Articulating Black Voices:

Linguistic Analysis as a Tool for Translation

in Zora Neale Hurston's *"Story in Harlem Slang"*

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Abstract

The notion that the content of a work of literature cannot be fully dissociated from its form is nowhere as true as in texts in which language is not only a medium but also an object of representation itself, as tends to be the case in minority literatures. Translating texts which subvert standard language is no easy task, as it demands faithfulness to a message that seems to be intrinsically bound to the words on the page, with linguistic choices providing not only narratological and characterization cues but also powerful assertions regarding the center of the narrative. Translation decisions will be based on the artistic and sociopolitical effects of such choices, which lie beyond the scope of linguistics. However, if we are to understand those effects,

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we must first look into the linguistic layer of the text. In this sense, sociolinguistics and descriptive linguistics provide valuable tools for the type of reading that is necessary for translation, both by allowing us to identify the dialect in question and by providing a reliable framework to establish the reasons behind characters and narrators' use of language, all of which will need to be considered when writing in the target language. In this paper, I explore these concepts by looking at African American Vernacular English and illustrate the proposed instrumental reading by analyzing how Zora Neale Hurston constructs black voices and positions a black narrative center in *Story in Harlem Slang.*

Keywords: literary dialects, translation and linguistics, translation of non-standard varieties, instrumental reading, Zora Neale Hurston

Resumen

La idea de que el contenido de una obra literaria nunca puede separarse del todo de su forma adquiere especial relevancia en los textos en los que la lengua no es solo un medio sino también el objeto mismo de la representación, como a menudo ocurre en las literaturas de minorías. Traducir textos que se alejan de la lengua estándar supone un verdadero desafío: el mensaje está íntimamente ligado a la forma, que proporciona claves de lectura en torno a la narración, la caracterización de los personajes y el centro del relato. A la hora de tomar decisiones, los traductores tienen en cuenta los efectos artísticos y sociopolíticos de estas opciones léxicas, gramaticales y fonológicas, cuestiones que escapan a la lingüística. Sin embargo, para comprender estos efectos, primero hay que detenernos en los aspectos lingüísticos. En este sentido, la lingüística descriptiva y la sociolingüística se vuelven grandes aliadas de la traducción, ya que no

solo permiten identificar el dialecto en cuestión sino que, además, ofrecen un marco de referencia sólido para analizar las elecciones lingüísticas de los personajes y narradores, lo que será de vital importancia a la hora de redactar el texto en la lengua meta. En este trabajo, me valgo del inglés afroestadounidense para analizar estos conceptos e ilustro el tipo de lectura instrumental propuesta al analizar la construcción de voces afroestadounidenses y de un centro narrativo afroestadounidense en *Story in Harlem Slang* de Zora Neale Hurston.

Palabras clave*:* dialectos literarios, lingüística y traducción, traducción de variedades lingüísticas no estándares, lectura instrumental, Zora Neale Hurston

Introduction

> If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of 'ams' and 'ises'. Fortunately, we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself.
>
> *Zora Neale Hurston,* "*Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934)*

The portrayal of non-standard linguistic varieties in literature is both an artistic and a linguistic matter. Unlike spontaneous speech, the words employed by characters and narrators in literary discourse have been carefully chosen, arranged and edited by an author. However, when crafting their characters' utterances, writers inevitably draw their material from what they hear out in the real world—even when what they write purposefully deviates from real speech—and embed the social connotations attached to certain ways of speaking into the web of meaning of the narrative. Translating what is commonly termed *literary dialect* is no easy task, as it demands faithfulness to a message that seems to be intrinsically bound to the words on the page. As Klinger explains, linguistic choices provide not only narratological and characterization cues but also powerful assertions regarding the center of the narrative (2015, pp. 183-184), that is, the perspective from which the story is told. Every text poses unique translation problems that must be tackled on a case-by-case basis, the onus being on translators to consider the world of the text and come up with the best possible target-language rendering. However, concepts from linguistics can contribute to the type of reading that is necessary for translation, especially when dealing with texts where language is not merely a medium but also the object of representation itself. In this paper, I will explore the portrayal of "black speech" in Zora Neale Hurston's *Story in Harlem*

Slang to illustrate how linguistics can constitute a powerful tool for dissecting a text—the necessary first step to any informed translation decision. However, before diving into the analysis, we must establish what we mean when we speak of "black voices". In the next section, I will briefly summarize some of the most salient features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and comment upon its status as a non-standard variety.

What Is "Black Speech" Anyway?

We should begin by noting that there is no intrinsic difference between what is usually referred to as *language* and *dialect*. What people call a *language* in everyday use is actually the standard (i.e., empowered) dialect of the language in question. However, we cannot ignore the prevailing, hegemonic views on the matter, which position that ways of speaking other than the standard are debased versions of the "real" language, because those ideologies are precisely what authors portraying non-standard varieties are challenging. As Ashcroft *et. al.* say:

> The language of [the]‘ peripheries ’was shaped by an oppressive discourse of power. Yet they have been the site of some of the most exciting and innovative literatures of the modern period and this has, at least in part, been the result of the energies uncovered by the political tension between the idea of a normative code and a variety of regional usages. (Ashcroft *et. al.* 2011, p. 8)

Language, then, tends to be a thematic concern of minority writing. African American literature, for example, often makes use of eye dialect to illustrate how black characters' pronunciation differs from the standard. The artistic and sociopolitical effects that such choices may have, which are essential for translation, lie beyond the scope of linguistics. Yet the first step

towards unlocking the web of meaning of the text is the analysis of the form of the literary dialect. As Cohen Minnick (2010, p. xiii) points out, comparing how a given linguistic variety is spoken in the real world and how it has been represented on the text "can lead to insights about how writers perceive linguistic and social characteristics and what their attitudes are".

Thus, for any literary analysis to be possible, translators need to become familiar with the linguistic features of the dialect that is employed or alluded to in the text (or part thereof). In our case, we can turn to the body of descriptive linguistic research concerning AAVE. While acknowledging that there is variation within AAVE itself, as its lexical, phonological and even grammatical features change across geographical, age and socioeconomic lines, linguists rely upon the fiction of homogeneity to describe the variety theoretically. Due to the mainstream beliefs about AAVE, these descriptions are usually foregrounded with an explanation that AAVE is an internally consistent variety with grammatical, lexical and phonological features of its own and that, as Pullum (1999) says in the title of his seminal essay, it "is not standard English with mistakes".

We can illustrate this point by taking a look at one of the most common myths about this variety. Many people hold the false belief that AAVE speakers use the copula incorrectly, or simply do not use it. This misconception is underlain by an assumption that has no room in linguistics, namely, that AAVE speakers are trying (or should try) to speak Standard American English (SAE)—a viewpoint that also implies that departures from the standard are incorrect. However, the use of the copula in AAVE is governed by a very specific set of rules, which, although different from those of the standard variety, are no less systematic. Therefore, *he eating* and *he be eating* are not incorrect attempts at saying *he is eating,* and AAVE speakers will not say

one or the other at random. Rather, they will say *he be eating* when referring to a habitual action and *he eating* when describing a situation in progress in the present (although they would never fail to realize the copula with the first person singular or the third person singular neuter, as in *I'm eating* and *it's eating,* nor when the verb in question is stressed for emphasis).

A thorough description of the syntactic properties that set AAVE apart from other varieties of English exceeds the scope of this paper. These features, however, are not limited to the popularly acknowledged use of negative concord (as in *I ain't seen nothing*) and a verbal paradigm that differs from that of SAE (as in *she had ate*). As Green (2002) explains in the foreword to her book, "AAE is not a compilation of random deviations from mainstream English". Some grammatical features of AAVE are unique to this variety and the meanings they constitute may not be easily apparent to an average SAE speaker. Among them, we can mention some AAVE aspectual markers that are nonexistent in SAE, such as the habitual *be* discussed above, the stressed *been* used to refer to an action that happened or started in a remote past (*Bruce been running*) and the unstressed *done* that denotes that an event has ended (*I done finished my homework)* or has just happened *(I done lost my phone*). Moreover, unlike SAE, AAVE has some preverbal markers that qualify the meaning of the verb: *finna* denotes immediacy (*I'm finna eat*), *steady* denotes consistency (*He steady bothering you*) and *come* marks the speaker's indignation (*Don't come looking at me like that*).

AAVE speakers' knowledge of the variety is not limited to syntax. This dialect also has its distinctive lexical characteristics, including certain lexical manipulations, such as what Green (2002, p. 30) calls the "get my/your X phrases" (as in *get my drink* or *get my sleep*) or the use of *go* and *be like* as reporting verbs, to which Cuckor-Avila's research (2002) attests. In addition,

AAVE possesses certain lexical items that resemble those in SAE but have a different meaning. For instance, the word *kitchen* can be used with the same meaning as in SAE, but it can also refer to the curly hair at the nape of the neck. These lexical entries have entered the AAVE lexicon at some point in history and stood the test of time. They are now known by roughly all speakers of AAVE. In this sense, they should be distinguished from slang, therefore dispelling another popular belief that holds that the vocabulary of "black speech" is restricted to some slang words. Slang is a very local and age-related phenomenon that produces words that are adopted and abandoned within a very short period. The AAVE lexicon includes slang, and research has been done regarding whether slang plays a more important role in this variety than in others, but that is not all there is to it.

Furthermore, the phonological features associated with AAVE are crucial for understanding how a black voice may be constructed in a literary text. Among the most common manipulations of standard spellings used to articulate black voices, we can mention the substitution of the final *-th* for *-f* (writing *baf* for *bath,* for example) to show the voiceless labiodental fricative employed by AAVE speakers where SAE speakers produce the voiceless interdental fricative, or the substitution of *-th* for *-d* in initial positions (*they* is changed to *dey*) to show the voiced alveolar plosive used in AAVE instead of SAE's voiced labiodental fricative. The spellings of words such as *test*, *desk*, *hand* or *old* are sometimes changed to *tes*, *des*, *han* and *ole* to represent the final consonant cluster reductions typical of AAVE, and the final *-ing* is usually written as *-in'* (*singin*', *talkin', walkin')* to account for the use of the alveolar nasal in the articulation of this suffix, which is pronounced with the velar nasal in SAE.

AAVE's phonological features are just like its grammatical characteristics in that, contrary to what prescriptivists may claim, they are not random deviations from "the norm" but rather rule-governed, systematic patterns. Sounds in AAVE are employed in a given environment based on their phonetic properties. For instance, *ing* is pronounced with the alveolar nasal only when it is a suffix and not when it is part of the root of the word, as in *sing* or *ring.* At this point, we should notice that, as English is not a very isomorphic language, the spelling of the words does not constitute an exact mirror of how they are pronounced. The fact that much African American literature subverts standard spellings reveals that many AAVE speakers feel excluded from the prevailing linguistic ideology and that authors choose to appropriate the language to "make it bear the burden" of their cultural experience, as Achebe (1964, p. 434), drawing on Baldwin, puts it. Such artistic choices can be better understood in the light of sociolinguistics as a way to construct the identity of characters, narrators or authors themselves since, as Bucholtz and Hall state, "identity is not the source but the outcome of linguistic practice" (quoted by Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2015, p. 72).

Black Voices In "Story in Harlem Slang" by Zora Neale Hurston

American literature has a long tradition of employing eye dialect to represent black characters' speech, which initially tended to be associated with stereotypical representations for humorous purposes that continued relegating the variety to an inferior position. Birnhaum, as quoted by Cohen-Minnick (2010, p. 12), calls such representations "a kind of white blackface". Although some African American writers had also experimented with ways to represent black speech, it was not until the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s that black authors showed a

heightened interest in depicting African American speech as a way to challenge the prevailing linguistic hegemony.

One of the most prominent figures of this black artistic movement was novelist, folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, whose "Story in Harlem Slang" is an excellent illustration of how authors use language to construct black voices, telling the story from a black perspective and asserting the status of black characters as literary subjects. In this short story, set in Harlem, the narrator introduces readers to Jelly and Sweet Black, two impoverished—and hungry—male prostitutes. While the two men are engaged in a verbal contest in which each of them tries to convince the other that they are loaded with money, they see a domestic worker walking, presumably with her pay in her pockets. The two men immediately start flirting with her, hoping that she will agree to buy them dinner. However, the woman sees through their intentions and resumes her way, leaving Jelly to wonder whether he should have left his native Alabama to seek an easy life in Harlem.

As the title indicates, the story contains many Harlem slang words, which may be impossible to understand for some readers without the glossary that Hurston includes at the end. However, the systematic nature of the language employed by the three characters and by the narrator contrasts with the negative connotation of the term *slang* and with the belief that black speech is a debased, incoherent version of "proper" English that Hurston's white readers were likely to espouse. The three characters speak a rather pure version of AAVE, as shown by the grammar they use as well as by their pronunciation, marked through alternative spellings. Moreover, Hurston manages to articulate a black voice for the narrator, whose language, despite being closer to SAE, displays certain characteristics of AAVE.

Although the ethnicity of the three characters is made known to the reader through narratorial comments, by having them speak AAVE, Hurston conveys more information regarding their social class and the fact that, through their linguistic performance, they actively seek to assert their identity as part of the African American community and to establish solidarity with the other characters. Most of the AAVE-unique vocabulary they employ belongs to the realm of slang since expressions such as *collar a nod*, *pimp* and *Russian* are restricted in use both in terms of place (Harlem) and time (the 1940s). At first glance, even though this is the kind of vocabulary that three Harlem dwellers were likely to employ in a casual conversation at the time the story is set, Hurston's use of slang may seem like a stereotypical portrayal of black people. However, if we analyze the syntactic and phonological features of the characters' speech, *Story in Harlem Slang* comes across as an ironical title, as the consistency of these characteristics disproves the view that black people speak some sort of butchered English.

It is here that the analysis of the text is most dependent upon linguistics, for readers who are not familiar with AAVE will fail to grasp the subtle yet powerful argument that is woven throughout the short story. As translators are trained in the standard varieties of English, they need to bear in mind the relationship between dialects and identity in order not to read the text from the point of view of the standard, that is, valuing the syntactic and phonological features of AAVE not on their own terms but as *deviations* from SAE. Only by reading AAVE from the point of view of AAVE can we appreciate how the story is told from a black center, which will be vital for rendering the text appropriately into another language. However, it is not only concepts that the translator needs to be equipped with. Knowledge of the variety spoken by the characters is crucial both to

understand the utterances that they have to translate and to access deeper layers of meaning in the text.

Take the following extract from *Story in Harlem Slang*: "if you don't know what *you talking* 'bout, you better ask Granny Grunt" (emphasis added). Without knowledge of AAVE, it appears no different than "finally, Cleona come out the door and *she be talkin* to some pretty nigger" (emphasis added), taken from Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001, p. 84) in that they both appear to follow a different use from the verb *to be* than the one employed in SAE to form the present continuous tense. However, the two phrases differ in that only the one written by Hurston follows the rules of AAVE. Appreciating this difference helps us reconstruct the author's intentions, which is crucial for translation: while Hurston disproves the myths surrounding black speech by presenting readers with a rule-governed language, Everett has one of his characters write a novel (from which the extract above has been taken) that portrays black speech inaccurately and ridiculously. Thus, descriptive linguistics becomes an indispensable tool for translators. With the aid of descriptive grammars such as Green's (2002), we can realize that "finally, Cleona come out the door and she be talkin to some pretty nigger" is an inaccurate representation of AAVE, as the verb to be is not used in non-emphatic present continuous sentences in this variety, and the use of an uninflected *be* is used to express habitual actions, which is not the case here. Only then can we think of a target-language rendering, evidently employing different strategies to tackle the diverse challenges posed by both texts.

Further examples of the consistency of AAVE in *Story in Harlem Slang* lie in the characters' use of negative concord in utterances like "[you] ain't got no business in the barrel"; "boy, you ain't no good for what you live", "you ain't drawed no roll on me" and "I just don't pay

you no mind" and in their use of *been.* At one point, Jelly says *"*Long as you been knowing me, Sweet Black, you ain't never seen me with nothing but pe-olas", using the stressed aspectual marker *been*, which situates an activity or sate in the remote past or, as in this case, indicates that an activity or state has started somewhere in the remote past and continues until the present. SAE lacks an aspectual marker that expresses the same meaning, so translating Jelly's utterance into this variety would imply expanding the meaning carried by the aspectual marker, as in "you have known me for an incredibly long time".

Jelly's use of *been* in the previous sentence differs from that of Sweet Black in "I been raised in the church". This is no aspectual, stressed *been*, but rather the less frequent unstressed *been*, which is used in contexts where SAE would use a form of *have* followed by *been.* Spears (2017, 151-75) lists other uses of the unstressed *been*, including its function as the simple past form of *to be,* as in *she been married when I met her* (*been* being the past copula that links the pronoun *she* to the adjective *married*). Although *was* is most commonly used in AAVE as a past copula, many other AAVE verbs have an identical morphology in simple past and past participle contexts. This phenomenon is also found in SAE with verbs such as *feel*, *hear*, *get* or *buy,* although it is much more common in AAVE. In Hurston's short story, this feature is present in some of the characters' utterances, such as "dat broad I seen you with wasn't no pe-ola" and "I seen you two mullet-heads before". Another difference between the AAVE and SAE verbal paradigms is that many verbs which are irregular in SAE are regular in AAVE, as we can see in the characters' use of *knowed, throwed* and *drawed.*

Furthermore, the characters follow AAVE rules in their use of the copula. The paradigm of the verb *to be* in AAVE distinguishes between *am* for the first person singular and *is* for the

other persons in the present tense, and does not make any distinctions for person in the past, where the form *was* is used. We can see this at work in the characters' speech: "I'm from there", "where 'bouts in Georgy is you from?", "if they's white, they's right", "you skillets is trying to promote a meal on me" and "you was beating up your gums". The characters, however, do not always realize the copula, as in "who boogerbooing?", "you trying to jump salty", "what you doing cold in the hand?". This non-realization of the copula is allowed (though no required) by AAVE, albeit subject to specific rules, which the characters follow: it cannot be omitted in the past tense ("I was uptown when Joe Brown had you all in the go-long last night", "I wouldn't give you air if you was stopped up in a jug"), with the first person ("I'm not putting out a thing", "If I'm lying, I'm flying!"), after *it* ("it's a good thing I ain't short-tempered"), or when it is emphatic ("a red hot pimp like you say you is"), among other constraints.

These syntactic features are by no means a comprehensive list but a selection of examples that show that the characters in *Story in Harlem Slang* speak AAVE. We can also see how Hurston builds the characters' black voices by spelling certain words differently than in the standard norm. Although this representation does not amount to eye dialect, it manages to portray certain features of AAVE pronunciation. The alternative spelling used most consistently throughout the story is the substitution of initial *th* for *d* in the words *that* and *the,* often spelled *dat* and *de* in the story. This marks that the characters employ the initial voiced alveolar plosive used in AAVE in these and similar words. Other alternative spellings include the use of *naw* instead of *no* to mark the open vowel used in AAVE, the use of *sox* instead of *socks* and *lil* instead of *little* to signal the final consonant cluster reduction and the omission of syllables to mark the deletion of unstressed syllables in initial and medial word position, which, despite occurring in most varieties of English,

tends to be more frequent in AAVE than in SAE. While most of the verbs ending in *-ing* are written with the standard spelling, the *g* is dropped once ("what's cookin'?"), to signal the use of the alveolar nasal. Although Hurston applies the alternative spelling technique sporadically, it should not be inferred that, apart from the features marked in this way, the characters' pronunciation does not differ from SAE. The occasional use of alternative spelling works together with the AAVE grammatical features and the Harlem slang to build the black voices so that, rather than being expected to be read as exclusive features, these spellings are meant to remind readers of some of the consistent phonological features of AAVE so that they may supply the rest.

In addition, the characters employ some rhetorical strategies commonly associated with AAVE. This is especially interesting for translators, for while the purely linguistic aspect of their dialogues is more revealing of Hurston's interest to depict AAVE, the rhetorical patterns these characters engage in constitute valuable characterization cues. As we look into them, we understand that the three characters are actively seeking to construct black identities and to achieve solidarity with the others, since they employ strategies—*giving dap*, *signifying, rapping* and *woofing*—that are part of the pragmatic competence of AAVE speakers and is immediately associated with this variety of English.

To begin with, *giving dap* is "a form of nonverbal communication that is used to express agreement about some issue in the conversation or to show solidarity" (Green 2002, p. 144) which often takes the form of handshakes involving specific hand movements that change as often as slang. These movements tend to be supported linguistically and are significant components of AAVE speech events. In the short story, Jelly and Sweet Black's handshake works both as a greeting and as a bonding strategy:

'*Gimme some skin!'*

'Lay de skin on me, pal!' Sweet Back grabbed Jelly's outstretched hand and shook hard" (emphasis added).

"You over-sports your hand your ownself. [...] I just don't pay you no mind. *Lay de skin on me*!" (emphasis added).

Furthermore, Jelly and Sweet Black's exchange includes several instances of *signifying*, which Smitherman defines as "the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles—that is, signifies on—the listener" (as quoted by Green, 2002, p. 135). Sweet Black signifies on Jelly when he contradicts his assertions about the woman with whom he had been the night before: "Buy you a whiskey still! Dat broad couldn't make the down payment on a pair of sox"; "Jelly, de wind may blow and de door may slam; dat what you shooting ain't worth a damn!". As we can see from Sweet Black's use of hyperbole and rhyme, signifying is not merely an insult. It requires remarkable linguistic prowess on the part of the speaker, who needs to be able to come up with fresh images and employ figures of speech.

Although in these examples Sweet Black is confronting Jelly, signifying can be part of friendly interactions. *Playing the dozens*, on the other hand, takes the verbal contest one step further towards the aggressive end since this "mean game" is meant to "totally destroy somebody else with words" (Rap Brown, as quoted by Green 2002, p. 135), usually making an inappropriate remark about the interlocutor's *momma*. In the story, Sweet Black attempts to play the dozens with Jelly when he says "If you trying to jump salty, Jelly, that's your mammy", but Jelly limits the contest to signifying when he answers, "Don't play in de family, Sweet Black. I don't play de dozens. I done told you".

While signifying and playing the dozens are face-threatening acts, the comments Jelly and Sweet Black direct to the domestic worker are aimed at increasing their interlocutor's positive face to persuade her into buying them dinner:

> "Big stars falling!" Jelly said out loud when she was in hearing distance. "It must be just before day!"
>
> "Yeah, man!" Sweet Back agreed. "Must be a recess in Heaven pretty angel like that out on the ground."
>
> "But baby!" Jelly gasped. "Dat shape you got on you! I bet the Coca Cola Company is paying you good money for the patent!"

Remarks along these lines are typical of the AAVE speech event known as *rapping*, which usually refers to exchanges between a male and a female, in which "the male tries to win the favors of a female as he delivers a compliment (in his estimation) by using verbal expertise" (Green, 2002, p. 136). While the domestic worker refuses the two men's advances, she uses imagery and wit in her replies, falling within the conventions of the speech event. In this way, she chooses to project a black identity and show some solidarity towards her addressees. It is this solidarity that causes the men to continue rapping, as we can see in the following exchange between the domestic worker and Sweet Black:

"I'm not putting out a thing. I'm just like the cemetery I'm not putting out, I'm taking in! Dig?"

"I'll tell you like the farmer told the potato, plant you now and dig you later."

When the domestic worker leaves, after calling Sweet Black a thief, the man tries to save face by making the following comment:

> "What I want to steal her old pocket-book with all the money I got? I could buy a beat chick like her and give her away. I got money's mammy and Grandma change. One of my women, and not the best one I got neither, is buying me ten shag suits at one time."

Utterances of this kind are associated with another rhetorical feature of AAVE, known as *woofing*. Woofing, which implies skillful boasting, can be achieved through hyperbole, as in the previous quote and in the following comment by Jelly:

> "How can I be broke when I got de best woman in Harlem? If I ask her for a dime, she'll give me a ten dollar bill; ask her for drink of likker, and she'll buy me a whiskey still. If I'm lying, I'm flying!".

Moreover, woofing can involve structure manipulations, such as Jelly's repetition of the word yellow in "Last night I was riding round in a Yellow Cab, with a yellow gal, drinking yellow likker and spending yellow money. Tell 'em 'bout me, tell 'em!". The repetition leads to the use of figurative language (*yellow gal*, *yellow money*), which, as we have seen, is a characteristic component of all the speech events that form part of the pragmatic competence of AAVE speakers. As we can see, Hurston's portrayal of AAVE reveals her keen eye for recognizing the subtleties of the linguistic and communicative behavior of AAVE speakers and allows her to construct the characters' black voices.

When it comes to the narrator, Hurston's skill is equally visible, for the voice with which she endows the non-AAVE-speaking narrator is unmistakably black. Great care should be employed when translating the narratorial comments into a different language since, as there is no explicit assertion regarding the narrator's ethnicity, it is only through his/her voice that readers can see that the story is being told from an African American center. Although the narrator employs

grammatical and lexical features of SAE, she/he incorporates certain lexical items of AAVE, and manipulates language with the characteristic expressiveness of this variety. She/he uses slang terms, such as *Zigaboo, collar nods* and *pimp,* which reveal his/her familiarity with Harlem culture, as well as the non-slang word *mama*, which is associated with AAVE. Apart from the words she/he employs, some lexical manipulations are reminiscent of AAVE: she/he describes Jelly as *papa-tree-top-tall,* using the hyperbole and alliteration that is usually employed by AAVE speakers in casual conversation, and she/he says that Jelly *made the crossing* (instead of *crossed*), which bears some resemblance to the "get my/your X phrases" in that it involves transposing a verb into a noun and using it as a complement of a generic verb. Moreover, the use free indirect speech and thought throughout the story means it is not always easy to delimit where an expression is to be attributed to the narrator or to the characters, which highlights the similarities in their use of language.

It is in grammar and phonology that the narrator's language differs from that of the characters. The narrator does not employ any AAVE morphosyntactic feature, and Hurston does not highlight any characteristic of the narrator's pronunciation through alternative spellings, save for counted exceptions (*till, tell'em*) which are also contracted by SAE speakers. At first sight, it might seem that the narrator is choosing to adhere to SAE to accommodate to the traditional standards of literary publication, which would somewhat dilute the African American perspective from which the story is told. However, readers are informed that the narrator is not writing but speaking in the very first line of the story, "Wait till I light up my coal-pot and I'll tell you about this Zigaboo called Jelly", with the spelling *till* further emphasizing orality. As written language tends to be modeled upon the standard variety, the narrator's choice to speak signals both a refusal

to change his/her manner of speaking to accommodate to the conventions as well as a desire to identify more with the speakers of the non-standard variety.

The stylistic characteristics of the narration are also those of orality. The narrator prefers short, simple sentences linked by connectives such as *then*, *and* and *so* instead of long, complex sentences with different levels of subordination. As Ong (1982, p. 36) explains, orality is "additive rather than subordinative". Moreover, Hurston uses sentence length to convey the rhythmic patterns which many black SAE speakers use to inflect an otherwise standard variety with prosodic features associated with AAVE, thus signaling "solidarity with the greater African American community" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 182). That the narrator does not speak AAVE, then, is not a sign of accommodation but of Hurston's recognition that not all black Americans speak this variety and that ethnicity can be conveyed linguistically in several ways.

Conclusions

One of the most salient features of minority literatures is the creativity with which language is shaped into a tool for the deconstruction of the hegemonic discourses that relegate minorities to the periphery. By articulating the voices of the excluded and the marginalized, authors empower minorities and assert their place in literature, and by telling stories from their perspective, they position alternative centers, a move which, ultimately, challenges the notion of center altogether. Although linguistics has tended to be dissociated from literary analysis since the 1920s, it is key to articulate the full meaning of these texts.

I hope that this paper will help shed new light on the value of linguistics as an instrumental tool for practicing translators. The notion that the essence of a work of literature cannot be fully

dissociated from the language in which it has been written is nowhere as true as in texts in which language is an object of representation used to endow characters, narrators and the minorities to which they belong with an authentic voice that is not constrained by the prevailing linguistic ideology. A linguistic analysis of such texts is the first step towards achieving a faithful translation since it provides the basis for conscientious decision-making. Concepts such as the dialect/language hierarchy and linguistic variation, taken from general linguistics, provide the framework for analyzing the language of minority groups. In turn, sociolinguistic notions, like identity and group solidarity, help us explain the linguistic behavior of narrators and characters, as well as the intention that lies behind certain linguistic and artistic choices of the author.

Even with the aid of these concepts, my reading of *Story in Harlem Slang* would not have been possible without the extensive body of research regarding the features of AAVE that has been carried out in the past decades. The work of descriptive linguists is essential for translation since knowledge of the variety in question is necessary not only to understand what characters or narrators are saying but also to recognize whether the variety is being portrayed accurately or not, to identify instances of code-switching and to determine a character's group allegiance, all of which is fundamental to access the web of meaning of the text.

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Appendix

"Story in Harlem Slang" by Zora Neale Hurston

(First published in American Mercury, July 1942)

Wait till I light up my coal-pot and I'll tell you about this Zigaboo called Jelly. Well, all right now. He was a sealskin brown and papa-tree-top-tall. Skinny in the hips and solid built for speed. He was born with this rough-dried hair, but when he laid on the grease and pressed it down overnight with his stocking-cap, it looked just like that righteous moss, and had so many waves you got sea- sick from looking. Solid, man, solid!

His mama named him Marvel, but after a month on Lenox Avenue, he changed all that to Jelly. How come? Well, he put it in the street that when it came to filling that long-felt need, sugarcuring the ladies 'feelings, he was in a class by himself and nobody knew his name, so he had to tell 'em. "It must be Jelly, 'cause jam don't shake." Therefore, his name was Jelly. That was what was on his sign. The stuff was there and it was mellow. Whenever he was challenged by a hard-head or a frail eel on the right of his title he would eye-ball the idol-breaker with a slice of ice and put on his ugly-laugh, made up of scorn and pity, and say: "Youse just dumb to the fact, baby. If you don't know what you talking 'bout, you better ask Granny Grunt. I wouldn't mislead you, baby. I don't need to not with the help I got." Then he would give the Pimp's sign, and percolate on down the Avenue. You can't go behind a fact like that.

So this day he was airing out on the Avenue. It had to be late afternoon, or he would not have been out of bed. All you did by rolling out early was to stir your stomach up. That made you hunt for more dishes to dirty. The longer you slept, the less you had to eat. But you can't collar nods all day. No matter how long you stay in bed, and how quiet you keep, sooner or later that big

gut is going to reach over and grab that little one and start to gnaw. That's confidential right from the Bible. You got to get out on the beat and collar yourself a hot.

So Jelly got into his zoot suit with the reet pleats and got out to skivver around and do himself some good. At 132nd Street, he spied one of his colleagues on the opposite sidewalk, standing in front of a café. Jelly figured that if he bull-skated just right, he might confidence Sweet Back out of a thousand on a plate. Maybe a shot of scrap-iron or a reefer. Therefore, Jelly took a quick backward look at his shoe soles to see how his leather was holding out. The way he figured it after the peep was that he had plenty to get across and maybe do a little more cruising besides. So he stanched out into the street and made the crossing.

"Hi there, Sweet Back!" he exploded cheerfully. "Gimme some skin!"

"Lay de skin on me, pal!" Sweet Back grabbed Jelly's outstretched hand and shook hard. "Ain't seen you since the last time, Jelly. What's cookin'?"

"Oh, just like de bear I ain't nowhere. Like de bear's brother, I ain't no further. Like de bear's daughter ain't got a quarter,"

Right away, he wished he had not been so honest. Sweet Back gave him a top-superior, cut-eye look. Looked at Jelly just like a showman looks at an ape. Just as far above Jelly as fried chicken is over branch water.

"Cold in hand, hunh?" He talked down to Jelly. "A red hot pimp like you say you is, ain't got no business in the barrel. Last night when I left you, you was beating up your gums and broadcasting about how hot you was. Just as hot as July-jam, you told me. What you doing cold in hand?"

" Aw, man, can't you take a joke? I was just beating up my gums when I said I was broke. How can I be broke when I got de best woman in Harlem? If I ask her for a dime, she'll give me a ten dollar bill; ask her for drink of likker, and she'll buy me a whiskey still. If I'm lying, I'm flying!" "Gar, don't hang out dat dirty washing in my back yard! Didn't I see you last night with dat beat chick, scoffing a hot dog? Dat chick you had was beat to de heels. Boy, you ain't no good for what you live."

"If you ain't lying now, you flying. You ain't got de first thin. You ain't got nickel one."

Jelly threw back the long skirt of his coat and rammed his hand down into his pants pocket. "Put your money where your mouth is!" he challenged, as he mock-struggled to haul out a huge roll. "Back your crap with your money. I bet you five dollars!"

Sweet Back made the same gesture of hauling out nonexistent money.

"I been raised in the church. I don't bet, but I'll doubt you. Five rocks!"

"I thought so!" Jelly crowed, and hurriedly pulled his empty hand out of his pocket. "I knowed you'd back up when I drawed my roll on you."

"You ain't drawed no roll on me, Jelly. You ain't drawed nothing but your pocket. You better stop dat boogerbooing. Next time I'm liable to make you do it." There was a splinter of regret in his voice. If Jelly really had had some money, he might have staked him, Sweet Back, to a hot. Good Southern cornbread with a piano on a platter. Oh, well! The right broad would, or might, come along.

"Who boogerbooing?" Jelly snorted. "Jig, I don't have to. Talking about me with a beat chick scoffing a hot dog! You must of not seen ,me, 'cause last night I was riding round in a Yellow Cab, with a yellow gal, drinking yellow likker and spending yellow money. Tell 'em 'bout me, tell

'em!" "Git out of my face, Jelly! Dat broad I seen you with wasn't no pe-ola. She was one of them coal- scuttle blondes with hair just as close to her head as ninety-nine is to a hundred. She look-ted like she had seventy-five pounds of clear bosom, guts in her feet, and she look-ted like six months in front and nine months behind. Buy you a whiskey still! Dat broad couldn't make the down pay- ment on a pair of sox."

"Sweet Back, you fixing to talk out of place." Jelly stiffened.

"If you trying to jump salty, Jelly, that's your mammy."

"Don't play in de family, Sweet Back. I don't play de dozens. I done told you."

"Who playing de dozens? You trying to get your hips up on your shoulders 'cause I said you was with a beat broad. One of them lam blacks."

"Who? Me? Long as you been knowing me, Sweet Back, you ain't never seen me with nothing but pe-olas. I can get any frail eel I want to. How come I'm up here in New York? You don't know, do you? Since youse dumb to the fact, I reckon I'll have to make you hep. I had to leave from down south'cause Miss Anne used to worry me so bad to go with me. Who, me? Man, I don't deal in no coal. Know what I tell 'em? If they's white, they's right! If they's yellow, they's mellow! If they's brown, they can stick around. But if they come black, they better git way back! Tell 'em bout me!"

"Aw, man, you trying to show your grandma how to milk ducks. Best you can do is to confidence some kitchen-mechanic out of a dime or two. Me, I knocks de pad with them cack-broads up on Sugar Hill, and fills 'em full of melody. Man, I'm quick death and easy judgment. Youse just a home-boy, Jelly. Don't try to follow me."

"Me follow you! Man, I come on like the Gang Busters, and go off like The March of Time! If dat ain't so, God is gone to Jersey City and you know He wouldn't be messing 'round a place like that.

Know what my woman done? We hauled off and went to church last Sunday, and when they passed 'round the plate for the penny collection, I throwed in a dollar. De man looked at me real hard for dat. Dat made my woman mad, so she called him back and throwed in a twenty dollar bill! Told him to take dat and go! Dat's what he got for looking at me 'cause I throwed in a dollar."

"Jelly, de wind may blow and de door may slam; dat what you shooting ain't worth a damn!" Jelly slammed his hand in his bosom as if to draw a gun. Sweet Back did the same.

"If you wants to fight, Sweet Back, the favor is in me."

"I was deep-thinking then, Jelly. It's a good thing I ain't short-tempered. 'T'aint nothing to you, nohow. You ain't hit me yet."

Both burst into a laugh and changed from fighting to lounging poses.

"Don't get too yaller on me, Jelly. You liable to get hurt some day."

"You over-sports your hand your ownself. Too blamed astorperious. I just don't pay you no mind. Lay de skin on me!"

They broke their handshake hurriedly, because both of them looked up the Avenue and saw the same thing. It was a girl and they both remembered that it was Wednesday afternoon. All of the domestics off for the afternoon with their pay in their pockets. Some of them bound to be hungry for love. That meant a dinner, a shot of scrap-iron, maybe room rent and a reefer or two. Both went into the pose and put on the look.

"Big stars falling!" Jelly said out loud when she was in hearing distance. "It must be just before day!"

"Yeah, man!" Sweet Back agreed. "Must be a recess in Heaven pretty angel like that out on the ground."

The girl drew abreast of them, reeling and rocking her hips.

"I'd walk clear to Diddy-Wah-Diddy to get a chance to speak to a pretty lil 'ground-angel like that" Jelly went on.

"Aw, man, you ain't willing to go very far. Me, I'd go slap to Ginny-Gall, where they eat cow- rump, skin and all."

The girl smiled, so Jelly set his hat and took the plunge.

"Baby," he crooned, "what's on de rail for de lizard?"

The girl halted and braced her hips with her hands. "A Zigaboo down in Georgy, where I come from, asked a woman that one time and the judge told him 'ninety days.'"

"Georgy!" Sweet Back pretended to be elated. "Where 'bouts in Georgy is you from? Delaware?" "Delaware?" Jelly snorted. "My people! My people! Free schools and dumb jigs! Man, how you going to put Delaware in Georgy? You ought to know dat's in Maryland."

"Oh, don't try to make out youse no northerner, you! Youse from right down in 'Bam your own- self!" The girl turned on Jelly.

"Yeah, I'm from there and I aims to stay from there."

"One of them Russians, eh?" the girl retorted. "Rushed up here to get away from a job of work." That kind of talk was not leading towards the dinner table.

"But baby!" Jelly gasped. "Dat shape you got on you! I bet the Coca Cola Company is paying you good money for the patent!"

The girl smiled with pleasure at this, so Sweet Back jumped in.

"I know youse somebody swell to know. Youse real people. You grins like a regular fellow." He gave her his most killing look and let it simmer in. "These dickty jigs round here tries to smile. S'pose you and me go inside the café here and grab a hot?"

"You got any money?" the girl asked, and stiffened like a ramrod. "Nobody ain't pimping on me. You dig me?"

"Aw, now, baby!"

"I seen you two mullet-heads before. I was uptown when Joe Brown had you all in the go-long last night. Dat cop sure hates a pimp! All he needs to see is the pimps 'salute, and he'll out with his night-stick and whip your head to the red. Beat your head just as flat as a dime!" She went off into a great blow of laughter.

"Oh, let's us don't talk about the law. Let's talk about us," Sweet Back persisted. "You going in- side with me to holler 'let one come flopping! One come grunting! Snatch one from de rear!" "'Naw indeed!" the girl laughed harshly. "You skillets is trying to promote a meal on me. But it'll never happen, brother. You barking up the wrong tree. I wouldn't give you air if you was stopped up in a jug. I'm not putting out a thing. I'm just like the cemetery I'm not putting out, I'm taking in! Dig?"

"I'll tell you like the farmer told the potato, plant you now and dig you later."

The girl made a movement to switch on off. Sweet Back had not dirtied a plate since the day be- fore. He made a weak but desperate gesture.

"Trying to snatch my pocketbook, eh?" she blazed. Instead of running, she grabbed hold of Sweet Back's draping coattail and made a slashing gesture. "How much split you want back here? If your feats don't hurry up and take you 'way from here, you'll ride away. I'll spread my lungs all over New York and call the law. Go ahead, Bedbug! Touch me! And I'll holler like a pretty white woman!"

The boys were ready to flee, but she turned suddenly and rocked on off with her ear-rings snap- ping and her heels popping.

"My people! My people!" Sweet Back sighed.

"I know you feel chewed," Jelly said, in an effort to make it appear that he had had no part in the fiasco.

"Oh, let her go," Sweet Back said magnanimously. "When I see people without the periodical principles they's supposed to have, I just don't fool with 'em. What I want to steal her old pocket- book with all the money I got? I could buy a beat chick like her and give her away. I got money's mammy and Grandma change. One of my women, and not the best one I got neither, is buying me ten shag suits at one time."

He glanced sidewise at Jelly to see if he was convincing. But Jelly's thoughts were far away. He was remembering those full, hot meals he had left back in Alabama to seek wealth and splendor in Harlem without working. He had even forgotten to look cocky and rich.