Expressive meaning in an AAE attributive construction ☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the syntax, semantics, and prosody of the discourse *-ass* construction in African American English, as in *get all that ugly-ass junk out of here*. This construction involves attributive modification in which a noun or adjective (called the ASSOCIATE) forms a constituent with the word *ass* and modifies a head noun. The paper describes the syntactic distribution of both the ASSOCIATE and the word *ass*. Arguments are presented that support an analysis in which *-ass* is not a nominal but a functional head that categorizes its sister as adjectival, similar to *-ish* and *-y* in mainstream English. Semantically, it is argued that discourse *-ass* is an expressive in the sense of Potts (2007b): it is "semantically bleached" (Spears, 1998), and its semantic contribution is not truth conditional. The paper shows how discourse *-ass* has the properties associated with expressives as articulated by Potts (2007b) and as first observed about the construction in Spears (1998).

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1. Introduction

Colloquial African American English has a construction that has been noted by Spears (1998), Collins et al. (2008), and others, and which is exemplified and underlined in (1):

(1)   Get all that <u>ugly-ass junk</u> out of here. (Spears, 2001: 231; underline added)

I will refer to this construction as 'discourse *-ass*', following Spears (1998). This term emphasizes one of the main points of this article, that this construction is expressive, in the sense of Potts (2007b). Spears (1998) was the first to argue that the meaning of discourse *-ass* is its expressive contribution to a context, and the first goal of this paper is therefore to expand on these observations in the context of recent work on expressive meaning, primarily as articulated by Potts (2007b). The second goal of the paper is to lay out the syntactic distribution of the construction. This aspect of the paper is important, because if the *-ass* in discourse *-ass* makes no meaningful contribution to the construction on the truth-conditional semantic level, then we must look to the syntax to determine the constraints on its distribution. Although the phrase *ugly-ass* may appear at first to have the structure of a compound, this paper will present arguments that support an analysis in which the *-ass* of discourse *-ass* patterns more like bound affixes such as *-ish* and *-y* in English, or *-(c)ito/-(c)ita* in Spanish, than as part of a compound.

In the prototypical case, a discourse *-ass* construction consists minimally of two parts: an adjective or noun (e.g., *ugly, fool*), and the word *ass*. Together, these two parts modify a noun, as shown in (1), where *ugly ass* modifies *junk*. The structure of discourse *-ass* is shown schematically in (2), which gives the terms that I will use in analyzing the construction.

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(2)   ugly   -ass   junk
      ASSOCIATE *a*-word   HEAD-N
      [MODIFIER   ]

I refer to *-ass* in this construction as the *a*-word, since in some cases it can be something other than *-ass*, and to minimize the distraction of repeatedly using a swear word. The pre *a*-word material (e.g., *ugly*) will be referred to as the ASSOCIATE, and we will see that although the associate is typically an adjective or noun, it is not confined to these syntactic categories. I will refer to the N in the construction as the "head noun" (HEAD N). Following Spears (1998), I will often hyphenate the associate and the *a*-word in order to indicate that they form a prosodic constituent; adopting this typographic convention can also help disambiguate uses that involve the word *ass* but do not have the structure or meaning of discourse *-ass*.

As shown in (2), I will use the descriptive term MODIFIER to refer to the constituent that consists of the associate and the *a*-word. In addition, I will sometimes refer to the modifier as the "associate + *a*-word" constituent, particularly when discussing the modifier as two lexical items.[1]

On its own, the word *ass* means 'buttocks', and it is considered a mild to moderately strong swear word in African American English (AAE) and most other varieties of English. In the discourse *-ass* construction, the literal meaning of the word is absent. This is seen in (1) in the fact that it is used to describe "junk," which does not denote a being with anatomical properties. The discourse *-ass* construction does, however, retain the force of the swear word, and usages like (1) may be considered impolite or even "obscene" in many speech situations (Spears, 1998).

Because this paper will focus somewhat narrowly on the syntactic and semantic distribution of discourse *-ass*, it will not address how the construction fits into the broader context of African American communicative practices and "black ways of speaking" (Spears, 2007: 226). For insightful discussions on these topics, particularly with respect to discourse *-ass*, see Spears (1998, 2001, 2007), and Smitherman (1994, 2000).

1.1. A note on the data

The construction discussed in this paper is part of AAE. Two useful sources for readers unfamiliar with the language are Green (2002), for an overview of the grammar and phonology of AAE, and Smitherman (1994, 2000) and Spears (1998) for definitions and information on particular lexical items. The grammaticality judgments in this paper come from informants who identify as African-American and native speakers of AAE. The two main informants were a 28-year-old male and a 44-year-old male. Both informants were life-long residents of the New York City area. The 28-year-old informant had spent 5 years outside the NYC area, in Raleigh, North Carolina. In order to minimize the influence of Caribbean dialects or other languages and dialects that are spoken primarily outside the U.S., only informants whose parents were born and raised in the U.S. were used.[2] The majority of the judgments in this paper come from these two informants. A third, 50-year-old female informant participated, but she dropped out part-way through informant work because she did not like giving judgments on what she judged to be incorrect English, and she was not comfortable with the swear words in the data.

The data come from numerous sources: contrived sentences; examples from previous scholarly work such as Spears (1998) and Collins et al. (2008) (linguistic examples from this source will be abbreviated 'CMP'); examples from the Internet; from the social networking tool Twitter; from popular media such as films and rap songs; and examples offered by informants. Because it is difficult to determine whether any given example from the Internet is from a speaker of AAE, all the examples in this paper, regardless of source, were judged by native speaker informants. In other words, although Web pages and Twitter feeds are cited for some of the data in this paper, the grammaticality judgments on them come from native speaker informants. Judgments on data from mainstream English are my own.

Much of the data comes from the stand-up comedy film, *The Original Kings of Comedy* (Lee, 2000). This film contains the sets of several different comedians. For all examples from this source, the name of the performer who uttered the example (e.g., Bernie Mac) is given in addition to the conventional (producer, year) citation.

1.2. Distinguishing discourse -ass from similar constructions

Before proceeding to the syntactic and semantic distribution of discourse *-ass*, we must first distinguish discourse *-ass* from superficially similar constructions. The uses discussed in this section all involve the word *ass* but are distinct from discourse *-ass*, and although some of them are likely related to discourse *-ass*, the connections between them and discourse *-ass* must be set aside for future research.

The most closely-related construction is exemplified in (3), which I will refer to as the [+human] construction. Using the terms outlined above, we can say that the [+human] construction involves an associate (again, usually an adjective or a noun), and the word *ass*. This construction appears to lack a head-N, but here the associate + *ass* constituent functions as an argument.

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[1] Spears (1998) uses the term "*-ass* word" (abbreviated to AW) to refer to what I call the MODIFIER or "associate + *a*-word" constituent. In Spears (2001), he refers to AWs as "*ass* compounds."

[2] This may be a challenge particular to work on AAE in the northeastern United States, though see Spears (2001) for some discussion of commonalities between African American and Caribbean language practices.