Africanisms in Contemporary English

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

In what follows, examples from African languages and CE are provided to show parallels between the two. With regard to CE, the focus is on Ebonics for two primary reasons. First, Ebonics, derived ultimately from African languages, shows the greatest degree of Africanisms by virtue of this fact. Second, Ebonics, through vehicles such as rap and hip-hop, rhythm and blues, jazz, the blues, rock and roll, country, field songs, and ring shouts, has been and tends to be one of the most innovative and influential (voluntary and involuntary) documented contributors to what ends up eventually being incorporated into CE or mainstream Standard American English (SAE). Some of the examples of Africanisms in CE deal with syntactic structure, such as

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

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

### Syntax and Semantics

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

**Preposition/Locative-Final Interrogatives**

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

**Ebonics**

1. Where she at?

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

**Yoruba**

2. Níbo l’ó wà?

where FOC’3SG.SUBJ at/be located

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

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

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

Resumptive Pronoun

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

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

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

Akan (Fante)
6. Ṣpanyin no ɔ-nom nsa
   elder DEF 3SG SUBJ-drink wine
   “The elder drinks (wine).”

Yoruba
8. Oba ó dé ilé
   king 3SG.SUBPST arrive house
   “The king arrives at the house.”

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

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

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

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

**Resumptive-With**

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

**Ebonics**

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

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

**Akan**

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

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

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

**Ebonics**

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

**Akan**

13. obiara pe n’asɛm ne
    each like 3SG.POSS’word with
    n’asɛ bi
    3SG.POSS’face beautiful some

    “Everyone likes her with her beautiful face.”

Resumptive-with can also be used to assign blame or responsibility. When the pronominal possessor is the subject of the sentence, the subject is understood to be responsible in some way, shape or form for the action mentioned in the sentence.

**Ebonics**


**Akan**

15. W-a-pira ne
    3SG.SUBJ-PERF-injured with
    n’asɔoden.

    3SG.POSS’hardheadedness
    “S/he got hurt with her/his hardheaded self.”

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

**Multiple Negation**

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

**Ebonics**

16. Cain’t nobody tell me nuttin’ ‘bout no spades.

    “No one can tell me anything about spades.”

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

17. Don’t nobody go nowhere.

    “No one should go anywhere.”

18. Ain’t nobody sayin’ nuttin’ new.

    “Nobody is saying anything new.”
Akan
19. Esi a-m-ma Kwaku fufuo a-n-di
   E. PST-NEG-give K. fufuo PST-NEG-eat
   a-n-da koraa
   PST-NEG-sleep at all

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

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

Genitive Marking/Agreement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yoruba
27. Ó ra oúnję l’ójà
   3SG.SUBJ buy food PREP’market
   “He buys food at the market.”

Wolof
   3SG.SUBJ go (to) market DEM
   “S/he is going to the market.”

Another of the prominent features of Ebonics is
the use of be to connote iterativity as in the fol-
lowing:

Ebonics
29. She be trippin’
   “She acts inappropriately.”

30. He be wil(d)’in
   “He acts recklessly.”
One can find a direct parallel to this in Yorùbá:

Yoruba
31. Ò má a ń jeun l’ááárò
   3SG.SUBJ HAB eat PREP’morning
   “S/he eats in the morning.”

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

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

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

A similar feature can be found in Akan.

Akan
35. Òrebeka n’asem
   3SG.IMMFUT-speak 3SG.POSS’word
   “He’s about to say his piece.”
36. Merebèdidi
   1SG.SUBJ-IMMFUT-eat
   “I’m about to eat.”

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

37. He ugly (denamug)
   “He’s is (very) ugly.”
38. He smart
   “He is smart.”

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

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

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

Akan
41. Èso
   3SG.SUBJ.INAN big
   “It is big.”

The Lexicon/Morphology

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

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

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

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

Further Readings


Africanity

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

Defining Africanity

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

Nobles and Goddard

Wade W. Nobles and Lawford L. Goddard define Africanity and Afrocentricity synonymously as the intellectual and philosophical foundation used to develop the political, scientific and moral criterion for authenticating the reality of African family processes. It is the utilization of the African experience as the core paradigm for human