

“Hoochie-Coochie Diva”: AAVE Discourse Strategies in *Waiting to Exhale*

Kathleen YAMANE*

Abstract

Over the past decade, sociolinguists have increasingly turned their attention to language use within specific “communities of practice” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003) to more fully understand the interface of language and socio-cultural parameters. Da Fina (2006) and others stress the necessity of acknowledging the fluid nature of identity and the range of ways that our shifting identities are expressed through language within specific speech communities. This focus on actual discursive practice, initiated by scholars of language and gender, has prompted exciting research into the speech patterns of doubly marginalized groups such as African American women, long overlooked in research that tended to categorize all women as being part of one homogeneous (white) group, and all Afro-Americans as being male.

Part of a larger study aiming to more clearly describe speech patterns among African American women in a variety of contexts, the current study focuses on code-switching practices among four black female friends in the film *Waiting to Exhale*, based on the best-selling novel of the same name by Terry McMillan. As educated, middle-class professionals the women have access to both Standard English and AAVE, yet vernacular features occur with much great frequency in their private, intimate conversation in the Birthday Party scene. Along with speech acts such as call-and-response and *braggadocio*, this study considers the distribution of salient grammatical and lexical AAVE markers in the data and seeks to correlate their use with other factors such as emotional pitch.

Key words: African American vernacular English (AAVE), code-switching, *Waiting to Exhale*

Introduction

The explosion of research in the areas of language and gender and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) led to a backlash within the field of sociolinguistics with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), among others, critical of the simplistic binary oppositions that were the basis of research set up to confirm stereotypes and doomed to result in overgeneralizations. And while research in the black vernacular has been ushered into exciting new areas with second- and third-generation scholars taking the lead to investigate manifestations of AAVE in contemporary black culture, Morgan (2004) and Troutman (2001) have been particularly critical of the marginalization of African American women and women of other minority speech communities, rendered invisible

Received September 12, 2014 *College of Liberal Arts

or misrepresented by the “monolithic womanism”, in Troutman’s words, that implies that one style of speech behavior applies to all women, without consideration of ethnicity, age, social class, sexual orientation and other sociolinguistic factors (2001, p. 212). Morgan bemoans the fact that, “What seems to bias scholarly research on African Americans is how black women are viewed in relation to others, especially black men and white women—and how their identities are assigned as part of a system of dichotomies rather than discovered as something much more complex” (2002, p. 87).

This discussion sparked an awareness of the need to widen the parameters in order to more fully explore the relationship of language and identity of the socially, ethnically and sexually marginalized and to look more closely at specific communities of language use in a fuller range of contexts—the public and private sphere, mixed vs. single sex interaction—as well as across a wider range of registers, age groups and social groups. To that end, sociolinguistic research has seen a shift away from the paradigms of difference and dominance towards increased focus on what Eckert and McConnell-Ginet have labeled “communities of practice” (2003). This new focus on “how people position themselves with regard to linguistic resources” (da Fina, 2006, p. 353) recognizes that we all possess a range of identities which shift according to the varied circumstances and people with whom we interact in our daily lives. As a natural extension, we all participate in multiple speech communities, in which a variety of linguistic features and patterns of discourse are tapped. This focus on actual discursive practice has exciting implications for the study of the speech patterns of African American women and other marginalized groups, with studies by Fought (2006), Morgan (2002, 2004), and Buchwartz (2004), among others, stressing the need to examine a wide range of data in order to better grasp the rich texture of verbal interaction and the complex interface of language and sociocultural parameters.

Part of a larger study aiming to more clearly describe speech patterns among African American women in a variety of contexts, the current study focuses specifically on code-switching practices among professional middle class speakers. Smitherman notes that some ninety percent of all African Americans speak AAVE at some point in their lives, in some contexts (2006, p. 19). For most speakers of AAVE, the vernacular features are variable; that is, a speaker alternates the use of AAVE features with Standard English variants, depending on the speech situation. This style shifting has been the subject of numerous studies. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998) correlate it with socioeconomic class, while Edwards (in Fought, 2006, p. 52) researched the correlation of code-switching with gender. Rickford and McNair-Knox (in Rickford, 1999, pp. 112-153) find stylistic variation to be influenced by both addressee and topic. Foster (1995) looks at the use of code-switching in the classroom and in interviews, and finds in both situations a conscious shifting to the vernacular forms to signal an alter-identity and establish a sympathetic bond with the addressee(s). In his detailed analysis of African American Baptist worship services Pitts (1993) observed that the highly emotional climaxes of the black preachers’ sermons exhibited more frequent use of AAVE forms than was found in the prayers, hymns and other parts of the church

service. Pitts attributed this increased use of the vernacular, in some cases involving twice the number of features, to the heightened emotional content. While sociolinguists have long linked the use of local dialect and vernacular forms with the expression and promotion of solidarity, Pitts' work suggests that emotional content is another significant parameter worth consideration.

Yamane (2006, 2007) analyzed language use among a group of upper middle class females in the Spike Lee film *Jungle Fever*, noting the use of a range of linguistic markers distinctive of AAVE in the private, intimate conversation of the five women, while they consistently used Standard English in other communication. The use of call-and-response was found to be a particularly important rapport-building device, along with an increase in the use of AAVE phonological and grammatical features. These findings were contrasted with a similar scene from the film *The Best Man* in which four upper middle class male friends reunite on the eve of a wedding (Yamane, 2008). While their dialogue was also peppered with an increased use of black vernacular, close analysis showed a different distribution of features, favoring distinctive forms of address and the ritual verbal insults known as *signifyin* or *dissin*, described by Smitherman as “the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles—that is, *signifies* on—the listener” (1977, p.118). This was seen as reinforcing the macho atmosphere of the gathering. Although homogenous in ethnicity, age, social class and educational level, the gender differential between the two groups was shown to result in significant differences in communication style.

The present study focuses on the communication patterns of four black female friends in the 1995 film *Waiting to Exhale*, based on the best-selling novel of the same name by Terry McMillan. Both the book and movie became immediate hits upon their release, inspiring *Waiting to Exhale* parties across the United States to celebrate female bonding. The story explores the relationships of the four friends, all educated professionals, and of their ongoing struggle to find true love, holding their breath until the day they can feel comfortable in a committed relationship. As the story opens, Bernadine's (B) husband calmly announces his intention to leave her and their two children for a white woman. Savannah (S), a successful television producer, is involved with a married man whom she cannot find the resolve to leave. The young executive Robin (R) goes from one loser to the next, never finding a worthy partner. Gloria (G), a single mother who runs her own beauty salon, has all but given up on men after learning that her son's father is gay, instead focusing her attention on her only child as he prepares to leave the nest. While there is variation in their backgrounds and occupations, as upper middle class professionals, the women have access to both Standard English and the black vernacular. It has been frequently noted that code-switching to the vernacular is most likely to occur in situations in which all of the participants are African American but in other scenes in the movie, the women are seen to use mostly Standard English in their interaction with a range of contacts of various ethnicities, including family members, neighbors, colleagues and bank employees. Even in the passionate discourse between lovers, the rage-fueled attack on an unfaithful husband, and arguments with a mono-dialectal Mama pleading with her

daughter to find a man, we hear few instances of the women switching out of the standard code. One notable exception is an utterance from Gloria, arguably the most emotional of the group, when she discovers her son engaged in a sexual act with a teenage girl in his bedroom.

Data Analysis

The data for this study is taken from the film script. White (2003) acknowledges the recent transition from the stereotyped mammy figure/ aggressive vixen dichotomy long common on the screen to a more authentic portrayal of African American women with actors like Halle Berry and Angela Bassett gaining recognition for their portrayal of memorable, multi-dimensional characters and directors, Spike Lee and Forest Whitaker among them, winning critical acclaim for films which portray the black community—*sistas* included— with increased realism, depth and sensitivity. In the scene selected for analysis, the four friends have gathered to celebrate Gloria’s birthday and to comfort Bernadine. Numerous details remind us of their privileged status: the stylish furnishings; their fashionable outfits, accessories and attention to hairstyle; the Moët & Chandon champagne they are drinking. The scene opens with the women seated together on sofas in Bernadine’s living room cheerfully singing “Happy Birthday” and offering birthday toasts to Gloria. The birthday party scene is divisible into four segments, marked by changes in music and mood. As the music switches to a slow love song in the second segment, the mood becomes more somber and reflective, prompting Bernadine to phone her ex-husband’s new partner and indulge in a moment of self-pity. The third segment finds the women up dancing, whooping it up, and adopting a more defiant attitude regarding their personal worth. In the fourth segment the friends collectively try to answer the question that plagues them all, “What happened to all the good men?” In its entirety the scene runs to approximately eight minutes of dialogue. This study considers the distribution of salient phonological, grammatical and lexical features of AAVE in the data, and seeks to correlate their use with other factors. We will also consider the use of speech acts typical of AAVE, as call-and-response was seen to play an important role in the *Jungle Fever* data.

I. AAVE Phonological and Morphosyntactic Features

In this section we will identify the use of AAVE phonological and grammatical variables as they occur in the *WTE* data. Examples are identified by the number of the segment from which they were taken and, where identifiable, the name of the speaker. The transcript in its entirety can be found in the Appendix.

Phonological features

In her novel, McMillan does not utilize apostrophe insertion or other devices to represent the phonological characteristics of the characters when they code-switch to AAVE. In the movie, however, there are several instances of clear shifts to AAVE phonology in the scene in question. The most frequently occurring of these is the alveolarization of velar nasals in word final position:

- ① S: Happy birthday, baby. To the best *BLOW-dryin'*, *SCISSOR-scalpin'...BUMPER-curlin'*, *BRAIDin'*, *WEAVin'...*“Get this gray out of my head” *DYEIn'* beautician...west of the Mississippi.
- ② B: That *lyin'* asshole messed up my life.
- ② G: Girl—you crazy? What are you thinkin'?
- What're you all *doin'*?
- ② G: What are y'all *doin'*?
- ② B: Gloria, I gave him two babies and she think she can just take my *fuckin'* husband.

The data also contains three examples of alveolization of the interdental fricative, all occurring in the second segment:

- ② G: Bernie, don't do *dis*.
- B: What ha—what happened to *da* music? I thought *dis* was supposed to be your party.

It should be noted that all of the other occurrences of the interdental fricatives in the scene (over 40 in total) retain the Standard English pronunciation of [ð] and [θ]. In the first example above Gloria is urgently begging her friend not to make the call. In the second and third examples Bernadine, having expressed her anguish, consciously or unconsciously switches to the AAVE form as she tries to recreate the party mood.

Another feature evident in the delivery of some lines in the film is the manipulation of suprasegmentals. This category includes such things as exaggerated intonation contours, vowel elongation, stress, pitch and rhythm. Rickford and Rickford claim that, “[In AAVE] the cadence, the rhythm, inflection and rhetorical style are organic to the message, the clues that the speaker provides as to his or her mood and the nature of his or her relationship with the audience” (2000, p. 19). While not represented orthographically in the script, there are several cases in the data where the women make use of exaggerated pitch range to convey a heightened level of excitement or other emotion:

- ① S: Happy birthday, baby. To the best *BLOW-dryin'*, *SCISSOR-scalpin'...BUMPER-curlin'*, *BRAIDin'*, *WEAVin'...*“Get this gray out of my head” *DYEIn'* beautician...west of the Mississippi.

① S: Oh, she's so nasty.

Nasty.

NasTEEE.

④ S: You know—the days when men actually flirted with you and asked you out for a real date, you know? Where they *HIDin*?

The first example is Savannah's birthday toast at the opening of the scene. It is noteworthy that the exaggerated stress on the first syllable of each of the six adjectival phrases combines with the alveolarization of the nasals discussed above. As we shall see in the Discussion section, this tendency to cluster AAVE markers is not restricted to phonological features. The remaining two examples, one an enthusiastic response to a comment made by Savannah and the other, a thoughtful question posed by Savannah herself that marks an important transition in the scene, both signal heightened emotion.

Grammatical Features

Of the four morphosyntactic features of AAVE identified in the data, copula deletion occurs most frequently. A substantial amount of AAVE research has focused on zero copula and the teasing out of its distribution in different syntactic and sociolinguistic contexts. Among the findings, it has been shown that zero copula occurs most commonly with the third person singular and plural forms (*is, are*). The nine cases of copula deletion occur in our data concur with this:

② G: Girl—you *crazy*?

④ S: *Where they hidin'*?

R: *They not hidin'*.

B: *They with white women.*

G: *They gay.*

B: *or married.*

G: And *they ugly.*

S: *They behind bars. . . .*

R: And *they ugly.*

All four of the women make use of this form, most notably in the fourth section as they build on each other's comments with repetition of the zero copula pattern. Except for the first example where it combines with a second person pronoun, the remaining eight cases involve third person plural pronouns, referencing men. The repeated use of this pattern may reflect a conscious, collective shifting of gear into heavy AAVE mode, in line with the frequent use of this feature in the "strategic construction of a street conscious identity" in the lyrics of hip-hop music, as noted by

Alim (2003, p. 51).

Interestingly, this AAVE marker occurs embedded among utterances in which the copula is retained, including Savannah’s, “Oh, she’s so nasty.” in the first segment and “They’re too damned scared to make a commitment.” uttered by Robin in segment #4. Robin’s line is spoken slowly and clearly, suggesting that the retention of the copula here signals more thoughtful reasoning.

Another feature noted in the women’s speech is multiple negation. Although also associated with working and lower class speech in other dialects of American English, multiple negations are most strongly associated with AAVE. In our data, there are two examples.

- ① R: Gloria, I hope you find true love...and get you some that’s so electric, *you ain’t gonna need no blow dryer.*
- ② S: None of us—*not none of us*—have a man.

The first example comes from Robin’s birthday toast, wishing her friend true love and satisfying sex (“...you get *some* that’s so electric”). Code-switching to the vernacular at this point adds to the sense of intimacy as well as allowing the speaker a chance to perform. The example from the second segment marks an important transition, with Savannah the first to openly articulate the source of the friends’ collective misery.

The absence of the third person singular *-s* marker and other uses of the third person with first/second person verb forms are also common in AAVE. In our data we find two examples:

- ② B: Gloria, I gave him two babies and *she think* she can just take my *fuckin’* husband.
- ④ S: Hey—we already *said they was ugly!*

As we saw to be the case with code-switches to other AAVE markers, the first example is uttered in an emotionally charged scene in which Bernadine expresses the source of her anguish to her friends for the first time. Savannah’s usage comes at the end of a long string of lines *signifyin’* on males which, as we shall see, is loaded with AAVE features.

Turning to noun morphology, our data has two examples of possessive neutralization, in which the same pronominal form is used for the nominative and possessive, as in the examples below. The examples, both involving third person plural forms, follow one another:

- ④ G: They want you to be *they mama.*
- B: And *they daddy.*

These two utterances occur towards the end of the scene, as the communal critique of men reaches its dramatic peak. There are no examples in our data of two other commonly occurring

AAVE grammatical features, invariant *be* and existential *it*.

II. Semantic Features

In this section we will address the use of AAVE lexical features in the birthday party data. Smitherman (2000a, 2000b, 2006), Hudson (2001) and Green (2002), among others, have written about the distinctive lexical and semantic features of AAVE. One of these involves form of address. *Girl* is a well-known and often imitated form of address for a black female, used by both males and females, and is also a term of solidarity and bonding between African American women (Smitherman, 2006, p. 31). In our data, this form is used in alternation with a number of other address forms.

In our data there are six examples of the use of *girl/girlfriend* to address another member of the group. Three occur during the toasts in segment #1, while the others are part of supportive responses to another speaker's call. An alternative diminutive form, *baby*, occurs once in the opening segment. Interestingly, this passage includes an equal number of instances in which a proper name is used in place of *girl*. All seven of those cases involve disagreement, contradiction or a challenge to the speaker. This is most pronounced in the second segment as the other women attempt to discourage Bernadine from calling her ex-husband's new partner:

G: *Savannah*, talk to her.

Bernie!

Bernie!

G: *Bernie*, don't do this!

B: *Gloria*, I gave him two babies and she think she can just take my *fuckin'* husband.

G: *Bernie! Bernie!* Cut! It's stupid! It's stupid and it's childish!

S: Thank you.

B: *Gloria*, I have some shit I wanna get off my chest.

The four other occurrences of lexical items in our data specifically linked to AAVE are clustered together in the third segment:

③ Shake your *booty*.

G: *Fly* diva.

R: Mm-hmm, *freak* mama!

G: *Hoochie-coochie* diva!

Major (1994) and Smitherman (2000a) define these terms as follows in their AAVE dictionaries:
booty: the female body or female rear end

fly: to be fast and ecstatic; brash; good or great

freak: a person who obviously enjoys sex

hoochie-coochie: a very erotic dance

At this point the party has livened up and the women are dancing in a spirited manner, flaunting their bodies and obviously feeling the effects of the champagne. *Fly diva*, *freak mama* and *hoochie-coochie diva*, all rooted in the black idiom, are colorful, sexually charged labels addressed to Savannah in response to her boastful comment about her good looks.

In addition to tapping the lexicon in the examples above, the rich figurative capacity of the black language is evident in other ways as well. Drawing from Hurston (1933) and her own analysis of the semantic features of AAVE, Yamane (1999) notes the “creation of sensual and unconventional images” that reenergize the black code, incorporating a physicality imbued with a sense of motion. Metaphorical phrases such as *jaw jackin’* (“to talk”) reflect the action of the encoder, evoking visual images based on movement. We see several excellent examples of both unconventional metaphorical images and the focus on physicality in the birthday toasts in the opening segment:

① S: Happy birthday, baby. To *the best blow-dryin’, scissor-scalpin’...bumper-curlin’, braidin’, weavin’*...“*get this gray out of my head*” *dyein’ beautician ...west of the Mississippi*.

R: Weak. Gloria, I hope you find true love...and *get you some that’s so electric, you ain’t gonna need no blow dryer*.

S: Oh, please.

R: *And so juicy...it’s gonna put an end to your 10-year drought*.

Savannah cleverly strings together six action-based descriptive phrases to toast her friend, creating vivid images that incorporate her actions not only as a hairdresser, but specifically as a hairdresser for black women (*braidin’, weaving’*.) This is evaluated as being “weak” by Robin, who proceeds to wish her friend true love and exciting sex using witty metaphors that play on Gloria’s job as a beautician. The two women might be seen as competing in their delivery of their toasts, making repeated use of black rhetorical strategies.

III. AAVE Speech Acts

In addition to the features discussed above, three rhetorical strategies unique to AAVE can be noted in the data set: call-and-response, *braggadocio* and *talking that talk*. The first of these is defined by Smitherman as “spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s statements (“calls”) are punctuated by expressions (“responses”) from the listener” (1977, p. 104). Seen to be an important dynamic in the development

of the discourse in *Jungle Fever*, call-and-response occurs throughout the birthday party scene but is most frequent in the second and fourth segments as the women react supportively to comments made by the others. The most commonly used responses are simple agreements (“Mmm”, “Unh-huh”, “Umm”) but there are also examples of stronger accord (“You bet you do.”, “That’s it.”, “That’s what it is!”). Other examples indicate reactions of surprise or amusement such as “Whoa!”, “Wow!”, laughter, squealing and howls. While not as frequent, varied or original as the examples of call-and-response in the *Jungle Fever* data, they are seen to serve the same purposes of encouraging each speaker to express her innermost thoughts and strengthening the connection between the women. The third segment, in its entirety, contains 16 examples, only in three of which the speakers are identified:

- ③ S: I’m sick of this shit now. I hate men... The one man I love is married with a kid and there’s my life in one little sad nutshell.

Mmm...

B: Men do leave their wives.

Mmm...

R: At least he told you he was married.

S: Yeah, but see, I’m not your average 24-year-old girl who’s willing to wait around and count the days, see?

Unhh-huh...

Umm...

S: Un-huh. I’m 33 years old.

Whoa!!

Wow!

[squeal]

S: And I still look good.

[laugh]

S: I still look good.

You bet you do!

You do!

You look good, girl!

G: Fly diva.

R: *Mm-hmm, freak mama!*

G: *Hoochie-coochie diva!*

S: Ahh, y’all go to hell!

Yeah!

Savannah, you know you look good, Girl.

In this same segment Savannah makes use of the black speech act of *braggadocio*, which involves confident boasting about oneself. *Braggadocio* (“bragging”) has its origin in the African oral tradition and has in recent years been popularized by rappers. Smitherman characterizes this as the speaker “. . . project[ing] himself (or herself, but usually himself) as a powerful, all-knowing, omnipotent hero, able to overcome all odds . . . usually bragging about lovemaking or verbal skills” (2000b, pp. 275-276). Savannah’s female version, focusing on her good looks and general desirability, elicits the largest number of supportive responses from the other women present.

The third verbal strategy comprises the entirety of the fourth segment, as the women cooperate playfully to answer Savannah’s insightful question regarding the lack of good men. Troutman explains this communicative pattern as follows:

“*Talking that talk* appears to be an overarching rubric under which *smart talk* and other verbal strategies fit” . . . requiring “quick-wittedness, ingenuity, spontaneity, and sound thinking ability. *Talking that talk* serves as a vehicle whereby African Americans can play with language, display their mental adeptness, defeat a verbal opponent, and have fun simultaneously.” (2001, p. 224)

The women’s dialogue in the fourth scene offers an excellent example:

S: You know—the days when men actually flirted with you and asked you out for a real date, you know? Where they hidin’?

R: They not hidin’. They’re too damned scared to make a commitment.

Mm-hmm.

B: They want white women. They with white women.

G: They gay.

B: Or married.

G: And they ugly.

S: They behind bars.

B: Got bad credit.

G: Got little dicks and they can’t fuck.

WHOA!

OHHHH!!

That’s it!

That’s what it is!

S: Or they got big ones and still can’t fuck!

WHOOO!

[howls of laughter]

That’s what it is.

- G: Wait-wait: They wanna spank ya!
WHAA!!
What?!
- B: They wanna what??
- R: Now, that's not a bad thing, Gloria.
- G: Alright!
- R: Oh, come on!
- B: They're too possessive.
- G: They want you to be they mama.
- B: And they daddy
- R: And they ugly.
- S: Hey—we already said they was ugly!
- B: Yeah—good and ugly!
- R: Inside out ugly?
- S: If you're ugly inside, you're ugly outside.
- B: Inside out.

All four of the women contribute to this increasingly negative appraisal of men in turn, latching on to the previous comment without interrupting each other. We noted above the frequency of AAVE linguistic markers in this segment including the repeated pattern of short sentences with copula deletion, in response to Savannah's question, "Where they hidin'?" with each woman offering examples from her own experience. While most are humorous and some pathetic, they all retain the pattern and rhythm. As the scene builds momentum, incorporating increasingly raunchy *disses* regarding male sexual prowess, Gloria and Savannah's calls are punctuated by strings of enthusiastic responses, the taboo nature of the discourse further strengthening their bond. The passage can be said to crescendo up to the point of this climax and to then decrescendo as the women physically and verbally run out of steam, with Gloria tripping over words and Robin mistakenly repeating a line that has already been used. The string of attacks is spontaneous, clever and most importantly, a collaborative endeavor.

Discussion

There are a number of points to be made relating to the code-switching to salient AAVE markers in the birthday party scene. In terms of personal style, all four of the women use the vernacular at some points. Savannah's utterances contain the most examples of phonological and grammatical markers, including the use of exaggerated stress and pitch contours, while she and Robin both make brilliant use of colorful and imaginative semantic markers to enliven their toasts. Savannah's

opening words in fact set the tone for the whole scene as she “performs” in the vernacular, cleverly toasting the birthday girl. She is challenged by Robin who in turn wishes her friend “electric” and “juicy” sex, incorporating—appropriately—a hair dryer metaphor. It is again Savannah, her verbal skills on display, who enlivens the dialogue with *braggadocio* in the third segment, to the howling approval of the others. Bernadine, although the most rawly emotional of the four, largely restricts her usage of the vernacular to those segments in which the friends collaborate on the construction of the dialogue, such as the *diss* in segment #4. The exceptions to this are her alveolarization of the final nasals in her anguished descriptions of her husband and his new partner (“lyin’ asshole”) and the conscious shifting to AAVE pronunciation of the interdental fricatives to lift the somber mood following the phone call. In her most emotional statements, she is more apt to turn to curse words than to the vernacular to express herself. Only her toast to the birthday girl, following Savannah and Robin, is serious in tone and devoid of vernacular markers, suggesting that personal style is an important consideration in code-switching.

The shifting between the vernacular and standard forms was also seen to correlate with other pragmatic and stylistic factors, including the emotional tone of the scene. While the entire scene might be characterized as dramatic, the women’s serious displays of emotion are framed by comical interludes punctuated by occasional disagreements that erupt over the course of the evening. Savannah and Robin’s birthday toasts in the opening sequence and the collaborative *diss* that close the scene have been identified as the most humorous moments, with Robin’s amusing performance of *braggadocio* in the third segment lifting the mood after the phone call incident and her own woeful acknowledgement of her pathetic love life. All three of these segments draw heavily from AAVE semantics and speech acts, which were seen above to attract a clustering of other linguistic markers associated with the vernacular. Smitherman (2000b) describes this as, “tapping into the linguistic culture, the linguistic wellspring of our history; hitting the registers that we know are Black, lively talk, real talk, colorful talk, full of flavor”. It is significant that the birthday scene both opens and closes in this manner. Consciously or unconsciously, they turn to the vernacular forms in these key positions as a resource for reinforcing both their identity and their intimate bonding as a group and to delimit a safe enclosure in which they can freely explore issues of collective importance to them as black women.

The most poignant emotional outbursts occur in the middle, distributed throughout the second and third segments in the safe space created in large part through the manipulation of linguistic variables. The first of these, triggered by a sad love song, is Savannah’s observation regarding their shared state of affairs, “None of us—not none of us—have a man. Some sad shape.” Her measured delivery of the line and the use of the double negative construction suggest a heightened emotional state. In the next instance, a visibly distraught Bernadine, cigarette in hand and voice quivering, slowly articulates the source of her personal misery: “I gave him two babies and she think she can just take my husband.” The absence of the –s marker by Bernadine, seen to make the

least use of the vernacular, has a powerful effect in her delivery of this line. Following a break in the mood which finds the women dancing and jovial, Savannah again attempts to pull the dialogue back into a melancholy mood at the beginning of the third segment with the line, “I hate men...The one man I love is married with a kid and there’s my life in one little sad nutshell.” The first two examples above, containing one AAVE variable each, are interpreted by the other women (and the viewers) as authentic expressions of the speakers’ deep suffering. Savannah’s delivery of the third example, on the other hand, is quite fast, matter-of-fact and in the standard code. Rather than triggering empathy from the group, this leads into her *braggadocio* and the good-natured teasing of the others about her good looks.

The dual purpose of the gathering—a celebration of Gloria’s birthday along with an opportunity to grieve with the recently divorced Bernadine—resulted quite naturally in a tension between the spirited, often raucous passages that drew most heavily from the vernacular as the friends “performed” for and with each other and the solemn expressions of their deepest, darkest thoughts. The majority of cases of shifting to AAVE (17 out of 22 phonological shifts and 12 out of 15 grammatical) occurred when the women were in full vernacular mode, triggered by the speech acts, or were consciously attempting to transition to a cheerier mood. Through their performances they strived to cheer up their friend but most importantly, they succeeded in creating a private space in which they could all express their frustrations. While analysis of the *Jungle Fever* data suggested, in concordance with Pitts’ finding, a high correlation between emotional content and use of vernacular variables, the current data set suggests yet another dimension.

The focus on the friends’ shared identity as black women was in large part created through the manipulation of grammatical and lexical markers of the vernacular code, along with vernacular speech acts. In other scenes in the movie, their identity as mother/daughter/neighbor/lover/and professional working woman was marked by an infrequent use of AAVE markers. In this one pivotal scene alone, their collective identity as black women is allowed to surface through their choice of linguistic tokens to create and reinforce their solidarity. Here, as in the *Jungle Fever* scene, with both black males (“gay”, “ugly”, “too possessive”) and white women (“that bitch”, “that lyin’ asshole”) identified as the enemy, it is their very identity as black women-- as blacks **and** as women-- that is called into question. Code-switching to AAVE forms can be viewed as a discourse strategy through which the women are able to claim a space for themselves in which they are empowered to fully express themselves, nourish interaction and move on. In fact, in the aftermath of this gathering all four of the women find the strength to make positive changes in their lives and finally, to exhale.

In future studies the author hopes to examine a wider range of variables and a larger set of data to develop a better characterization of the rich textures of the speech community in question and a fuller understanding of the role of language in the empowerment of African American women. It is only through the in-depth analysis of a variety of discourse situations in multiple communities of practice that we can begin to hear and describe their true voices.

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APPENDIX

Data Segment I:

[opens with the women singing "Happy Birthday" to Gloria]

G: Oh... thank you.

S: Happy birthday, baby. To the best BLOW-dryin', SCISSOR-scalpin'...BUMPER-curlin', BRAIDin', WEAVin'...'Get this gray out of my head" DYEin' beautician...west of the Mississippi. Happy birthday.

G: Oh, thanks.

R: Weak. Gloria, I hope you find true love...and get you some that's so electric, you ain't gonna need no blow dryer.

S: Oh, please.

R: And so juicy...it's gonna put an end to your 10-year drought.

G,S: Oh! OOHOO!

S: Oh, she's so nasty.

Oh, nasty.

NasTEEE.

B: Oh, come on, raise them once more one more time. Let's get serious now. Girlfriend...here's to peace of mind...and all the happiness that your heart and hand can hold...cause Lord knows you deserve it.

G: Oh....

Oh!

All: Happy birthday, girl.

G: Oh, thank you.
All: Happy birthday.
G: I can do this.
S: All right, come on, make your wish first. Make your wish.
G: Okay.
R: Come on, girl, go on.
G: Okay
B: Oh, this is pitiful. Come on, let's help this old lady.
S: You need some help.
B: Let's help her out.

Data Segment II:

S: Why do they write these damn songs? Want to make you think and believe and dream you could feel like this. [Hmm] Shit. Somebody had to go through this shit in order to write it. Don't you think? Shit. You know what? You know what we all have in common?

R: What?

S: None of us—not none of us—have a man. Some sad shape.

B: That lyin' asshole messed up my life. I should call him right now. I want to talk to that bitch.

G: Girl—you crazy? What are you thinkin'?

You wait!
Oh-oh! Wait a minute! Hold it!
Hey, wait, wait!
What're you all doin'?

B: Hand me the phone. I'll talk to that bitch. I have a number for her.
Wait! Wait!

G: What are y'all doin'?

[“Johnny? Hello?”]

R: No! No—it's not John, Bitch.

G: Put the phone down!

G: Savannah, talk to her.
Bernie!
Bernie!

G: Bernie, don't do this!

B: Gloria, I gave him two babies and she think she can just take my fuckin' husband.

G: Bernie! Bernie! Cut! It's stupid! It's stupid and it's childish!

S: Thank you.

B: Gloria, I have some shit I wanna get off my chest. I'm hurting. Ohh, fuck the phone. What ha—what happened to the music? I thought this was supposed to be your party.

Data Segment III

Voices:
All out!

Come on, baby!

Yeah!

Shake your booty, now!

S: I'm sick of this shit now. I hate men... The one man I love is married with a kid and there's my life in one little sad nutshell.

Mmm...

B: Men do leave their wives.

Mmm...

R: At least he told you he was married.

S: Yeah, but see, I'm not your average 24-year-old girl who's willing to wait around and count the days, see? Unhh-huh...

Umm...

S: Un-huh. I'm 33 years old.

Who!!

Wow!

[squeal]

S: And I still look good.

[laughter]

S: I still look good.

You bet you do!

You do!

You look good, girl!

G: Fly diva.

R: Mm-hmm, freak mama!

G: Hoochie-coochie diva!

S: Ahh, y'all go to hell!

Yeah!

Savannah, you know you look good, girl.

You look good, girl!

Data Segment IV

S: What ever happened to the good old days?

Mmm...

R: What good old days?

Unnn..

B: Jinx!

S: You know—the days when men actually flirted with you and asked you out for a real date, you know? Where they HIDin'?

R: They not hiding. They're too damned scared to make a commitment.

Mm-hmm.

B: They want white women.

G: They gay.

B: Or married.
G: And they ugly.
S: They behind bars.
B: Got bad credit.
G: Got little dicks and they can't fuck.
 WHOA!
 OHHHH!!
 That's it!
 That's what it is!
R: Or they got big ones and still can't fuck!
 WHOOO!
 [howls of laughter]
 That's what it is.
G: Wait-wait: They wanna spank ya!
 WHAA!!
 What?!

B: They wanna what??
R: Now, that's not a bad thing, Gloria.
G: Alright!
R: Oh, come on!
B: They're too possessive.
G: They want you to be they mama.
B: And they daddy
R: And they ugly.
S: Hey—we already said they was ugly!
B: Yeah—good and ugly!
R: Inside out ugly?
S: If you're ugly inside, you're ugly outside.
B: Inside out.
R: Jeez, who asked her?

要 旨

ことばとジェンダー、及び、アフリカ系アメリカ人英語の研究が盛んになるにつれ、社会言語学における研究方法が疑問視されるようになってきている。例えば、Troutman (2001) は、ある1つの言語行動が、民族性、年齢、社会的階級、性的指向を含む様々な社会言語学的要因を無視して、すべての女性に当てはまるかのように記述される点、及び、その結果、アフリカ系アメリカ人女性や他の少数言語共同体に属する女性の真の姿が見えなくなっている、あるいは、誤って伝えられている点を指摘し、この種の研究を「一枚岩にされたウーマニズム」(monolithic womanism) という語を用いて批判している。そのため、社会言語学者は、言語と社会文化的な要因との接点をより深く理解するために、ある特定の「実践コミュニティ」(communities of practice, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) の用語) 内での言語使用により注目して、研究を行うようになってきている。また、da Fina (2006) らは、人は皆、日々の生活の中で実際にインタラクトする他者や状況に応じて、自己のアイデンティティを変えているという事実を重視し、アイデンティティの流動性はもちろんのこと、特定の言語共同体内で言葉を通して表現されるアイデンティティの幅も認めた上で、研究を行っていく必要があることを強調している。

本研究は、様々な状況で用いられるアフリカ系アメリカ人女性の発話パターンをより正確に記述することを目的とした一連の研究の一部である。本稿では、映画*Waiting to Exhale* 取り上げ、友人関係にある4人のアフリカ系アメリカ人女性が、互いにどのようにコードスイッチングしながら会話しているかに焦点を当てて論じていく。4人は皆、教養があり、中流階級に属し、専門職に就いている。標準英語とアフリカ系アメリカ人英語の両方を用いることができるが、「誕生会」のシーンでは、この4人で交わされる会話の場面を中心に、アフリカ系アメリカ人英語の特徴がより多く現れる。言葉の掛け合い (call-and-response) やから自慢 (braggadocio) といった発話行為とともに、アフリカ系アメリカ人英語に顕著に見られる文法的・語彙的特徴にも注目し、これらの現れと感情の高まりといった他の要因との相互関係を探る。

キーワード：アフリカ系アメリカ人英語、コードスイッチング、映画*Waiting to Exhale*