg, 2004*

***Waste** [= to kill, not just to use carelessly or extravagantly] her! — Sister Act, film, 1992*

Melioration (alternatively termed amelioration or elevation) is yet another semantic process of change in language. It involves an improvement in the meaning of a word whose connotations become more favorable over time. Historically, it accounts for many new meanings of English words; for instance, *knight* once meant 'a boy' or 'male servant' but has improved its meaning to refer to 'a noble soldier of higher rank' or 'a man who holds the title 'Sir''.

Melioration is widespread in African American slang. This is probably because much slang is negative and involves taboo references to sexual acts, body parts and bodily functions. However, through increased use, these expressions lose their shock value and become more positive. For instance, the world of African American music was responsible for popularizing the meliorated meanings of *jam*, *jazz*, and *juke*, all of which originally had sexual references. Here are more examples of African American slang with ameliorated meanings:

*It's a unique glimpse at the talented people who make Dallas a **badass** [= excellent or admirable] place to live — Pegasus News, 2008*

- I'd love to shoot the shit with you **bitches** [= women] all night, but I gotta go — Coach Carter, film, 2005*
- You **burn** [= cook, especially if very well] supper? Who's the lucky girl? — Jungle Fever, film, 1991*
- Before you go, don't forget to give us that **cheese** [= money]. Why? Because we broke — Bamboozled, film, 2000*
- I honestly think that you're a **cold** [= excellent or admirable], dude! — Blu Light, 2010*
- The concert was hype, Boss **delivered** [= performed in an excellent or admirable way] — Geneva Smitherman, 2000*
- I love hanging out with my **ho's** [= women] and I love meeting new people — My Yearbook, 2009*
- Back to the fact I'm the **mack** [= sexually active man who has many sexual partners] — Us3, 1993*
- I vouch for this **motherfucker** [= excellent or admirable man], he's a mother-fucking genius — 8 Mile, film, 2002*
- Curtis can still write a **motherfuckin** [= excellent or admirable] song — Google News Archive, 2009*

Pejoration (alternatively termed degradation or degeneration) is the opposite of melioration. It involves a depreciation in the meaning of a word whose connotations have become less favorable or have worsened over time. Historically, pejoration has shaped the meanings of many standard words. For instance, *silly* once meant 'blessed' or 'innocent' but has worsened semantically to mean 'ridiculous' or 'trivial'.

This process is also encountered in African American slang, which generally favors mockery and degradation. Because of the generally negative tone of slang, pejoration is considered less evident than melioration (Eble 1996: 59). Our findings show that both processes operate with a similar degree of intensity. Here is a selection of African American slang expressions that have undergone pejoration:

- I could never be a maid because I'd have an **attitude** [= arrogant, condescending or uncooperative attitude] — Seinfeld, NBC-TV series, 1991*
- No one was calling her a big, ugly **bear** [= unattractive woman] — Deseret News, 2007*
- You're not goin' anywhere, **boot** [= African American person]. You're goin' to jail — News, CNN-TV program, 1992*
- They ran a **game** [= deception or manipulation] on me, these two — Clockers, film, 1995*
- Why are dudes so **geographical** [= harboring prejudice against someone*

- because of their place of origin] when it comes to music? — Realest Niggas, 2010*
- That bitch is a **marshmallow** [= white person, especially fat] — Urban Dictionary, 2009*
- So did they come to a decision on how to deal with him making Youkilis as his **maytag** [= flunky]? — Google News Archive, 2009*
- I was a kid living in the **projects** [= housing projects for the poor] — 30 Rock, NBC-TV series, 2009*
- He's a fuckin' **snake** [= treacherous person], you niggaz are fuckin' blind to facts! — Jay-Z, 2009*
- I don't matter if I marry Suzie, the fuckin' **snowflake** [= white person] — All Hip Hop, 2009*

Sometimes, the melioration or pejoration in slang can be extreme and involve a total reversal of meaning. Antiphrasis, as it is technically called, is the use of an expression to mean the opposite of its usual sense, for instance saying *that's wonderful* when one really thinks something is terrible. Brasch calls this semantic inversion and considers it an important feature of African American lexis (1981: 295). Indeed, there are numerous examples of this interesting process in African American slang, possibly given a fondness for wordplay and semantic experimentation. Let us examine the following citational examples:

- We got the **bad** [= excellent or admirable] bitches gaspin for air in Aspen — Jay-Z, 1996*
- We are still blessed to have the **baddest** [= best] rock band in the world as ours — Ebony, 2009*
- If you know of an **ill** [= excellent or admirable] party or club event coming up, simply mail us and we'll post it here — McGill Party, 2009*
- The beat is so **illin'** [= excellent or admirable] and real crazy all the way thru — TV Clip, 2010*
- That Cadillac Escalade is one bad-ass ride. I love the rims, they make that shit look **mean** [= excellent or admirable] — Aaron Peckham, 2005*
- Check out the brainy Brett! You're a smart **motherfucker** [= excellent or admirable man]! — Pulp Fiction, film, 1994*
- We'd have to be talking about one charming **motherfucking** [= excellent or admirable] pig — Pulp Fiction, film, 1994*
- Listen, the new Bugatti is one **sick** [= excellent or admirable] car! — Team Ninja, 2009*
- She was so **vicious** [= excellent or admirable], lips so luscious, suck a nigga dick and have it shinin like some dishes — Snoop Dogg, 2006*

## 7. Summary

Semantic change is a natural and well-established vehicle for language development. It is also an important part of African American slang which is often created by attaching new meanings to previously existing standard English words, a process known as figuration, and changing previously existing meanings of these words, known as semantic shifting. In this aspect, African American slang is not different in any way from the standard English lexicon, where figuration and shifting are used extensively to form new meanings. This disproves any uninformed claims of the alleged linguistic deficiency of African American slang. Moreover, these two processes often feature in poetry, and their pervasive use in African American slang attests to great linguistic creativity and experimentation. Figuration in African American slang is extensive and involves metaphor, metonymy and several other processes; notable is the use of allusion peculiar to African American culture and the African American experience. Semantic shifting is extensive as well, and involves all four processes: generalization, specialization, melioration and pejoration. All of them occur in standard English and are connected with historical change in language. In African American slang, however, they happen more quickly and perhaps are therefore more conspicuous.

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