CHARACTERIZING AAVE: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF CHARLES CHESNUTT'S SHORT STORIES[1]

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0 Abstract

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is arguably the most widely studied variety of American English, including its employment to establish authenticity in literature. This study attempts to provide a descriptive account of the features of AAVE employed by Charles W. Chesnutt, an African American author from the Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem literary period, through the examination of three short stories with publication dates ranging from 1887 to 1901. Data were obtained from *The Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive*, from which a corpus constituting approximately 10,000 words was created. The present study builds upon recent descriptive accounts of AAVE, in addition to earlier work, including Foster's (1971) focus on phonology in seven separate short stories, Green's (2002) consideration of *The House Behind the Cedars*, and Minnick's (2004) examination of *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*.

> "Moreover, black dialect offered the black writer
> 'cultural capital' in another sense: it stood for the
> value of a cultural heritage in a society that denied
> that blacks had any culture of their own."[2]

1 Introduction

African American Vernacular English (AAVE), known by various other names (see §2.1.1), is arguably the most widely studied variety of American English. Discussions of its genesis and common phonological and morphosyntactic features are widespread and have long-lasting implications for society, e.g. with reference to the prestige – or lack thereof – conferred upon it. Nevertheless, while the use of AAVE in written form can be used to demonstrate a perceived substandard characterization of an individual's speech, it can also be used in literature to convey authenticity, which may be used for myriad purposes.

The *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem*, a term coined by Charles W. Chesnutt himself, describes the transitional years between the end of slavery and the artistic rebirth of the Harlem Renaissance, and it is commonly applied to types of artistic expression, viz. that of literature. This period represented, to use Barbara Baker's (2006:134) description, the "resilience of the southern black community." Rising from the backdrop of slavery was a need to reconcile a horrifying shared origin and the need to formulate a new cultural heritage. Through the use of the vernacular, Chesnutt was able to create characters whose speech demonstrated a shared means of expression unavailable to those outside of the community.

This paper serves as a joint contribution to the fields of literary studies and linguistics, as it provides an account of the AAVE used by Chesnutt in his short stories and attempts to foreground these results against other scholarly works that outline the development of this variety of English. As such, this paper is organized into four additional sections. Section two provides a general literature review of the terminological issues and commonly-cited features of AAVE. Also found in this section is an examination of the previous literary linguistic studies of Chesnutt's work. After the methodology associated with this study is described in section three, the data are analyzed and presented in section four for recognition of the most salient features by each character. Finally, the discussion is brought to a conclusion and the results are formalized within a broader context in section five.

2 Literature Review

The following sections attempt to provide a concise definition of AAVE and engage the issue of terminology. Some commonly recognized features are introduced, and a discussion regarding the use of dialect in literature is undertaken. Moreover, a brief examination of the Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem literary period is provided in order to establish the historical and sociocultural context of Chesnutt's short stories.

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[2] This quote is taken directly from McCaskill and Gebhard (2006:165).

2.1 African American Vernacular English

The following two sections briefly introduce AAVE. The first subsection (§2.1.1) addresses the question of accepted nomenclature used to describe the variety and the implications for its usage. The second subsection (§2.1.2) aims to identify some specific features that consistently typify the variety. This discussion is not intended to summarize the entire field, but simply to provide pertinent background information to be considered in conjunction with the analyzed dialogue.

2.1.1 Terminological Issues

"African American Vernacular English" (AAVE) has been selected for this study as the most neutral,3 i.e. the least controversial, term by which to reference this particular language variety, and many other scholars, including e.g. Mufwene et al. (1998), utilize the same terminology. On the other hand, a variety of other terms have been used historically and contemporaneously instead of AAVE. For instance, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006), Poplack (2000), and Kautzsch (2002) refer to "African American English," while essays in Norment Jr. (2003) describe "African American Language," "Afro-American English," "Ebonics," "Negro Dialect," "Black English," and "Black English Vernacular." Nevertheless, many of these terms carry different connotations, some of which are extremely negative, that may impede the discussion at hand. As such, this study refers strictly to "African American Vernacular English," though any of the aforementioned terms could reasonably stand in its place. Additionally, although some argue that it is a full language and not simply a dialect of Standard American English (SAE), this position is not supported by the present   study.

2.1.2 Common Features

Although many books, anthologies, and articles have been written about the prototypical features of AAVE, Fasold and Wolfram's (1970) seminal article is oftentimes cited as a cohesive, straightforward description of the variety. This is not to say that the other sources previously mentioned are without merit; rather, the aforementioned article calls attention to many of the same phonetic, phonological, and morphosyntactic characteristics as other works, but it takes as its primary goal the descriptive identification of these characteristics. Other sources consider the features somewhat secondarily. For instance, Poplack (2000) is a purely diachronic account of AAVE; Mufwene et al. (1998) considers a variety of sociolinguistic issues; and Kautzsch (2002) examines very particular features in ex-slave recordings, viz. the scope of negation and the use of negative particles, the use of the copula, and relativization strategies.

     With regard to Fasold and Wolfram (1970, reprinted in Normant Jr. 2003:59-92), a variety of phonetic and phonological features are mentioned. Consonant clusters in word-final position are oftentimes reduced, and this might be more advanced with particular phonetic clusters (62). In addition to this word-final reduction, <r> may be deleted when in any position other than word-initial, leaving behind an altered vowel quality (66-68). The plosivization of <th> sounds, i.e. the

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[3] The neutrality of this term has also been called into question, as it implies a restriction to working-class individuals. However, "vernacular" is retained to concretize the non-codified status of the linguistic variety.

voiced and voiceless interdental fricatives, is widespread and may depend on the individual speaker and the phoneme's placement in the particular word (65-66). An unstressed syllable can be completely unpronounced, e.g. *'member* and *'bout* for *remember* and *about* (71).

Other quite salient morphosyntactic features are also discussed. Due to word-final reduction of consonant clusters, the past tense –ed can be lost. The use of completive <done> and the remote time <been> isalso common, though the latter is specific to AAVE (75). Furthermore, leveling of the verbal paradigm (75), deletion of the copular verb (79-80), use of negative concord (80-85), and alternative possessive constructions are attested (85-86).

As this study aims to consider literary exemplars as evidence in support of the purely linguistic accounts, each of these features is considered in analyzing the corpus. Furthermore, as Fasold and Wolfram (1970) considers the variety of AAVE as attested at the time of their writing, it seems logical to claim that any features found in the literature from seventy to eighty years prior are likely not to be innovations on the part of the author; instead, they are likely features that were retained from an earlier linguistic variety.

2.2 Previous Studies

The following three sections describe the previous work of Foster (1971), Green (2002), and Minnick (2004) on literary dialect and, in particular, Charles W. Chesnutt's use thereof. As far as the author knows, these are the only three studies that take a purely linguistic approach, i.e. one that does not rely primarily upon the literary aspects of character development, and plot progression to Chesnutt's literature.

2.2.1 Foster (1971)

The Phonology of the Conjure Tales of Charles W. Chesnutt is currently the most comprehensive account of the dialect used in works by Chesnutt, as it systematically recognizes phonological variation consistent with AAVE in a collection of short stories. It begins with a very brief account of Chesnutt's life, including the fact that much of his early life was spent in Fayetteville, North Carolina, even though he would ultimately become a teacher for some time elsewhere. Upon his arrival in the North, he began writing *The Conjure Tales*, the accuracy of which was influenced by his fine attention to details during his time as a teacher and a phonographer (Foster 1971:2).After this introduction to the author's life, Foster shifts his focus to the phonological characteristics of Uncle Julius's (UJ) speech, the main character in the aforementioned text.

In order to gauge the authenticity of UJ's speech, Foster relies upon the fieldwork notes of Guy S. Lowman. Given that the individuals whose speech patterns were consulted were white, Foster's (1971:3, 26-27) analysis rests upon the premise that the late 1800s/early 1900s speech of European Whites and African Americans – of lower socioeconomic status – contained more commonalities than differences, which is necessary to confirm that UJ's speech is similar enough to the variety likely spoken by Chesnutt himself, an assumption the present study supports. Nonetheless, there exist four major areas in which Chesnutt deliberately modified the orthographic representation of words to represent the dialect: phoneme substitution, phoneme deletion, phoneme insertion, and phoneme transposition (Foster 1971:5).

2.2.2 Green (2002)

African American English: A Linguistic Introduction provides a broad overview of the features of AAVE, but chapter six – "AAE in Literature" – is the most relevant for the present study. Green (2002:164) argues that the four principal reasons for literary dialect are to make a connection between a character and a specific region, identify a character as belonging to a certain [socioeconomic] class, to establish the authenticity of a character, or simply to elicit a readerly response. As she focuses specifically on the linguistic perspective, the final reason is eschewed from her examination. Nevertheless, Green (2002:166) foregrounds the previous work of Brasch (1981) in delineating the body of African American literature into five separate historical periods: the Colonial Revolution Cycle (1760s-1800), the Antebellum Cycle (early 1800s-1860), the Reconstruction Cycle (1870s-1900), the Negro Renaissance Cycle (1920s-1940s), and the Civil Rights Period (1945-1970s). For the purpose of this study, the more commonly accepted terms "Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem" and "Harlem Renaissance" will be used for the "Reconstruction Cycle" and the "Negro Renaissance Cycle," respectively.

Although Green (2002) identifies seminal authors and poets from all periods, excluding the Colonial Revolution Cycle, the Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem is the most relevant for the present study. In her examination of this period, she calls upon the literary fruits of a few individuals, including Charles W. Chesnutt. Green (2002:174-175) looks specifically at the characters' speech in Chesnutt's novel *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), citing such common features as the reduction of complex consonant clusters, the regularization of the past tense, differences in agreement, and the use of lexical items and idiomatic expressions specific to AAVE, e.g. *telling lies* refers to the sharing of "folktales and exaggerated stories" (Green 2002:174).

2.2.3 Minnick (2004)

Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech considers the author's role in using literary dialect to portray speech authentically. Four separate texts are examined in pursuit of this goal: *Huckleberry Finn*, *Conjure Tales*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The second mentioned text, *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, was written by Charles W. Chesnutt and contains seven short stories.

Nevertheless, Minnick (2004) focuses strictly on the story entitled "Dave's Neckliss," and she addresses phonological and syntactic characteristics that typify Julius McAdoo's speech. Some of the more salient features include conditioned sound changes affecting the vocalization of /ɹ/, the plosivization of interdental fricatives, various reductions involving syllable structure, and vowel changes that clearly distinguish AAVE from SAE. Additionally, some of the more noticeable syntactic features include copula deletion, completive *done*, negative concord, leveling of verbal paradigms, regularization of the past, and the *for to* construction.

3 Methodology

This study attempts to provide an empirical account of the literary features of African American Vernacular English found in three short stories by Charles W. Chesnutt. While this paper does not aim to provide an explanation for the existence of AAVE or a full account of its diachronic traits,

it does serve to quantify and describe the most salient phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics featured by Chesnutt. Moreover, this paper expands the scope of previous linguistic treatments of Chesnutt's work, as it does not rely strictly upon the speech of UJ. Instead, previously unexamined short stories serve as the corpus. These stories have publication dates ranging from 1887 to 1901, which situates them within the middle of the Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem literary period. Consequently, the results of this study may be used to support non-literary treatments of language usage from the period.

Foster's (1971) examination of the phonological processes in Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* provides the basis for the present study's examination of the phonology; however, given the disparity in corpus size, the author aims to confirm the assertions made in the earlier work. *The Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive* makes available the text of thirty-five short stories, one novel, two essays, and two poems. These short stories span the length of Chesnutt's life and represent broadly the period recognized now as the Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem. The table found in Appendix 1 contains the collection of short stories in the archive with their respective publication years.

It should be noted, however, that not all of these short stories represent the vernacular. As such, the inclusion of every story in the current study would be counterproductive and yield irrelevant results. Consequently, those that have been examined previously by Foster (1971), Green (2002), Minnick (2004), or other literary scholars and those that do not straightforwardly employ literary dialect have been excluded, leaving the three below.

Table 1: Short Stories in the Present Corpus

Title	Publication Year	Word Count	DD Word Count	DD %
Appreciation	1887	393	217	55.2%
Aunt Mimy's Son	1900	4,505	3,372	74.85%
The March of Progress	1901	4,443	1,518	34.17%
Total Word Count:		**9,341**	**5,107**	**54.67%**

The short stories were subcategorized individually and collectively, i.e. the word frequency count was ascertained (using AntConc) for each individual short story to identify if any disparity in usage exists among the stories, and, in particular, among the characters; the word frequency was also determined for all of the stories together (see Table 1 above). Nevertheless, it should be understood that the dialectal dialogue (DD) word count and frequency associated with each story are not metrics for the authenticity of the speech; rather, they reflect the relative position of a given character's position in the story. As such, it should not be considered as anything more than an interesting method of viewing the non-linguistic factors associated with each character, e.g. a character with a lower socioeconomic status may have a more marginal role in the story, which would lead to fewer opportunities to speak and, consequently, fewer instances to foreground the linguistic variety. As a result, simply calculating the overall frequency of a specific feature of AAVE would limit the conclusions that could be drawn.

In any case, this distribution provides a relatively straightforward means of identifying which stories are more likely to contain the most salient synchronic characteristics witnessed during the aforementioned period. These are subsequently compared to the results found in the studies of Foster (1971), Green (2002), and Minnick (2004). Nevertheless, it should be understood that the literary exemplars identified are interpreted as literary evidence to be used in addition to the more

prototypically linguistic evidence, i.e. to avoid running the risk of circular argumentation.

4 Analysis

The following three sections present the short stories from the corpus. A discussion of the literary and linguistic aspects of each story is undertaken, recognizing such characteristics as the basic plot; the main characters; the relative frequency of the non-standard linguistic variety; and the particular phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical traits that serve to characterize authentically the individuals' speech.

4.1 Appreciation (1887)

Comprising approximately four hundred words, 55.2% of which represents dialectal speech, "Appreciation" is the shortest story in the corpus. It presents a conversation between Old Pilgrim Gainey/Uncle Pilgrim (OPG), who had returned from the North to his hometown in Missouri; and "Mistah Dixon," his nephew. The two discuss how economic and social norms differ in the North, e.g. African Americans actually attempt to secure legislative positions in the North, which is starkly contrasted with the South. Nevertheless, the point is made by OPG upon the arrival of Tom Macmillan, a minor character, that "cullu'd people ain't 'preciated at de Norf." This is supported by his claim that chewing tobacco is readily shared among people living in the South, presumably a metaphor for a more collective existence, which he did not find to be the norm in the North.

    In any case, this story presents the second-highest proportion of the vernacular from the corpus. As Old Pilgrim Gainey had moved later in his life to the North, it is reasonable that his speech would less likely be influenced by his new home. In considering the most commonly recognized features of AAVE, it becomes clear that his dialogue was not haphazardly compiled; instead, it accurately represents the features described by non-literary linguistic sources. For instance, OPG consistently plosivizes the interdental fricative in word-initial position, viz. *de*, *dey*, *dem*, *dat*, *dar* for *the*, *they*, *them*, *that*, *there*. Word-finally, on the other hand, there is a change in place of articulation, though the spirant quality is retained: *Norf* for *North.* Similarly, the velar nasal is alveolarized word-finally. Apheresis and syncopation are widespread, which Chesnutt represents orthographically with an apostrophe, e.g. *s'pose*, *b'leeves*, *'preciated* for *suppose*, *believes*, *appreciated.* Consonant cluster reduction is primarily employed word-finally, as in *jes'*, *an'*, *fac'* for *just*, *and*, *fact*, though it is also attested word-medially in an environment where /ɹ/ was lost, e.g. *chil'en* for *children*. In fact, the loss of /ɹ/ and its intrusive inclusion in other instances is quite common, especially in the final scene between OPG and Tom:

> *"Look a'heah, Marse Tom, you stop dat now! Said Pilgrim with a delighted grin, which displayed all his wealth of ivory: Is yer got any terbacker, Marse Tom?"*
>
> *[…] "I nevah had dat much tabacker give ter me all de time I wus at de Norf!"*

In addition to these phonological processes, there appears to be noticeable differences in the vowels employed by OPG, some of which were affected by the deletion or insertion of /ɹ/, e.g. [ɔ] in <Lawd> and [iə] in <heah>. Nonetheless, these will not be considered in further detail, as Foster

(1971) provides an extensive account of the phonology, and in great detail the vowel quality, in other stories by Chesnutt.

A common morphosyntactic characteristic of OPG's speech includes negative concord, which, although not exclusive to AAVE, is used with a greater degree of frequency. Literary exemplars are provided in (1) below.

(1) a. "*I **ain't** come on **no** visit, sah.*"
    b. "*Well, 'bout de chil'en, I **didn'** had **none**.*"
    c. "*Bout de chu'ches, I **nevah** went ter **no** white chu'ches.*"
    d. "*[D]em as has de money **doan** hab **no** trouble […]*"

Additionally, leveling of the verbal paradigm is commonly attested, as in (2). This leveling is also found in the existential construction poses by OPG to Tom, as demonstrated in (3).

(2) a. "*I made twice as much es **I does** heah.*"
    b. "*[…] an' **yer has** all de privilege **yer wants***"

(3) "*Is yer got any terbacker, Marse Tom?*"

Finally, specific lexical items used in the story are quite limited. OPG mentions three times with various qualifiers that the North was *middlin'*, which was commonly used in the South to refer to mediocrity. Excluding this single word, the only other construction that is immediately identifiable as non-standard is the lexicalized expression *at de Norf*.

OPG's speech is overwhelmingly consistent. Each of the phonological features described earlier – plosivization, alveolarization, apheresis, syncopation, consonant cluster reduction, and the loss or intrusiveness of <r> – is attested in every instance where it would be possible. This is correlated strongly with the morphosyntactic features, in particular negative concord and paradigm leveling.

4.2 Aunt Mimy's Son (1900)

"Aunt Mimy's Son" is the longest story in the collection and also holds the highest ratio of dialect usage (74.85%). It follows the experiences of Mrs. Jemima Belfontaine, commonly known as "Aunt Mimy" (AM). As an ex-slave and a prototypical Mammy figure, AM finds employment as a cook in a white household. Through conversations between AM and her boss, it becomes clear that she has a son, Tom, of whom she speaks quite highly. Tom migrated to the North for economic opportunities, and he is initially believed to have the capability to advance his people, as AM emphasizes in (4).

(4) "*[…] like my Tom, dey'dhe'pdeir race to gitout'n de land o' Egyp' an' de house er bondage, an' be somebody, like w'ite folks.*"

Nevertheless, he moves from one position to another in pursuit of more money before ultimately moving back home with his mother. She mentions to her boss that an old friend has visited and is ill, so she is taking care of him. However, it becomes apparent at the end of the story that this individual was actually her son, who would meethis untimely death under her care.

As previously mentioned, AM is a former slave; consequently, it is plausible that her speech would be perhaps more conservative than the speech of characters in the other stories. Furthermore, given her central role in the story, much more dialogue is available for such a comparison to be possible. Nonetheless, this is an area for future research that is not engaged in the present study beyond tacit implications.

With reference to phonological processes, AM's speech is quite characteristic of AAVE. Interdental fricatives are realized as plosives in word-initial position, though simple deletion is also sometimes attested, particularly in the third-person plural pronoun:

> (5) a. "[…] *an' some of **'em** has mos' forgot how [...]*"
> b. "*it's nach'ul for **d**ew'ite folks not to want our folks crowdin' **'em**'*"
> c. "[…] *wouldn' res' easy in his grave 'less'n he wuz laid 'longside of **'em**.*"

As previously mentioned, the change from the velar nasal to the alveolar nasal – with much higher frequency than in other non-standard varieties – serves as an accurate indicator of AAVE. Given the size of this story and the sheer amount of literary dialect, it seems necessary to state that phoneme deletion was marked by Chesnutt with an apostrophe. As such, <n'> was used for two purposes: (a) to mark the aforementioned change in place of articulation, and (b) to represent consonant cluster reduction. These are evinced in (6) and (7), respectively.

> (6) a. "*I ain' use to bei**n'** call' Mis' Belfount'n […]*"
> b. "[…] *he   wuz   in   de   hotel   business—runni**n'**   a   hotel,   I   s'pose*"

> (7) a. "*I knows de han'write.*"
> b. "*He's ben in NooYo'k a**n'** Boston a**n'** Providence a**n'** Rhode Isla**n'**.*"

Apheresis and syncopation are both used productively throughout, particularly in unstressed syllables, and they are more commonly attested in AM's speech in environments where /l/ or /ɹ/ would be found, as demonstrated in (8). Related to this is the presence of an intrusive <r> or the deletion thereof, as seen respectively in (9) and (10).

> (8)   *'lected*, *he'p*, *deyse'ves (*elected, help, theyselves> themselves)

> (9)   *f**er***, *t**er***, *kind**er***, ***er*** (for, to, kind of, of)

> (10)   *wuk*, *fo'*, *lett**uh***, *yond**uh*** (work, for, letter, yonder)

Some interesting, salient morphological and syntactic features arise in AM's speech. For instance, she alternates between the *at de No'th* construction (as seen in the speech of OPG in "Appreciation") and *in de No'th*. The former is utilized the majority of the time (three out of four instances); as a result, it is unclear if the *in*-variant was actually in use or simply a mistake by Chesnutt. Nevertheless, AM's speech is characterized by leveling of the copular verb (11) and the use of the completive *done* (12).

> (11)   "*Dese young folks … is not good fer much.*"

> (12)   "*[A]ll his folks wuz gone, so I done tol' 'im I'd take keer o' 'im …*"

Relative clauses and complementizer phrases function somewhat differently than in the other stories, viz. in the omission of the *who* relativizer (13) and the use of *what* instead of *that* (14).

(13) *"[H]e's de only one Ø sent back any money ..."*

(14) *"Oh, no, suh, he always sot a heap o' sto' by his mammy. An' I'm proud o' him, for deyain' no yuther young cullud man **w'at**evuh went f'om dis place datevuh sent back as much money to de ole folks as my Tom has, an' he's de only one sent back any money he made hisse'f."*

Finally, regularization of the reflexive pronouns is heavily used by AM, viz. *hisse'f* and *deyse'ves* for SAE *himself* and *themselves*.

4.3 The March of Progress (1901)

"The March of Progress" has one of the lowest percentages of literary dialect (34.17%); however, the story itself is arranged in a much different fashion from the others. It takes place in the predominantly black town of Patesville, and the reader is situated within the debate taking place by the county committee over which individual to hire for the position of head teacher. The committee was composed of Frank Gillespie (FG), Bob Cotton (BC), and Abe Johnson (AB). Miss Henrietta Noble (HN), a white woman, was the former teacher, who, now returning from the North and in somewhat poor health, was vying for the position against one of her former students, Andrew J. Williams (AJW). After the debate has taken place, the members have decided to reappoint HN as the lead teacher; she passes away shortly after her appointment, thus allowing the "March of Progress" to continue, i.e. to allow educated black individuals to help advance the group as a whole.

 Although FG worked as a barber, he had been involved for quite some time in local politics. BC worked as a blacksmith; however, he had learned to invest his money very well, ending up owning multiple properties. On the other hand, AB had spent his life working in positions that required manual labor, and he was considerably older and less educated than the other committee members. Consequently, it is not surprising that his speech tends to foreground AAVE features at a much greater rate than the other two committee members.

 BC plays a limited role in the story, and, as a result, he has more limited dialogue. Nevertheless, he does consistently employ the alveolar nasal in nominal and progressive constructions (5/5 instances) and a more forward vowel in *for* (3/3 instances). He only sometimes exhibits r-lessness, reduces consonant clusters, and drops unstressed syllables. On the other hand, FG, the chairman of the committee, exhibits these characteristics to an even lesser extent in proportion to his dialogue, likely a result of his continued presence in the public sphere, i.e. while he consistently uses the alveolar nasal word-finally, he does not consistently adhere to any of the previously discussed features.

 Contrary to both BC and FG, however, AB exhibits all of the previously discussed AAVE features, in addition to other unmentioned features, at an extremely high rate. With reference to the nasal, the more front vowel in *for*, r-lessness, the reduction of consonant clusters, and the dropping of unstressed syllables, AB's speech regularly complies all of the time. In fact, the r-lessness that is less advanced in the speech of BC and FG is typically attested in words with greater

frequency; on the other hand, AB's dialogue begins with less r-lessness, likely due to the initial formality of his response, but increases due to the emotional connection he has to HN – and she to the rest of the community as well. Additionally, this does seem to be less advanced in certain words and unattested in words that would otherwise make no sense. For instance, words like *member*, *remember*, and *salary* retain the rhotic. Furthermore, <th> plosivization is used for every determiner.

Nevertheless, AB utilizes many prototypical features of AAVE morphosyntax, none of which are attested in the speech of the other two characters. This is likely analogous to his less prestigious socioeconomic status. As such, he consistently levels the verbal paradigm, using forms like those in (15).

(15)　　a. "*I s'pose **I has** a right ter speak in dis meet'n?*"
　　　　　b. "*[…] an' **we'sgettin'**ou' own houses an' lots an' hosses an' cows*"
　　　　　c. "*ef **I reads** de signs right […]*"
　　　　　d. "*an' **she teached** 'em sense an' manners an' religion an' book-l'arnin'*"

Additionally, negative concord and regularization of the reflexive pronouns, similar to AM, is quite widespread in AB's dialogue, seen in (16) and (17), respectively.

(16)　　a. "*An' we **hadn' done nothin', neither**, ferdem to 'member us fer.*"
　　　　　b. "*When she come heah we **didn' hab no** chu'ch.*"
　　　　　c. "*[..] w'endey**wuzn' nobody** else knowed how ter read it.*"

(17)　　deyse'ves, hisse'f

5 Conclusion

This study has considered the previous linguistic treatments of Chesnutt's work in Foster (1971), Green (2002), and Minnick (2004), and it has analyzed three additional short stories that have, as of yet, remained relatively unexamined. The stories in this corpus have publication dates over a fourteen-year period, ranging from 1887 to 1901. This situates them approximately in the middle of the Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem literary period, which recognized a change in the way that black authors perceived themselves and their place in an overwhelmingly white-driven society. The dialogue presented in each of the three short stories considered by the present study – and five characters in particular – demonstrates internal consistency and reinforces the rule-governedness of AAVE as a variety of a natural language. Additionally, each story presents a different set of characters whose speech typifies the most commonly cited features of AAVE. These features also vary depending upon the characters' respective socioeconomic status, i.e. the presence of features of AAVE is more extensive in the speech of OPG, an extremely old man from a slave-owning state; AM, an ex-slave; and AB, a man who had worked menial, labor-intensive positions his entire life. On the contrary, the remaining two characters, BC and FG, tend neither to use all of the features discussed nor at the same frequency. Although literary evidence should not be taken as *a priori* evidence of features attested in the spoken language, it can be used to concretize the claims already made in strictly linguistic sources. This includes not only the identification of common traits of AAVE speech, but also the recognition that they occur with greater frequency than in other non-standard varieties of English. In line with Green's (2002) description, the literary dialect

employed in these stories connects the characters and specific regions, demonstrates the socioeconomic differences among characters, and lends authenticity to their speech.

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