

## Understanding Language Across the Racial Divide

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### Abstract

This study was an offshoot of a rhetorical criticism of African American tropes in popular film (Berman, 2003). Convinced that popular culture texts called for audience research (Stromer-Galley & Schiappa, 1993), I showed two focus groups (one African American and one Caucasian) excerpts from films that contained examples of African American tropes. The groups found similar meanings in the tropes but differed significantly in other areas. The Caucasian group valued the tropes for their currency in today's slang, but hinted that the language was less than standard. The African American group found the tropes to be highly enjoyable, creative cultural expressions—not merely slang—and decried the negative associations with African American vernacular, attributing these attitudes to a lack of understanding of the culture and its language.

### Introduction

What started off as a rhetorical criticism (Berman, 2003) grew more complicated—and interesting—with the addition of two focus groups. The rhetorical criticism was on African American tropes in popular film. Tropes are unique language forms that differ from a word's everyday or proper meaning because of a turn toward more creative means of expression (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990; Quintilian, 95/1922) and thus an embellished or enhanced meaning (Blair, 1783/1965). The tropes studied here are the predominant ones associated with African-American culture. Signifying, which depicts indirection, critical overtone, and / or creative speech forms, sometimes in the context of inciting some type of rhetorical action, and word games such as capping (making the last and definitive statement in an argument, therefore "capping" the other speaker), boasting (brags, asserting one's abilities, or "big talk," Abrahams, 1964) and playing the dozens (a duel of insults that traditionally involve the other person's family members).

Although cultural speech forms are generally studied ethnographically (e.g. Abrahams, 1964; Dundes, 1973), at the time I most often encountered African American vernacular through the media and thus selected popular film as a text. But shortly after this decision, I read Stromer-Galley and Schiappa's (1993) article that cautioned critics of popular culture texts not to engage in "audience conjecture" (p. 28)—making unfounded assumptions about audience response. Although I didn't plan to make such claims, my premise implicitly involved the audience: I assumed that their movie-going experience would be positively affected by the tropes. With the study re-designed to include audience input, I realized that I could analyze how perceptions of African American tropes differed across racial lines.

### Audience Research and Focus Groups

Focus groups were my method of audience research. It is a method uniquely suited to new areas of inquiry (Byers & Wilcox, 1991) and this was a first-time study (African American tropes have not been the basis of research using film as text). Focus groups generate foundational data based on participant responses that typically have depth, insight, and connection to life experience (Krueger, 1998; Morgan, 1988). In-depth responses supported my goals of discovery and inquiry and my research questions about the nature of audience response to African American speech forms. Focus groups also have the advantage over individual, in-depth interviews because of the favorable ratio of time efficiency to data produced (Byers & Wilcox, 1991), which was a factor in that the groups supplemented a rhetorical criticism on seven popular films (Berman, 2003). And, this method provides the benefit of group interaction (Byers & Wilcox, 1991; Morgan, 1988); the data were unexpectedly enriched by the different interaction patterns of each group.

I conducted one African American focus group and one Caucasian group. Homogenous groups have the advantage of a more comfortable atmosphere, leading, hopefully, to more participant discussion and a clean design for comparison between demographics (see Jhally and Lewis' 1992, study of the *Cosby Show*)—all helpful in preliminary research. I kept each group to six members because I wanted in-depth opinion and knew that showing the film clips would already reduce discussion time. Based on a standard ninety-minute session and accounting for the film clips and my introduction, conclusion, and question asking, approximately ten minutes was left for each participant to speak. In the African American group, of one female and five males, the talk time was more equally shared than in the Caucasian group, which was divided equally by gender, but often dominated by two of the males. The participants in both groups said that they did not know each other, aside from school acquaintances (I solicited two summer school classes of sixty plus students each) and, in preliminary screening, they denied being movie “buffs” or aficionados, which could skew the discussion and data (Morgan, 1998).

Moderators should be as similar as possible to group members to provide a greater level of comfort within the group environment (Morgan, 1998). Thus, being Caucasian, I moderated the Caucasian group and an African American graduate student (Nakesha) moderated the African American group. However, we were also each other's assistant moderators. Admittedly, this decision introduced complicating variables. But there were also benefits: Because Nakesha was a member of the cultural group that I was studying, her presence at both groups lent integrity to the research. She provided invaluable insights interpreting the data. And, we gained the possible benefit of asking for explanations that might be overlooked by a moderator of the same race due to in-group understandings (Morgan, 1998).

The focus group tape consisted of five, particularly clear and creative tropes along with some context. I considered a trope to be an exchange that contained one or more of the following elements: (a) imagery or an otherwise creative reference, (b) a critical overtone, particularly with an element of indirection, and (c) a language game such as capping or playing the dozens. As well, the tropes embodied at least one of the general characteristics of black speech usage (which Smitherman, 1986, calls black modes of discourse): indirection, creativity, double meaning or double entendre, artistic functionality (a creative approach to carrying out the rhetorical objective of the speaker), and the combination of traditional forms with individual style. It should be noted that, although I am treating African American tropes

as discrete, culturally based language forms, some would consider them to be characteristic of a more general style of urban slang. The expected communication style in city life has overlapped with African American vernacular (often referred to as African American Vernacular English, or AAVE). AAVE is a form of American English spoken primarily by African Americans that has been established as a distinct linguistic system with roots in Creole language (see, for example, Rickford, 1998). AAVE includes black modes of discourse (Smitherman, 1986) and many African American trope forms. After each clip, we asked a schedule of questions including summary and ending questions so that the focus group participants had multiple chances to state and revise interpretations. The transcripts from the groups were reviewed for the same or related themes. Using axial coding (Krueger, 1998) we then recombined sections to look for overall patterns (or lack thereof, see Jhally and Lewis, 1992).

The groups met traditional research criteria as adapted to qualitative methods (Guba, 1990) with two caveats. The face validity may have been affected by the racial difference between the groups and the assistant moderators, although we did get what we judged to be unfettered responses from the Caucasian group, in that some were critical of African American vernacular. Likewise in the African American group: They seemed to speak freely about negative Caucasian attitudes toward black speech. Thus, I believe that the data are reasonably credible and compelling (Krueger, 1998). Conclusions in qualitative research are considered valid when they have an acceptable "truth value" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290), i.e., when they inspire confidence and believability produced by the interaction of the participants, the tenor of the topic (too private or too superficial), and other factors (Krueger, 1998). Our participants had a commensurate level of experience as filmgoers and were directed to specific aspects of the clip with opportunities to make personal connections via non-leading questions. However, at one point the moderator deviated from the schedule of questions by omitting a lead question and went directly to a probe. Although this may have skewed the data, the group had already addressed the lead question. Thus, I am reasonably confident in the validity of the conclusions.

Of course, focus groups do not claim representativeness (even when members are from a small and specific population, Cohen, 1991), and thus results cannot be generalized to a larger audience (Krueger, 1998). But results are potentially transferable to other social environments based on in-depth understandings (Krueger, 1998), similarities between the issues studied, and the context of the research setting (Krueger, 1998). Because of members' personal testimony and explanations, I considered the data to be transferable to Black and White film audiences with similar demographics. Thus, I had a credible basis for answering the questions:

RQ1: How do Black audiences respond to African American tropes in popular film?

RQ2: How do Black audiences respond to African American tropes in popular film?

RQ3: How do their responses compare?

### Results

The results below are from three of the film clips. The data are organized based on responses to the key questions (those that asked about trope meanings). Prior to each set of results is the context read to the participants, followed by dialogue from the clip.

*The Best Man*

Merch and Harper are close friends from college. Merch has just picked up Harper at the airport and they are heading into New York for a wedding between two of their college friends. Harper is a writer with a book about to be published. Merch has his law degree but has not yet passed the bar. Currently he works with underprivileged urban children. Last week he had to take a gun away from one of them. Harper exclaims:

Harper: Oh--hell no! A gun?! Damnit Merch--Didn't that firm that you worked at last summer ... did they not offer you a six-figure salary?

Merch: Yes they did.

Harper: So what's up?

Merch: I have to pass the bar first.

Harper: Whatever man ... Alright listen brother, all I'm saying is, if you're gonna be stressed, get paid for it man.

Merch: [smiling] Now you sound like Shelby

Harper: Shelby. [looks away, out the window] Lock down! [Harper laughs out loud]

Merch: [Tries to hide a smile but is hardly able to] You are lucky that I love you like an adopted brother.

Harper: [Still laughing] Yeah. I'm playin'. [Hit's him on the leg] She's cool. Shelby's cool. Yeah.

*Did the language in the film clip tell you anything about the relationships between the characters?* The African American group members and at least one member from the Caucasian group commented on the close relationship between the two men. The most analytical of each group noticed the contrast in values between Harper and Merch: Harper is focused on monetary reward and Merch, on at-risk, community kids. But the groups differed in the way that they expressed these opinions. In the Caucasian group, Craig described Harper critically ("very materialistic"), while in the African American group, Vince showed preference not by criticizing Harper, but by elaborating on Merch's position ("The other guy basically was lookin' out for his own people, lookin out for the kids in the uh Black community").

There was more difference in the groups' interpretations of key terms. Citing personal experience, Craig said that "lock down" was Harper's way of criticizing Merch for not spending enough time with his friends. Whereas the African American group said that "lock down" was Harper's way of creatively characterizing the relationship without voicing outright disapproval of Shelby.

*Soul Food*

The youngest of three sisters, Bird, just got married. Her family is skeptical of her husband, Lem, however: He's been in jail and, as the scene opens at the wedding reception, is "dirty dancing" with an old girlfriend. The family matriarch, Big Momma, sends her favorite grandchild, Ahmad, to go get Bird, who is in the ladies' room along with her sisters Maxine and Terri. Maxine is particularly offended by Lem's dancing. Ahmad (Maxine's son) opens the door to the ladies room:

Maxine: Ahmad, what you want?

Ahmad: Yo Bird

Bird: What! (agitated)  
 Ahmad: Big Momma said get your black ass out there.  
 Maxine: Big Momma ain't told nobody's black ass to get nowhere. Now you stay out of grown folks' business. [Ahmad retreats].  
 Maxine: And now your man is out there bumpin' and grindin' with Ms. Hoochey Momma, actin' like wadn't no wedding less than ten minutes ago.  
 Bird: Whose man?  
 Maxine: Your man, girl, bumpin [makes dance-bumping motion].  
 Bird: Oh hell no.  
 Maxine: Mmm Hmmm.  
 Bird: Ain't nobody about to disrespect me on my wedding day.  
 Maxine: That's what I'm talkin' about ... And did you see that dress Ms. Thing had on?  
 Terri: See her behind in that dress?  
 Maxine: Girl, just all up her butt.

*Did you notice any unusual language use and what did that language mean?* The Caucasian group focused on "bumpin' and grindin,'" and took a more analytical approach, first discussing their familiarity with the trope ("I'm from a small town and you don't hear 'bumpin and grindin'"), then moving quickly to general commentary. Craig identified it as African American, "urban," and "forward" and attempted to explain that such language was acquired through childhood influences. In Craig's opinion, had a white family adopted Ahmad, his speech would have been completely different.

The moderator skipped that question with the African American group because, immediately prior, they had been discussing the language meaning in terms of the dynamic among the sisters. It seemed a natural progression to explore a trope that was central in the sisters' conversation. Thus the moderator asked the probe, "What did y'all think of the phrase, 'Ms. Hoochey Momma?'" As with *The Best Man* clip, they remained more involved with the language, trying to get at precise meaning. Keneka, the only woman in the group, said it meant "nasty." Other opinions ranged from "whorish-like qualities" to "underdressed." But, they cautioned, the meaning depended on the context. "You could say 'Hoochey Momma' to your sister and just be playin'."

The groups' opinions also differed on the question of how communication behaviors helped them understand Maxine's personality. The Caucasian group used the tropes to form opinions about Maxine, calling her "forward," "the mediator," and, two girls agreed, "the instigator." The African American group was more nuanced and careful. Vince put Maxine in a clearly positive role: She was the family protector, demanding respect from an (underdressed) interloper. He and Ede agreed that it would be unfair to make a judgment on Maxine's personality based on this incident alone. (Vince: "I don't think it's fair, because ... people have, you know, ... emotions fluctuate during the day, so..."). Everyone has emotional moments, they said, and this was only one look at her personality within the movie.

#### *B.A.P.S*

*B.A.P.S.* is an acronym for Black American Princesses. The prospective princesses are Nesi (Halle Berry) and Mickey, who work at a restaurant in Decatur, Georgia. In an effort to break out of their small-town lives, Nesi enters a contest to be "Dance Girl of the World"

for an MTV video. The \$10,000 prize would allow them to start on their dream of opening a combination restaurant and hair salon. In this scene they have arrived in LA and are standing in the long audition line:

- Nesi: Girl, I'm gonna blow this audition up!!
- Mickey: We got to, cuz we only have enough money for one night in a hotel room. [Spies another girl going through her dance routine.] Look at her tryin' to *show out*. She thinks she got it goin' on.
- Nesi: Mmm Hmmm.
- Mickey: You the bomb.
- Nesi: I got this
- Mickey: No problem
- Nesi: [to the girl practicing her routine] Uh huh--that was good, but you might want to go on home, now, cuz I'm here--No, stay, cuz we gonna need a few extras in the video [cracks her neck then does a short dance number, making high-pitched noises with each pose].
- Mickey: That's my gir-rl. That's *my* girl. That's my *girl*! Ye-ah! Ye-ah! Baby, we *got* this. [Then, pointing, with both hands, to the back of her head, she turns slowly, saying] Boo Yow! [The words are written in her hairdo.].

*What would you identify as the most creative language?* In the African American group, Keneka asserted that "Boo Yow" stood out; it was the most creative phrase, which started a chorus of "Boo Yow." Ricky said conclusively, "In the clip, most creative word was 'Boo Yow,' had it in her hair." The Caucasian group did not find the language common or everyday, but dated. Initially they focused on the phrase, "I'm gonna blow this up." When I brought up, "Boo Yow," their opinion did not change: Joy, who was from a small town, said, "That's old school." The group had not noticed the phrase written in Mickey's hair. We re-watched the clip and they found the hairdo "hilarious" but did not make any additional comments.

*How does the trope inform relationships?* Both groups said that the communication behavior indicated the girls' closeness. The African American group also talked about the girls' history. Vince said, "They was girls, probably from way back when, elementary school or something; together like 'at--had the same type of language." Leonard described the relationship as a mutual support system and then the reenacting began: Jaguar said, "That's my girl," Leonard followed with, "Here, Here" (which may have been a take off on Mickey's "Ye-ah. Ye-ah"), and Ricky added, "Boo Yow." Everyone laughed.

### Discussion

African American tropes in popular film heighten the movie-watching experience for all audience members. But differences exist that are tantamount to a racial divide on this topic. White audience members are predominantly concerned with whether the vernacular is "in" or not and whether they are familiar with it, whereas African American audience members enjoy the language for its cultural connection and expressiveness. They regret non-African Americans' lack of understanding in this area.

Not surprisingly, for black audiences the trope forms ("slang") create entry points to the movies and individual characters based on the familiarity of the speech forms (and, most

likely, other communication aspects not discussed in this paper such as tonality, timing, etc.). For example, in *Jungle Fever* (not described in this paper), a character named Flipper confessed to his best friend about an affair with a white woman. After the clip, Ricky said, "You know, my friends would say the same thing," at which point he gave a rendition of Flipper's speech: "Heyyyy---Guess what I did." Audience members not only see themselves using the trope forms (or some rendition of them) but also having the same or similar reactions as the characters.

The speech forms are a source of group interaction and enjoyment for black audiences. The language may be all the more enjoyable for what it is not: the variety of mainstream English that African Americans use in order to interact successfully in a white world. As Ede said, it was not the language used in "our other facades everyday." They do not have to translate meanings between mainstream and African American speech.

Similar to white audiences, black audiences use the trope forms as information about characters' values and beliefs, but black audiences do not make judgments on "macro" issues such as lifestyle, profession, or upbringing. Judgments made are on individual behaviors and decisions and even then, their degree of criticality is tempered. If the characters represent opposing value systems, audience members are more likely to stress the character whose values are in line with their own, instead of criticizing the other.

Not surprisingly, black audiences perceive the need for greater understanding when it comes to vernacular speech forms (in many communication contexts, not just popular film), particularly those that have come into common usage. Of course, miscommunication takes place even within one's own speech culture (Ede noted that when he was visiting friends in Cincinnati, they called partying, "bangin,'" a term that he had never heard before). But across racial lines, the miscommunication can be exacerbated and tensions created that were never intended, as expressed by Vince:

I mean it's like, basically like what she said, it's like, we was in here talkin' and other people, other races, white people--whatever--talking; we could be all on the same subject, talkin' about the same thing, but using different *words*, different *language*, different *dialects* [hitting the table at bolded words, then just hits the table]...Sick and tired of it [some laughter].

His parallel syntax underscored the frustration with misconstrued meaning due to different speech forms and communication behaviors.

Black audiences also see the need to counter the seemingly automatic connection between slang and a lack of education or intelligence. As Keneka noted, a greater familiarity with African American culture helps in this area: "It [learning about the African American language/culture] kind of lets people know [that] slang is not of ignorance, you know—even intelligent people use slang—it doesn't mean a person is ignorant because they use slang words." To black audiences, this unfair association is directly related to a lack of understanding of the culture in general.

White audiences concede that African American tropes contribute to their movie-watching experience through added humor and information about character personae, relationship, etc., but the language forms don't inspire significantly more enjoyment or

interaction with other audience members. In that the tropes are from another culture, it is not surprising that they have less effect on white audiences. (Cultural values and practices may also account for the differences in the group process, Benoit, 2001).

When white audience members do analyze African American tropes, their criteria are often personal familiarity and currency in popular culture. Nakesha offered an explanation: It is "in" or "hip" to use African American language. If audience members admit a lack of awareness about African American slang, they would be admitting that they were not hip. As if to illustrate this, Craig used African American vernacular when discussing character interactions in *Lethal Weapon IV* (another of the film clips). He reasoned that Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Roger (Danny Glover) didn't intervene when a private detective (Joe Pesci) was needling the newest member of the police force (Chris Rock) because "they didn't see anything bad *going down* anyway, so....".

This view of African American speech forms as either passé or "in" is bothersome because it indicates a one-dimensional, shallow view of black vernacular as feeders to the mainstream culture—almost as "hip" additives—while demonstrating a lack of regard for black speech as important cultural expression. The worst offense is equating African American vernacular with a lack of intelligence. Nonetheless, it seems that white audiences do not perceive much of a need for more understanding of African American tropes / vernacular in popular film (or perhaps other communication contexts), although they do see the benefit of bringing to light racial issues through film, noting Spike Lee's work in this area.

### Conclusion

This study would benefit from a number of changes. Clearly, a mixed-race focus group is important in order to claim a broader sense of transferability (in that most movie audiences are racially mixed) and as a basis for possibly drawing different conclusions. Mixed race group(s) and another set of groups would strengthen the validity of my conclusions. As well, the movies now need to be updated. There may be an interesting comparison between the language in two sets of African American popular films, separated by eight to ten years, as well as the audience response. Also, for racially homogenous groups, I would not use moderators who are of a different race than are the participants in the focus groups they are conducting. To build appreciation for a culture, sub-culture, or speech community, we need to better appreciate their significant symbols as well as the *ways* that they symbolize. African American tropes are part of a structurally complete (Smitherman, 1986) and culturally important vernacular, not one whose value comes from being absorbed (or appropriated, e.g. Dyson, 2004) into the mainstream. If one of our goals as a society is to develop a more tolerant multi-cultural underpinning, then a better understanding of African American vernacular, in mass media and everyday conversation, should be on the list of work ahead. It could inch us toward better race relations.

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