

Grammatical Reanalysis and the multiple *N-words* in African American English

Taylor Jones & Christopher Hall*†

Abstract

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is developing a class of previously undescribed function words, facilitated by the semantic generalization of the word *nigga*. Here we demonstrate *nigga* is unspecified for race, gender, or humanness. We argue that there are multiple n-words, fulfilling different grammatical and social functions. Using a variety of sources, we show that there are new pronouns in AAVE based on *nigga* – moreover, we demonstrate they pattern with pronouns, not imposters (Collins & Postal, 2010) with respect to binding, agreement, and theta-role assignment. We also discuss vocatives and honorifics. We conclude by discussing the origin of these forms, and discussing their relevance to both linguistic controversy and to societal controversy around the stigmatized dialect.

Keywords: *AAVE, syntax, semantic bleaching, imposters, grammaticalization*

1 Introduction

Some vernacular registers of African American English (henceforth, AAE and AAVE depending on which register is under discussion)¹ now make available to speakers a new set of lexical items, including pronouns, which are the result of the grammatical reanalysis of phrases using the AAE reflex of the English slur *nigger*, as in example 1:

(1) a nigga haven't made myself dinner yet
I haven't made myself dinner yet

In this paper, we argue that there are multiple “n-words” and that they fulfill a wide range of social and *grammatical* functions in some vernacular varieties of AAE.² We show that semantic broadening has led to grammaticalization. Because the perceived

*Author contact information: tayjones@sas.upenn.edu, cshall@culturept.com

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1. We will use the *V* when a vernacular register – and not any other register – is intended. We view AAVE as a proper subset of AAE.

2. We are intentionally vague on which varieties precisely. To our knowledge, this is not constrained by region, gender, or socioeconomic class, however we do not want to make universalizing claims about this aspect of African American English, and we are aware some social and cultural factors (e.g., orientation toward the Black Church or language ideologies taught at some Historically Black Colleges and Universities) may influence both stance toward, and use of, these forms.

origin of these words is a taboo word Allan and Burridge 2006 and because AAE is a stigmatized language variety which is often taken to be heavy on obscenity (Spears 1998),³ and because these forms are textbook CAMOUFLAGE CONSTRUCTIONS (Spears 1982), the fact that there are multiple “n-words” with subtle and well-articulated grammatical functions has been heretofore given inadequate syntactic attention. While there are many interesting social, discourse pragmatic, and sociolinguistic aspects of changing use of “the ‘n’-word” in AAE that deserve further attention – including questions of identity construction, permission, dialect crossing, and appropriation – the focus of this paper is solely on syntactic change happening among some AAE speakers. That is, we are not interested in use *outside* African American speech communities, and our focus is strictly a descriptive, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic analysis within AAE. We believe that the controversy around the word has impeded descriptive linguistic inquiry, and that continued misrepresentation of this aspect of the speech of the most marginalized subset of the African American community may have continuing negative effects (v.i., section 6).

In this paper, we discuss a variety of syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically differentiated forms of the “n-word”: We discuss emerging pronouns from the set of “n-words” in AAVE — first person *a nigga* (phonologically, /ənigə/) and *niggaz* (phonologically /nigəz/) — and we demonstrate that they are in fact sometimes pronouns, and not syntactic IMPOSTERS (Collins and Postal 2012). We also discuss second person VOCATIVES *nigga* (/nigə/) and *ma nigga* (/mənigə/), and third person SOCIAL DISTANCE HONORIFICS *this/that/my nigga*, used to give more information about the speaker’s relationship with a person being introduced as a topic of discussion. We also discuss neutral, discourse-linked bare *nigga*, where the referent is known from discourse, and no overt determiner is present. We sometimes refer to these as N-FORMS, below. The organization of the paper is as follows: we begin with a review of the already well-described phonological differentiation in AAVE between *nigga* and the slur *nigger*. We then demonstrate the semantic broadening of *nigga*, which now has a meaning roughly equivalent to General American (henceforth, GA) ‘guy,’ as distinct from the still extant (and sometimes homophonous) slur *nigger*. Then we discuss the difference between imposter DPs and bona fide pronouns, before showing that, for all relevant tests, some new n-forms pattern with pronouns. We continue by discussing politeness distinctions in n-form vocatives. We next briefly discuss social distance honorifics emerging from the same lexical class, before discussing the relevance of animacy for these n-forms. We discuss possible trajectories of emergence and adoption. Finally, we discuss the implications of such camouflage forms for cross-dialect comprehension and their relationship with linguistic prejudice.

A Note on the Examples

Because our focus is syntactic and semantic description, the existence of such forms, not people’s attitudes toward them, is of primary importance. The data we make use of here are from a variety of sources. As all of the “n-words” presented below are extremely common in informal AAE, there is no shortage of sources. We did not gather an exhaustive corpus; rather our data collection methodology was in line with RAPID AND ANONYMOUS OBSERVATIONS (Labov 1972b). Our experience echoes that of Arthur Spears, who noted

3. It is important to note that obscenity is relative, and what is at stake here is one of cross-dialect comprehension, and cross-cultural communication. The social mores associated with one language variety can be incorrectly applied to another. cf *cunt* in Scots English.

“I hear this kind of speech daily in the African-American community in which I have lived for over a decade, and the one in which I grew up. When the weather is not too harsh, I can sit on my front stoop and collect examples” (Spears 1998).⁴ Similar to Spears, we have made use of utterances spoken by friends and family, utterances overheard on the street (primarily in Harlem, West Philadelphia, North Philadelphia, and Washington DC), utterances overheard at the barbershop (in Harlem), and also from traditional corpora, film, radio, television, and books. We have also made extensive use of social media, both video (YouTube, Vine,⁵ etc.) and text (Twitter, Facebook).⁶ While text is by no means the only or primary source of evidence, it is worth noting, specifically with regards to evidence from Twitter, that while some may have reservations about textual evidence, the relationship between informal computer mediated text and speech is extremely well established (Anis 2007; Austen 2016; Doyle 2014; Eisenstein 2013; Jones 2015, 2016b, 2016a, 2016c; Squires 2012; Tagg 2009; Van Halteren and Oostdijk 2012), and of course the relevance of textual material and its reliability in linguistic analysis has long been established in historical linguistics, and is the *only* source of evidence we have for the phonologies of Old English, Vulgar Latin, and Attic Greek, among others.

For spoken data, both authors kept notes of instances of use that we heard while in AAE speaking communities we live and participate in, noting the date, time, speaker demographics, and general situation. The film, television, and other audiovisual data come from speakers who self-identify as ‘black’, are identified by others as ‘black’, and who are clearly speaking AAE. The social media material is largely from friends and acquaintances of the authors, where the social media post’s author is known to be a (black) speaker of AAE. Some of the material from Twitter is from Twitter users unknown to the authors, but whose profiles and other tweets make clear the user is a (black) AAE speaker.

Because our focus is on demonstrating the multifaceted nature of the n-forms, especially with regards to syntax, the methods of analysis used are primarily standard syntactic tests of binding, co-reference, phrase structure, and thematic behavior.

Finally, it should be noted both authors were raised in AAE speech communities, and both live in and actively participate in predominantly African American communities. For a limited number of examples below, where no source is marked, the authors have generated their own example sentences, further evaluated and approved by other native speakers who were asked informally for grammaticality judgements.

2 Multiple ‘N’ Words and Semantic Broadening

2.1 Are *Nigger* and *Nigga* Really Different Words?

Because the present object of study is related to and sometimes indistinguishable from a deeply offensive racial slur, it is important that we begin by both taking account of layman perceptions as well as a more rigorous scientific description of the linguistic be-

4. In fact, some of the examples in this paper were collected on the very same block.

5. Vine, a social media platform in which users shared short videos, still existed when we were beginning this research.

6. Note, we have not provided both usernames *and* avatars, as (1) the character strings here are sufficient to find the tweets discussed here, and some in the past have found the distinction between username, avatar, and actual offline identity needlessly confusing, for example, in the case of a twitter user whose avatar at the time of tweeting was *Avon Barksdale*, after the fictional character.

havior. Perhaps in part because AAE tends to be r-less and l-less in unstressed syllable codas (Baugh 1983; Edwards 1997; Foley 1972; Myhill 1988; Labov et al. 1968; Pederson, McDaniel, and Dent 1984; Williamson 1968; Wolfram and Thomas 2008), there is widespread disagreement among laymen as to whether AAVE *nigga* and GA *nigger* are the same word, or distinct (cf. Allen-Taylor 1998; Alonso 2003; Kennedy 2008; H. L. Smith 2007). A particularly cogent and concise summary of prevalent lay views can be found in H. Lewis Smith's polemic against the use of 'the n-word' in *The Black Commentator* (H. L. Smith 2007):

"Brother or brotha, sister or sista, n***er or n***a, all have two common denominators. First, they came about as the result of a ghetto vernacular. Second, replacing the "er" with an "a" changes nothing other than the pronunciation. The meaning remains the same and though African American users of the word try to say differently, and though this understanding is prevalent throughout the black community, the meaning is by no means global." (emphasis ours)

As Smith notes (and we believe incorrectly argues against), differentiation between the GA slur *nigger* and AAE *nigga* is prevalent in the subset of the AAE-speaking community that uses *nigga* and its descendants. This intuition, while widely derided in the popular discourse on the subject, is borne out by a careful examination of the data. While AAE is largely r-less and l-less in unstressed syllable codas, there are two relevant phonological phenomena that suggest a differentiation between the two forms, among speakers who use the newer variant: first, there is no evidence of an underlying /r/ surfacing intervocally; and second, in emphatic speech and when the racial slur is intended, /r/ is very often pronounced. While it could be argued that for many AAE speakers, other words, like *brother*, will surface without an intervocalic /r/ (as in 'my brotha ate it.')(Thomas 2007), there is also no intervocalic /r/ in words derived from the base *nigga*, such as *niggaism* [nɪ.gə.ɪzm] (as in the positive *real niggaism* – roughly, 'keeping things down to earth,' — or its opposite, the negative *bitch-ass niggaism, fuck niggaism*). The /r/ does, however, surface in words derived from the slur, such as *niggerish* [nɪgərɪʃ]. The distinction is maintained by many in both in speech and in writing, and is evident on social media (e.g., on Twitter, Facebook, etc.). Moreover, even when explicitly discussing offensive or disrespectful language, for many speakers *nigga* is unremarkable and inoffensive, as in:

- (2) a. I don't respect when a nigga call his girl a Bitch, that shit too disrespectful (@AjehAlexys, January 14, 2012)
- b. I think it's soo disrespectful when a nigga calls a girl a bitch. (@Shuh_nae_nae, December 30, 2011)

It is also extremely well established that emphatic or careful deployment of the slur *nigger* involves pronouncing the word final /r/, even for speakers of otherwise non-rhotic accents. A well known explanation of this distinction, discussed in (Rickford and King 2016) is Rachel Jeatal's explanation of the multiple n-words to Piers Morgan, following her rise to national attention after testifying in the trial of George Zimmerman, who shot and killed her friend, Trayvon Martin (transcription our own):

PM: Was there anything you wished you'd said when you were in there [i.e., the courtroom]

RJ: “nigga.”

PM: Why?

RJ: People — the whole world say it’s a racist word. Mind you, mind you, around two, two thousands, that was not — they changed it around, I think.

It starts spellin’ n-i-g-g-a. Nigga—

PM: Wha— what does that mean, to you? That, that way of spelling it: what does that word mean to you?

RJ: That mean a male.

PM: A black male?

RJ: No, any kind of male.

PM: black or white?

RJ: bla— any kind. Chinese could say nigga. “That’s my chino nigga.” They could say that.

PM: … and rappers and everything use it, in the music—

RJ: They use it!

PM: and that’s what they mean?

RJ: YES.

But, nigger [nɪ.gər], or niggr [nɪ.gɪr] — I advise you not to be by black people, ’cause they not gonna have it like that.

PM: Right.

RJ: ’cause that’s a racist word.

PM: They’re two different words—

RJ: YEAH!

PM: — and they have different meanings in, in your community.

RJ: No! In a generation. two thousand and...

PM: To young people, you mean?

RJ: Not young people! Old people use that, too!

PM: hmm.

Of course, this interpretation is well described in the literature on AAE. Arthur Spears makes very clear that *nigger* and *nigga* “in much African American discourse on language are two different words” (Spears 1998). This is echoed by Smitherman (1998), who states that “they [AAE speakers] understand readily the different ranges of meaning — from positive to neutral to negative — in the word nigga.” In fact, Lanehart and Malik (2016; 2017) found that for their study participants, not only are *nigga* and *nigger* different words, and not only is *nigga* completely inoffensive, but a significant portion of native AAE speaking teenagers in their study thought that the offensive and taboo “n-word” was *negro*. As one reviewer noted, elaborating on Jeantel’s description above “It’s not about age or generation; it’s about time and context.” While Rachel Jeantel’s explanation is consistent with common attitudes about the n-words (that there are at least two, that one became acceptable sometime in recent memory), we also wish to stress that the scholarly

evidence is sparse for the timeline she proposes. We note that there does seem to have been a rise in use of *nigga* in media since the 1970s, however, as we discuss in section 5, this rise may have simply been a change in media and public attitudes, allowing for more accurate representation of informal African American speech in the public sphere. We note, also, that Hiram Smith argues neutral and positive use of *nigga* among African Americans dates back to well before the 20th century (H. Smith 2015)).

Finally, the word *nigga* has become so far removed from the slur in most of the AAE speaking world that Larry Wilmore, in hosting the White House Correspondents' Dinner on April 30, 2016, could say in "humble appreciation" to the president:

(3) If I'm going to keep it one hundred: Yo, Barry, you did it my nigga!

He elaborated three days later on his television show, *The Nightly Show*, in response to an article by Piers Morgan:⁷

"*Nigger* is what white people use to denigrate, demean, and dehumanize black people. *Nigga* is a term of endearment some black people use between each other to take back that power. Now, you also said in your article, 'Larry, you're not a *nigger*, and neither is Barack Obama.' I know, stop calling us that! Conjugate the slur! And then also don't use it, trust me on that."

When lay-people who are native speakers of the variety in question insist that there are two distinct lexical items, and when this view is corroborated by the vast majority of academic linguists who work on the variety in question, we have no choice but to take it seriously. It is our contention here that this analysis — the one taken by native speakers and academic linguists alike — is correct. We make no claims as to which came first, as there are convincing arguments that the r-full pronunciation *nigger* is a later borrowing into AAE (Smith, forthcoming), however in such an instance, when there are two lexical items with two distinct pronunciations and distinct usages, the easiest approach is to treat them as separate "words", even if their etymological origin is intertwined (cf. other instances of doublets borrowed from the same language, e.g., French *caillou* 'pebble' and *calcul* 'calculus', both from Latin *calcus*). We believe that not only is there a difference between the r-less and r-full versions of the "n-word," but this approach should be expanded to include multiple "n-words", based on the evidence. We begin by discussing semantic broadening as it relates to the "n-word" before discussing the empirically observed "n-words."

2.2 A Necessary Prerequisite: Semantic Bleaching

Such a difference, leading to the forms under discussion in this paper, would be impossible were it not for the process of SEMANTIC BLEACHING (alternately, semantic broadening, semantic reduction, semantic weakening, generalization, or desemanticization) that applied to the GA slur *nigger* as a necessary first step. Semantic bleaching, following (Haiman 1991):

"...occurs as a morpheme loses its intention: from describing a narrow set of ideas, it comes to describe an ever broader range of them, and eventually may lose its meaning altogether."

7. Morgan had evidently not taken Rachel Jeantel's explanation to heart.

The term originates from Gabelentz (1891), who describes change in meaning as “bleaching” in the sense of “fading,” focusing on how “fresher, newer colors cover the old, bleached ones” (After the translation in Eckardt 2006). Below, we generally use the terms “broadening,” “reduction,” or “weakening,” rather than “bleaching,” following feedback from a reviewer, who wrote: “Although ‘semantic bleaching’ is linguistic jargon, the connotation of it, especially in an article about racialized misunderstanding, is problematic for me. Every time I read the word the connotation of ‘whitening to make better’ or ‘whitening to remove blackness’ (implying Black is bad or dirty) was problematic for me. It reminded me of why it is no longer okay to say ‘blind’ review.” We use “semantic bleaching” introducing the concept above because it is still the standard term, however, as much as possible we opt for an alternative to avoid this emotionally fraught unfortunate coincidence.

The confusion around whether there are two lexical items or not likely stems in part from the semantic broadening of *nigga*, which most likely originated as an r-less surface variant of the GA slur.⁸ There is academic attestation as early as 1893 that African Americans were using *nigga* neutrally; for instance, (Shands 1893) notes that in Mississippi [nigə] was “the common pronunciation of *negro*” as opposed to [nigroʊ̇], which was only “sometimes used” by “educated people.”⁹

However, now, while the slur’s dictionary meaning refers to “A dark-skinned person of sub-Saharan African origin or descent” (per the Oxford English Dictionary), *nigga* has a much wider range of referents in AAE. While the fluid and changing social construction of race (Omi and Winant 2014), and the ultimate biological non-reality of race (American Anthropological Association 1998; American Sociological Association 2003) are beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that the OED’s definition, while consistent with what most would consider a “common sense” definition, is predicated on extremely problematic and poorly supported assumptions. It should not be surprising, then, that something socially constructed and as fluid as race is subject to dramatic changes. Spears (1998) argues that “In the case of this lexical item, one of its principal semantic features (to look at the issue in this way) has been deleted: [+ of African descent].” In fact, while its default, unmarked use in AAVE among those who use it is [+human] and [+male], it is not specified for race or ethnicity, since Spears discussed the specification [-African descent] it has further developed such that it is not always male or even human. It is often used specifically to mean a generic male person, as in example 4:

- (4) a. Can’t trust a nigga that cut his own hair Them niggas don’t give a fuck about life (@GxldenFuture, April 22, 2014)
- b. Tbr , I Can’t Even Picture Myself Dating A Nigga . I Just Love Females ! (@ThatRedBoneDoe, April 7, 2014)
- c. I’m a liar sweetie, I cheat on niggas too. Probably shouldn’t trust me or I’ll hurt your feelings, boo. (Issa Rae in *Insecure* Season 2, episode 1 “Hella Great” on HBO, July 23, 2017).

However, it can also refer to women, especially when used as a description of a group or as an appellation (example 5).

- (5) My niggas! (female teenager to her female friends, uptown B train at 135th street in Harlem, February 1, 2017, 8:27pm)

8. Although for slightly different interpretations of its origin (see, e.g., H. Smith 2015)

9. Shands does so in a somewhat idiosyncratic transcription system; we have translated his system into IPA.

Furthermore, it can be unspecified for gender, as in example 6:

(6) I made a vow to myself that i will never bring a life into this world without being able to support that lil nigga to the fullest. (@celinetx12, February 24, 2014)

Clearly the use in example 6 is not a slur. Because it is also not specified for race or ethnicity, it is not uncommon to find *nigga* modified by an explicit statement of race or ethnicity (example 7):

(7) a. [...] That white nigga was hype as shit. [...] (@ab_deuces, November 13, 2014)
b. That white nigga alright! (customer at a barbershop in Harlem, December 23, 2016, 4:02pm)
c. It's always that one weird ass black nigga hanging in a group of white folks (@TweetsfromRDB, January 21, 2015)
d. Asians are so chill bruh, I never met a Asian nigga I couldn't fuck with¹⁰ (@TheHumanPencil, March 31, 2014)
e. I tried to stretch in class, but this African nigga sitting behind me wasn't having it (@jay_rome, April 2, 2014)
f. How that Mexican nigga gon' say he ain't got bread? (man on 145th street and Broadway, in Harlem, June 30, 2016, 9:26pm)

This, however, is not a new usage, as Smith (forthcoming) points out. During chattel slavery in the US, for instance, *nigga/nigger* was used to modify more specific nouns (e.g., *a nigger buck* to mean a (strong) black man). As we discuss in section 4 below, *nigga*'s field of reference has even expanded to include non-human animate creatures, and for some now includes inanimate objects. As we show in the next section, extreme semantic broadening, from an erstwhile phonological variant of a slur to a generic term similar to 'guy,' (or 'dude' which often replaces it in a more polite register) has allowed for the emergence of new pronouns built from *nigga*. This is not necessarily surprising; as Spears (1998) notes, similar broadening of the of terms to to no longer include [+ African descent] "has happened with N cognates in other languages, e.g., Haitian Creole *nèg* and Brazilian Portuguese *nego*. Consequently, this development should not be taken as exceptional."

3 The syntax of the n-words

3.1 Imposters: Syntactic-Semantic Mismatch

We must discuss syntactic IMPOSTERS, following Collins and Postal (2012) before turning to n-form pronouns, as it is necessary to rule out imposters before one can claim to have found new pronouns (cf. the discussion of Brazilian Portuguese *a gente* in Zilles (2005), and the rebuttal in Taylor (2009)).

In their book on the subject, Collins and Postal (2012) offer two definitions of imposter:

(8) An imposter is a notionally 1st person or 2nd person DP that is grammatically 3rd person.

10. NB. "Fuck with" means *be friends with* or *associate with* in this context.

And, arguing that the above is too restrictive, they propose:

(9) An imposter is a notionally X person DP that is grammatically Y person, X ≠ Y.

Their examples include:

(10) a. **Daddy** is enjoying **himself**.
b. Would **the baroness** like more wine?
c. **This reviewer** was unable to strictly follow the logic of the submission.
d. You won't have **Nixon** to kick around anymore!

Here (b) is second person (=would you like more wine), and the rest are first person in referent. Other examples include first person *yours truly*, *this reporter*, personal names, diminutive kinship terms, etc. (for a complete typology, we refer the reader to Collins & Postal 2012:7). For our purposes, the less abstract definition, in which imposters are first or second person semantically but syntactically third person, is sufficient.¹¹ Crucially for our analysis below, Collins and Postal write:

“critically, even though they denote the speaker or addressee, *all* English imposters *determine 3rd person verbal agreement*.” (emphasis ours).

The authors of the present work contend that for some speakers of AAVE, an informal register allows the use of a system of new words, derived from *nigga*, which fulfill grammatical functions, and some of which pattern syntactically with pronouns and not with imposters. Those forms include the first person pronouns *a nigga* (phonologically /ənigə/), and *niggas/niggaz* (phonologically /nigəz/), the second person VOCATIVES *nigga* and *my nigga/manigga* (phonologically /mənigə/), and the third person SOCIAL DISTANCE HONORIFICS *this/that/my nigga*, as well as bare, discourse linked *nigga*, which also sometimes appears to behave pronominally. The first of these n-forms pattern with pronouns across a range of diagnostics, although such behavior is not uniformly distributed among the n-forms (about which, we offer a tentative explanation in section 4), and this behavior is most pronounced with first person *a nigga*, to which we now turn.

3.2 First person pronominal *a nigga*

First person use of *a nigga* is extremely common in some vernacular registers of AAE (for instance, in the authors' circles in Harlem and Philadelphia). While there are many instances of *a nigga* for which an imposter analysis cannot be ruled out, there is strong evidence that some speakers have reanalyzed *a nigga* as a pronoun. Not only is the first person meaning clear from discourse context as would be expected with imposters, but first person *a nigga* (1) corefers with first person pronouns in relevant domains (including with possessive pronouns), (2) binds anaphors in their binding domain, (3) appears coindexed with instances of PRO licensing first person anaphora, and (4) triggers first person verbal agreement in some cases. It is also significantly less limited than comparable imposters (e.g., *a brotha*) in the range of constructions in which it can appear. Moreover, for most speakers, first person *a nigga* behaves as one phonological unit that cannot

11. The more abstract definition allows Collins & Postal to better handle some data not relevant to the current discussion.

be interrupted (say, with an adjective),¹² and it triggers different patterns of sentence intonation. We discuss these data in turn.

To begin there are many instances in which it is overwhelmingly clear from the discourse that *a nigga* has first person reference, whether it behaves as an imposter (and therefore triggers 3rd person agreement), or whether there is not enough syntactic evidence to distinguish between imposters and pronouns, as in example 11:¹³

(11) a. Right now, you know what I'm sayin', you in a nigga's kitchen. Hold on. Just a moment of silence for the brand new Italian tile. (YouTuber *Chi City*, giving a video tour of his own kitchen).

b. Oh, yeah, a nigga made pizza. Well, I was hungry! (same as above)

c. just gimme three damn minutes, maybe even four. She'll be wantin to marry a nigga. (Chris Tucker in *Friday* (1995))

d. Man, I'm on house arrest, I don't even supposed to be over here. don't get a nigga locked up. Man, come on. (same as above)

e. You gonna let a nigga in? (Cedric the Entertainer, standing alone in a doorway, in *Scary Movie* (2000)).

f. I fell asleep and a nigga had a dream I was hustlin' (man free styling on the corner of 143rd and Malcolm X in Harlem, Sunday, October 16, 2016, 11:58am)

g. It's frustrating...manigga cuz they not gonna rock with a nigga. (Man to his friend, discussing feeling excluded. 18th Street and 5th Avenue, New York, 1:35pm, May 25, 2016)

h. Happiest nigga lol, my bro found my glasses at his house.. I ain't had em in like 4 months, a nigga been at school blind, driving blind. Eh ({@JalenDotson5, April 21, 2014})

i. I'm so tired of school, but a nigga got goals (@KinahxMostDope, October 28, 2013)

j. depression ain't gon stop a nigga from being great. i won't be in this situation forever. [...] (@SheleiahT, March 19, 2014)

k. So I was standin' outside the shop, frozen, just watchin' [the cops], 'cause if you make a move then they think you suspect, too! I didn't know what to do. Nigga lookin' at me while they cuffin' him. I was right in front of the door. Barber comes out says "you next." So, a nigga went inside and I went straight to the back. (laughing). I got outta there, man. (Barber at a barbershop in Harlem, 5:58pm, April 6, 2017.)

l. Bruh. A nigga just paid the caterer. Let me say this...don't RSVP "yes" to our shit and then don't show up. (A friend of the authors, talking about wedding planning. That friend had made the payment to the caterers. September 25, 2017, 11:31am)

m. You made a nigga wait for some for so long...I'm wishing I could make this mine. (Childish Gambino in "Redbone" on *Awaken, My Love!*, December 2, 2016).

12. Here, we follow de facto convention on social media, and write it as two words.

13. We have chosen to use primarily spoken examples, since most of them can be independently corroborated, in their discourse context.

In many other instances, however, there is clear evidence of pronominal behavior. For instance, *a nigga* corefers with first person pronouns in the relevant domains (example 12), including first person possessive pronouns (12d, 12e):

- (12) a. If I had school this week I'd kill myself. But **I_i** forgot **a nigga_i** graduated. (@_ezSteezy, August 12, 2013)
- b. **im_i** always smiling ,but **a niqqa_i** aint happy bout shxt.. (@TheKirylewis, April 5, 2014)¹⁴
- c. If you not feeling **a nigga_i** then don't dap **me_i** (@ChaseNCashe, January 18, 2015)
- d. **a nigga_i** got problems of **my_i** own (@Spainard, February 20, 2013)
- e. You stuck by **a nigga_i** like **my_i** left hand (Webbie, "I Miss You, *Savage Life* 2, 2008)

Moreover, *a nigga* can license anaphors in their binding domain (example 13):

- (13) a. Spring got **a nigga_i** feeling **myself_i** (@PATisDOPE, March 14, 2014)
- b. Ever since **a nigga_i** taught **myself_i** how to roll I've smoked everyday [...] (@whoisaus, May 16, 2013)
- c. By **myself_i**, that's how **a nigga_i** came in [...] (@3coMMAs_, October 12, 2014)

While we will not pursue it further here, there does seem to be a not entirely surprising preference to coindex *a nigga* with another first person pronoun (*I, me*) across phrase and clausal boundaries, and bind the anaphor with the more conservative pronoun, as in examples 14a and 14b:

- (14) a. **I_i** wish **I_i** could meet **myself_i**, because **a nigga_i** too cool (@DGAF_BoutNoHoe, January 18, 2015)
- b. **I_i** google **myself_i** to see if **a nigga_i** made it (@AloeYaroi, September 16, 2014)

In the above example, it's impossible to get the reading "I google myself to see if someone else made it."

It is also common to find pro coindexed with *a nigga*, binding *myself*, as in example 15:

- (15) it's so hard (FOR **pro_i**) to tuck **myself_i** in but **a nigga_i** gotta stay comfy (@Ivan_splash, December 12, 2014)

Impressionistically, while *a nigga* can and does appear in the matrix clause, there seems to be a strong preference for its use in a subordinate clause. We leave a more thorough syntactic parsing, and therefore a more precise quantitative analysis, for future investigation.

Of its novel pronominal behavior, perhaps most striking is that, for some speakers, *a nigga* does not always trigger third person verbal agreement, but rather can trigger first person verbal agreement, as in:

14. Note, the author employs written taboo deformation for both *nigga* and *shit*.

- (16) a. Is It Me Or **A Nigga** Gettin Sexy By The Day (@They_WntWayne, December 16, 2011)
- b. I dont do good with ppl telling me what im worth on a time value so i retired from working at 23.and now here **a nigga am!** [...] (@_TriggaPlay_, August 17, 2013)
- (17) a. **a nigga haven't** ate all day (@Polos_and_loud, January 29, 2015)
- b. **A nigga haven't** had donuts in months, I ain't living right (@CallitHowEyeCit, January 20, 2015)

In fact, first person verbal agreement can disambiguate an otherwise ambiguous utterance as in example 18:

- (18) **I'm**_i really tired cause **a nigga**_i **haven't** been to sleep yet (@itsKevDaddy, January 19, 2015)

The corresponding sentence with third person agreement has two possible readings (example 19):

- (19) **I'm**_i really tired cause **a nigga**_{i/j} **hasn't/ain't** been to sleep yet

In example 19 it's possible that the speaker is saying "I'm really tired because someone else hasn't been to sleep yet," perhaps because that person is making a lot of noise, for instance. In example 18 there is no such ambiguity: "I'm tired because I haven't been to sleep yet."

Another asymmetry between *a nigga* and imitators like *a brotha* is that *a nigga* has available the full range of possible semantic roles, and as such appears in constructions for which *a brotha* is unattested. For instance, *a brotha* is generally a patient, experiencer, or recipient, as in example 20:

- (20) help **a nigga/a brotha** out
- help **me** out

However, it is unattested and extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get a first person reading of *a brotha* as an agent, so the only reading possible for 'a brotha said...' is a third person reading, whereas first person 'a nigga said...' is not only possible, but attested, as in:

- (21) Even though it wasn't a snow day a nigga said fuck that and stayed home (@NarvayeC, December 11, 2014)

Similarly, *a nigga* is attested as the subject of an unaccusative verb (and first person *a brotha* is not), as in:

- (22) **a nigga** /***a brotha** arrived (intended meaning: 'I arrived')

The only available interpretation of 'a brotha arrived' is that someone, not the speaker, arrived. However, *a nigga* can be, and is, used with unaccusative verbs like *arrive*, as in example 23.¹⁵

15. Understanding this example relies on knowing that *melanated* is an in-group term for "black", and that there is a stereotype that black people intentionally arrive fashionably late. Obviously, the authors do not endorse this stereotype.

(23) I'm melanated, so of course a nigga arrived not on-time... (@SoLeftField, June 21, 2015)

Another such asymmetry is between raising and control constructions. Both a nigga and a brotha are common in control constructions like example 24, however, a brotha is extremely rare in raising constructions,¹⁶ while a nigga is extremely common (example 25):

(24) a. all **a nigga/ a brotha** want is...

b. X make **a nigga/ a brotha** want Y

c. **a nigga/ a brotha** just want...

(25) a. the auto correct on my phone is making **a nigga seem** SO illiterate right now --- (@nahncenz, September 20, 2012)

b. “[...] I did nomore then what these hoes did to me I ain't as bad as they try to make **a nigga seem**” (@TeamLean_b, March 15, 2013)

c. ... I
got up and my back began to hurt so bad...**a nigga began** to cry sigh (@_LoveMika, November 1, 2012)

d. i wasnt ready for picture day today, **a nigga looked** crazy & shit (@leowavyy, October 6, 2014)

Importantly, *a nigga* forms one phonological unit which must be pronounced /ənigə/. While we have been using the orthographic convention that is used by the AAVE speaking and writing community, it should be noted that /eɪ nɪgə/ only permits a non-specific third person reading. In informal, fast speech, both may surface as [ənigə], but any token of [eɪnɪgə] is unambiguously third person. What's more, *a nigga* cannot be separated, as in *a classy nigga*, and still retain its default first person reading. For this reason, we interpret the schwa as functioning, in effect, as a prefix: pronominal *a nigga* may be more accurately:

(26) ə- nɪgə
1sg. Person
'I/me'

We will return to this below, as the presence or absence of other non-separable material determines different interpretations of the “n-word” in other contexts below (cf *manigga*, *my nigga*, *that nigga*). We also note that a first person reading is not available with an r-full pronunciation. That is, *tell me how you really feel about a nigga* triggers a first person reading of *a nigga*, whereas *tell me how you really feel about a nigger* cannot receive a default first person interpretation.

Finally, the difference between first and third person readings is recoverable from prosodic stress. In performing a separate research project, one of the authors had native AAE speaking co-collaborators from North Philadelphia read sample sentences. It was clear to most of the speakers, without instruction, that *a nigga* had first person meaning, as in this conversation with a collaborator, D:

16. We found one attestation: a single tweet from 2012, stating “...predictive text will make a brotha seem illiterate than a mug...” (i.e., “more illiterate than a motherfucker”). There is not enough evidence from this alone to rule out a generic reading. We found no instances of “a brotha began,” or “a brotha proved,” and one (clearly third person) token of “a brotha appeared.”

D: He BIN told a nigga about that.

Author: So, who'd he tell?

D: He told *me*.

Moreover, all that was necessary to elicit the desired prosody was the cue “first person” when an utterance was ambiguous, as in this exchange with a collaborator, C:

C: What a nigga told YOU?

Author: So, same thing, but first person.

C: Oh! ... I get it. What a nigga TOLD you?

First person plural *niggas* behaves similarly to *a nigga*, however, due to the facts of English agreement, syntactic tests are less conclusive in this instance. Binding and first person verbal agreement follow the same pattern one would expect to see with pronouns, but unfortunately, in this case it does not serve clearly to distinguish imposters from pronominal behavior, since *niggas* could be taken to have the semantics of ‘a class to which the speaker belongs’ as in example 27:

(27) a. They won't let **(us) grad students_i** have anything to **ourselves_i**.
b. [...] they won't let **niggas_i** have shit to **our self_i** (@DuckDuckGoose, March 26, 2016)¹⁷

As such, it does not seem possible at present to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that *niggas* is the plural equivalent of pronominal *a nigga*, since as in other varieties of English, first person plural and third person plural agreement are identical in all respects — although it is conceptually economical and appealing to treat it as pronominal /∅-nigəz/. Given that there is limited but strong evidence for first person singular pronominal behavior of *a nigga* in the grammar and there is an absence strong counterevidence for interpreting *niggas* as first person plural, we expect future native learners may intuitively posit the same analysis, although different methods will be required to test this hypothesis.

3.3 Second person politeness distinctions: Nigga vs. Manigga

Other n-forms are extensively used as terms of address. Specifically, there are two vocatives: *nigga* and *my nigga/ma nigga/manigga*. Similar to the situation that obtains with *a nigga*, orthographic convention masks some of the relevant phonological and syntactic behavior. The vocatives are more accurately [nigə] and [mənigə]. The latter cannot be split, as in:

(28) # listen, my well-dressed nigga

It also must be pronounced with a schwa in the first syllable, as /mā̄.nigə/ has a different semantic reading, and a different social function, as we shall see below. We will use *manigga* when discussing the vocative, following a common – but not universal – convention in social media, to avoid confusion. The difference between *nigga* and *manigga*

17. Note: the context for this utterance makes it clear *niggas* refers to men, and is not specified for race: “The worst part about the ain't shit women of Tampa [...] they won't let niggas have shit to our self”.

is a pragmatic one; We propose that at its core, the difference is a politeness distinction. The former indicates social distance, and places the speaker above or away from the listener. It is used when ‘holding court’ or talking to one’s equals or inferiors (example 29, all examples are from New York City unless otherwise noted):

- (29) a. Don’t worry **nigga**, you my lil brotha, **nigga**. I got you. (man on 9th Street and 5th Avenue, 9:25pm May 26, 2014)
- b. **Nigga**, what you scared for? I ain’t in yo *proxminity!* (young man rough-housing with his friends, 82nd Street and Broadway, 6:22pm, June 16, 2014, cf 37b)
- c. Goddamn, **nigga!** (said when the door of the uptown B train in Manhattan closed on the speaker’s bag, 9:42pm, July 1, 2014).
- d. like, **nigga**, what are you doing?! (woman telling a story to two men at the intersection of Market Street and Walnut Street in Philadelphia, 10:18am, September 9, 2014)
- e. I said Coke, **nigga!** (i.e., not Pepsi. A cousin of one of the authors, entertaining at home, 7:47pm, January 19, 2015)
- f. Don’t play me, **nigga**. I will end you. (Tiffany Haddish in *Girl’s Trip* (2017). Spoken to the suspected cheating husband of a friend)
- g. **Nigga**, I smelled Rod Stewart Before I saw him. (Roy Wood Jr. in his segment “The ‘real’ Rod Stewart” on *This is Not Happening*, published¹⁸ by Comedy Central on February 28, 2018).

Conversely, *manigga* is used when addressing someone higher on the social hierarchy, and is sometimes associated with pleading or arguing an unpopular position (example 30):

- (30) a. **Manigga!** (man, to get the attention of a friend, 145th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, Harlem, 9:57pm, October 21, 2014)
- b. Listen, **manigga**, listen. (Man pleading with a woman, 145th Street and Convent Avenue, Harlem, 9:03pm, September 18, 2014).
- c. **Manigga**, it wasn’t even like that, **manigga** (man to a friend, on 145th Street and St. Nicholas, Harlem, 1:07pm, May 24, 2014)
- d. That’s fucked up, **manigga** (young man challenging a friend’s behavior in a story, 145th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, Harlem, 10:03pm, May 26, 2014).
- e. That shit’s big though, right now, **manigga**, that shit’s big. (young man to older man who disagreed. 145th Street and Broadway, Harlem, 10:07pm, June 26, 2016)
- f. **manigga**, stop! (youth to his friend who was tickling him on the uptown A train at 125th Street. 5:10pm, May 12, 2015).
- g. Who the fuck...I...c’mɒn **manigga**. (man, confused when his girlfriend snuck up behind him. 145th Street between Amsterdam and Broadway, Harlem, 4:20pm, June 17, 2016)

Thus, it may be useful to think of the two as analogous in some respects to T/V-FORMS in the sense used in the study of the Romance languages. Similarly to the behavior of,

18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baCeALX2vlM?t=807>

say, *vous* ‘you (polite)’ and *tu* ‘you (informal)’ in French, speakers will switch from one to the other in the course of a conversation to signal social distance or confidence — for instance, as a disagreement becomes more heated, a speaker may switch from using *manigga* to just *nigga*, indicating increasing emotional distance.

To illustrate this, example 31a is a relatively neutral invitation to a previously quiet party to comment, while example 31b is a cutting rhetorical flourish, mocking the other person for having asked a stupid question:

(31) a. **Manigga**, what do you think?
b. **Nigga**, what do you think?

This is especially true if primary stress is on “think.” While the role of stress, intonation, and pitch contour in AAE is outside of the scope of this paper, we can still easily rank politest to least polite:

(32) a. **Manigga**, what do YOU think?
b. **Manigga**, what do you THINK?
c. **Nigga**, what do YOU think?
d. **Nigga**, what do you THINK?
e. **Nigga**. What do you THINK?
f. **Nigga!** What do you THINK?!

In light of the above, the fact that for many Americans all use of “the n-word” is considered offensive is particularly ironic since for many speakers of AAVE n-forms are deployed among friends as, in effect, politeness markers. The use of these forms is extremely subtle and nuanced, and the social interpretation of any of the utterances above is changed by changing the vocative used. For instance, 29a changes from confident to betraying a *lack* of confidence in the speaker’s reassurances if we substitute *manigga* for *nigga*. Example 29b becomes reassuring when it wasn’t. Example 29c becomes pleading instead of angry. Example 29d is softened. Example 29e becomes a polite correction instead of a (sarcastically) impolite rebuke.

It should be noted that the n-form vocatives do not pattern as full pronouns, but are rather terms of address, so it is not possible to say **I gave my nigga* ([mənigə]) *the book* and obtain the reading ‘I gave *you* the book,’ whereas it is possible to say *a nigga gave you the book* to mean the same. And, of course, it is common to see multiple n-forms in the same utterance, as in example 33:

(33) I’m tryin my nigga give a nigga some time (@whoaitsdev_, September 26, 2018)

3.4 Third person social distance marking

The “n-word” is also used in third person constructions that function as social distance honorifics: when introducing a new person into the discourse, some AAVE speakers have the option of marking their relationship to the person newly under discussion. This is achieved by recourse to the constructions *that nigga X*, *my nigga X*, and *this nigga X*, where *that* introduces any person, *my* introduces a friend of the speaker, and *this* introduces any person, but with derisive connotation (possibly related to the common exasperated/derisive expression ‘*this nigga here*’ [‘dis.nigə,çjʌ̯]). All three forms are used to introduce a previously unmentioned person into the discourse. Interestingly, it does

not matter how famous or well-known the person is; when introducing a new person into the discourse, *that nigga X* is used, as in:

- (34) a. **that nigga kanye** is one of the best artist period (@Too_Raw_DJ, January 5, 2015)
- b. gas is ... \$2.13. Give **that nigga Obama** 4 more years. (@Made_Lyrical, January 4, 2015)
- c. **That nigga George Takei** is funny as shit. (@PGington, November 25, 2012)
- d. [...] u ever heard of **that nigga sitting bull?** [...] (@J_maineyoo, July 27, 2014)
- e. Even **that nigga George Clooney** found a wife.. wtf is the world comin to. (@kailou_, May 4, 2014)
- f. **That nigga Ellen Degeneres** been getting away with those cokehead dance moves for too long now. (@StephGhost, February 2, 2014)

Again, note that race, ethnicity, sex, and gender of the person described are irrelevant to the use of *that nigga*, so even Ellen Degeneres, a culturally and ethnically white, lesbian woman – that is, someone as far from the stereotypical ‘black male’ as possible – is introduced with the n-form.

When the person introduced as a subject of the discourse is a friend of the speaker, or when the speaker wishes to highlight that friendship, *my nigga X* /mʌɪ nɪgə/¹⁹ is used, as in:

- (35) a. Yall pray for **my nigga teezy** please (@zayyvanable, February 12, 2014)
- b. **My nigga KILLA FRESH** got some new shit droppin tomorrow stay tuned! (@DJ_J12, January 9, 2015)
- c. Like **my nigga Rome** said, “Yo, be easy. You know shit get ugly out here.” (A friend of the authors’, on Facebook. 5:13pm June 30, 2016)
- d. Like **my nigga Melo** said : You fuck with²⁰ my enemies, you my enemy too. (same as above)

Finally, *this nigga X* has a derisive connotation, as in:

- (36) a. **This nigga Suge** out here faking heart attacks to get out of custody like he in Shondaland (@irathethird, Feburary 3, 2015)
- b. **This nigga [NAME]** just told me to make the faces of the people on the org chart more “generic” as to not offend anyone. (a friend of the authors, talking about a white male coworker who had implored her to lighten the skin tone of digital avatars in graphic design work she had done).
- c. **This nigga Bieber** was screaming nigger on video and y'all mad Justin Timberlake (@KingTralle, June 26, 2016)
- d. Why **this nigga spike lee** look like the black willy Wonka lol (@AyeRexx, February 17, 2013)

19. For some, this may be [mʌɪ nɪgə], depending on whether they speak a regional variety of AAE with monophthongization of the PRICE vowel. It is not, however, [mənɪgə].

20. NB: the meaning is, again, “associate with.”

In example 36a, *Suge* is the celebrity *Suge Knight*, and *Shondaland* refers to the production company owned by Shonda Rhimes that produces popular soap operas. That there should be a grammatical encoding of indignation or derision in these honorifics is not entirely surprising, since there is already evidence of indignation as a grammatically salient consideration in AAVE from the semi-auxiliary (indignant) *come* (Spears 1982; Green 2002), and from some uses of the verb of quotation *talkin' 'bout* (Jones 2016a). Note also the contrast between r-full and r-less n-words in 34c, where the r-full version is taken to be obviously a slur, and the r-less version is used to introduce the (sometimes non-black) person in question, including in some instances that carry negative affect.

3.5 Discourse linked third person bare *nigga*

Finally, there is a third person use of *nigga* that may parallel first person *a nigga* in pronominal behavior, however, we do not have much data on this particular construction, and this section will serve only to sketch the basics, leaving a fuller analysis for later work. Specific, discourse linked referents can be referred to using bare *nigga*, with no determiner. That is, rather than *the nigga* (cf *the guy*), one finds just *nigga* to refer to a known person.

- (37) a. Nigga said *proxminity!* (young man mocking one of his friends to his other friends. cf 29b)
- b. Nigga said “wake up!” (Passenger on a New Jersey Transit train arriving in Trenton, repeating the conductor. 4:15pm, February 8, 2017)
- c. Nigga say “this Harlem” (barber at a barbershop in Harlem, 1:30pm, July 3, 2016).
- d. I got these at Old Navy. The brother there hooked me up. Nigga gave me his discount. (man at a barbershop in Harlem, 3:21, July 17, 2016).
- e. Nigga was about to puke on himself (barber at a barbershop in Harlem, 4:54pm, June 15, 2017, about a man who attempted to enter a friendly boxing match out front of the shop while drunk, and who gave up shortly into it.)

In all of the above examples, *nigga* could be replaced with *he*, with no change in meaning. There are a few interesting pieces of evidence that bare *nigga* may be on its way toward pronominal behavior. First, it patterns with pronouns with respects to binding conditions A, B, and C. That is, it licenses the anaphor *himself* (as in 38a), but cannot be licensed by a local or c-commanding antecedent (as in 38b). Moreover, it replaces arbitrarily complex R-expressions (as in 38c). Finally, while it frequently occurs sentence initially, it also occurs in other environments (as in 38d), suggesting that bare *nigga* is not merely sentence initial truncation.²¹

- (38) a. **Nigga_i** saw **himself_i**
- b. * **Malik_i** saw **nigga_i**
- c. You know **that dude that live up the way_i**? **Nigga_i** bought a new car.
- d. **I_i** told **nigga_{*i/j}** I ain’t scared
- e. Lmao **co-worker_i** just told me our boss is his father-in-law. So I told **nigga_i** watch ya back (@_CaptBran, October 24, 2016)
- f. **That boy_i** like to argue so I sent **nigga_i** to law school (@Mia_Mon3, August 27, 2015)

21. See also examples 11k, and 39c.

It is important to note, however, that there are other constructions common in some varieties of AAE that allow for a noun phrase without a determiner (e.g., “I saw homegirl yesterday”), where the referent is known or recoverable from context, or easily guessed (Spears 2008), so how this use of *nigga* fits into a broader picture of AAE referential DPs warrants further research.

3.6 Revisiting the Structure of *N-words*

As the preceding sections have demonstrated, what is generally thought of as *the* n-word, at least in some varieties of AAE actually encompasses a wide range of n-words with their own unique discourse and pragmatic functions, and with specific phonological and syntactic behavior. We can, in fact, identify twelve distinct n-words (table 1).

person	orthographic convention	spoken form	meaning
first person	a nigga niggas, niggaz	ə-nigə nigə-z	I, me us, we
second person	nigga my nigga	nigə mə-nigə	vocative marker (polite) vocative marker
third person	nigga nigga a nigga my nigga [name] that nigga [name] this nigga this nigga [name] (nigger)	nigə nigə ə-nigə, əi-nigə mə-nigə, mə-nigə ðæt nigə, dæt nigə ðɪs nigə ðɪs nigə ðɪs nigə ðɪs nigə (nigə, nigəz)	‘person’ a <i>specific</i> discourse-linked person a (nonspecific/generic) person my friend [name] [name] (who is assumed to be known) exasperative marker [name] (indignant/exasperated/derisive) (a racial slur)

Table 1: Distinct n-words.

It is important to recognize these distinctions when investigating AAE, and to treat these uses as separate items, *especially* from the slur. To just assume that *nigga* is always the same as the slur *nigger* is to ignore important syntactic differences between AAE and other varieties of English. Such treatment is equivalent to insisting habitual/invariant *be* or stressed *BIN* are not syntactic features of AAE. That is, refusal to acknowledge the fine-grained syntactic patterns of use of the various n-words is fundamentally a refusal to engage with AAE descriptively, out of misguided ideological concerns. We discuss the potential ramifications of such an approach in section 6. However, now we turn to the relevance of animacy to use of n-words.

4 The Relevance of Animacy

Both the semantically broadened noun *nigga* and the n-forms suggest ANIMACY distinctions. There is some precedent for treating animacy as relevant in the analysis English, and specifically of AAVE morphosyntax (McLaughlin 2014), although it is as of yet an understudied area.

Animacy can be interpreted in at least three ways: biological, semantic, and syntactic (Comrie 1989; McLaughlin 2014; Silverstein 1976). Biological animacy – whether a creature is living in the strict scientific sense — is the least relevant here. Semantic animacy (roughly, whether something is perceived as living), and syntactic animacy (whether the morphosyntax of a given language groups NPs differently based on semantico-syntactic distinctions around perceived animacy), are strongly suggested by these data, however.

Particularly important for our analysis is the fact that animacy can be well captured through IMPLICATIONAL HIERARCHIES. As discussed by Comrie (1989), there exist more

than one cross-linguistically relevant implicational hierarchy. Consider as a starting point, for example, a variation on an animacy hierarchy discussed by Comrie (1989) where:

Free adult males > other humans > pets and domesticated animals > other sentient creatures > forces of nature > moving things > non-moving inert things

The third person NP *nigga*, while default [+human] and [+male] extends down the hierarchy to include sentient creatures, so that it is not uncommon to find it used to describe pets, wild animals, or even fish or insects in quotidian usage:

(39) a. [said of a dog:] This nigga think he goin' outside (Vine)
b. My cat fell in the toilet last night damn that nigga dumb (@Youseftherapper, December 6, 2014)
c. A wasp just stung me on some drive-by type shit, nigga stung me and bounced (@JayoSantana, July 25, 2014)

For the authors and their speech community, it is, however, ill-formed to use *nigga* to describe forces of nature, such as thunder or lightning, as in:

(40) ?? then there was a loud thunderclap_i; man, that nigga_i scared me!

However, it should be noted that for many speakers, *nigga* can be used to at all levels of the animacy hierarchy. For instance, Damon Young, editor-in-chief of *Very Smart Brothas* explains:²²

In the past month, I've referred to each of the following things as a "nigga."

My car. A bottle of hot sauce. A basketball. The weather. My dog. My wife. A grape. Jason Statham. The concept of having an all-red party. The concept of attending a party where the hosts expect you to wear all red. The eight of clubs. The internet.

In another article, *Random People, Places, and Things I've Definitely Called A "Nigga" Before, Ranked*, he gives examples ranging from Barbara Bush to an HDMI cord.²³ Previous literature on animacy hierarchies in linguistics does not address where on the scale humanoid aliens fall, to our knowledge, however these also can be called *nigga*, as in example 41:

(41) Fucked that nigga up! (said by Sterling K. Brown, speaking about a dead 'predator' who had been killed by an even bigger predator in *The Predator*, February 9, 2017).

The strong pronominal behavior of first person *a nigga*, somewhat weaker pronominal behavior of second person *(ma)nigga*, and complete lack of third person n-form pronouns is at first glance somewhat dissatisfying, since it creates only a partial paradigm. However, here we appeal to the Silverstein hierarchy, in which:

22. <http://verysmartbrothas.com/a-primer-on-the-use-usage-versatility-and-utility-of-nigga/>, published 4/7/15, accessed 3/21/17

23. <http://verysmartbrothas.com/random-people-places-and-things-ive-definitely-called-a-nigga-before-ranked/>, published 10/11/16, accessed 3/21/17

1st person pronouns > 2nd person pronouns > 3rd person proximate > 3rd person obviate > proper names > kin terms > human nouns > animate nouns > inanimate nouns

Here, again, we find that syntactic behavior is conditioned by animacy. While, in principle, n-words could be used for anything higher on the hierarchy than inanimate nouns, the higher up the scale we go, the stronger the syntactic effects we find are, so that at the peak we find *a nigga* binding anaphora, triggering verbal agreement, and totally unrestricted in terms of theta roles, but setting aside total desemanticization grammaticalized n-forms are unavailable to anything at the bottom of the hierarchy. It should be noted that the Silverstein hierarchy was originally proposed to account for ergative case morphology, and while we find evidence for some relationship between n-forms and animacy, we leave a more detailed elaboration of the interaction for future research.

5 Emergence of Pronominal Use: Is This New?

Tracing the evolution and spread of grammaticalization of n-words is extremely difficult. As with any linguistic change, it is unlikely we will ever know the first instances in which an n-form was used in an unambiguously pronominal manner, for instance. Moreover, given the murky history of AAE and poor attestation of historical AAE due to a long history of white supremacy in the US that did not – and largely still does not – view AAE as linguistically valid, the evolution of this specific form is particularly difficult to trace. However, we can establish some facts about usage of *a nigga* that point to a very rough timeline.

Imposter use of *a nigga* can be found in print in the early and mid 1800s. In appearances in antebellum texts, it is far from clear that black characters in a piece written by a white author can be taken as conclusive evidence that black speakers actually used such forms; much of the material ostensibly in some form of Black English from the period is clearly caricature. However, imposter use does appear in print as early as 1836 (Bird 1836) and throughout the 1800s, often, but not always, in horrific contexts:

(42)

- a. “Massa Cunnel nebber lick a nigga in ‘m life!” (“Master Cunnel never licked [==struck/whipped] a nigga in ‘m [him? my?] life”) (Bird 1836)
- b. Don’t kill a nigger, pray, let him lib anoder day! (Haliburton and Slick 1837)
- c. “Mat saw him yesterday; — a nigga remember the face of him.” (St. John 1847)
- d. “Is this sentinel to be bribed?”
“Dat sartin,” said the negro grinning, “coss a nigga know him berry bell.” (“That’s certain, because *a nigga* knows him very well”) (St. John 1847)
- e. The telegraph is very swift, but a nigga’s foot is swifter
I’ll go down to old Virginny and marry Pop Miller’s sister (Christy 1854)
- f. “And Mrs. H– lets you have your food too.”
“But they’ll give a nigga her food, cap’n – nebber make her pay for a han’fu’ of meal an’ a lash o’ bacon?” (Shields 1878)

In 42a and 42b the speaker is referring to their own person. In 42c and 42d, both are the character Mat referring to himself. Note that in 39c he uses both a syntactic

imposters (in this case his first name) and *a nigga* to refer to himself. Example 42e is from an “Ethiopic Melody” in which the speaker is clearly black – the rest of the song is about sneaking off to the woods to play the banjo while *massa* is asleep. Example 42f is from a back-and-forth between a southern white and a freed woman, who is represented as being horrified to find that she now has to pay for things that were “free” when she was enslaved.

Hiram Smith also notes (p.c.) that by reconstruction, undoubtedly r-less and semantically neutral “*nigga* was *nigga*.” Elsewhere, he demonstrates that neutral affect *nigga* appears both in the WPA recordings of former slaves, all recorded in the 1930s, but indicative of earlier language use if we assume “apparent time,” and also in the writings of former slaves during the 1800s. For instance, it occurs with what Smith describes as neutral affect in *Our Nig* (Wilson 1859) 21 times, and in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Jacobs 1861) 27 times (H. Smith 2015).

It is not until the 1970s, however, that we begin to find a much larger volume of examples of *nigga* with neutral affect, for obvious societal reasons: black Americans were increasingly able to create and widely disseminate less censored creative material. The first recorded audio attestations that the authors have found are from 1971 – specifically 2nd person vocative *nigga* in Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Badasssss Song*. Because there was limited opportunity for black cinema before the beginning of the so-called ‘blaxploitation’ era, it is likely that such forms were in use before the 1970s, but we have no record of it due to the systematic oppression of black Americans that poses similar difficulties for any attempts to study the history of AAE (Wolfram, Thomas, and Green 2000). By the blaxploitation era, however, there is an enormous number of tokens of the 2nd person vocatives (viz., e.g., Richard Pryor in *Which Way Is Up* (1977)). By 1993 n-forms, including first person singular *a nigga* were in common use. So common, in fact, that the Wu-Tang Clan had a hit song “Shame on a nigga” which uses the n-form to make a pun:

(43) Shame on a nigga that tries to run game on a nigga
 ‘shame on anyone who tries to cheat me.’²⁴

By the early 1990s first person *a nigga* appeared in print: in 1991 in an interview with Slick Rick in Spin magazine, in 1994 in fiction in Vibe, and again in 1995 in an interview with Wu-Tang Clan’s O.D.B. in Vibe magazine, clearly all with the expectation it was understood *a nigga* had a first person referent (example 44). Twenty years later, it is extremely common. So much so, that in order to hear it in some cities, like Spears (1998) explains, one need do little more than go outside.

(44) a. The next day, Mark told Ricky in person he was going to kill both Ricky and his mother. Apparently that did it. As Ricky says, “Mess with a nigga’s moms, and...” (Mack 1991)

b. I’m looking for someone to be nice to, someone who could take my bullshit and still have love for a nigga... (Malone 1994)

c. Then I just got held up answering questions by police and shit. News portraying all kinds of bullshit images of a nigga. I don’t give a fuck. I ain’t even

24. While it is potentially possible to interpret both tokens as third person, from the context this is clearly not what is intended. Since a full exegesis of their lyrics would be prohibitively long, we content ourselves to citing Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s paraphrase of the hook: “Punk, you play me, chump, you get jumped.” We strongly encourage the interested reader to listen to the primary source material.

tryin' to think about what people is thinkin' no more. (Ol' Dirty Bastard, in (Malone 1995), talking about his public image)

Two facts should be noted. First, historically racialized terms for black people are often semantically broadened, especially in New World languages, so for instance, Haitian Kreyol *nèg* now means ‘guy’ and it is possible and necessary to differentiate between a *nèg nwa* and a *nèg blann* — a black *nèg* and a white *nèg*. Second, it is not uncommon for semantically broadened imposters to take on pronominal behavior, as with first person *a nigga*. Examples abound in Japanese (*boku*, ‘slave, servant’), Vietnamese (*tôi*, ‘slave’), Thai (*khâa*, ‘slave’) (Hancil and König 2014), and Brazilian Portuguese (*você*, from old Portuguese *vossa mercee* ‘your grace/ your mercy’, *o senhor*, literally ‘the seigneur’), to name a few. It should come as no surprise that *nigga* has been semantically broadened, as this is a common process across New World populations, and, being broadened, it is not surprising that various n-words serve as input for well attested cross-linguistic processes of grammaticalization.

6 Camouflage Construction and Societal Implications

It is clear from the above that *nigga* fulfills a number of distinct grammatical and socio-pragmatic functions for speakers of varieties of AAVE that make use of it. It is also clear that there is disagreement and confusion among the general public as to whether and when it is acceptable to say, and whether it is distinct from the related slur.

What is important to acknowledge is that the above uses of *nigga* are not transparent to the general public, especially speakers of other varieties of English. There is a growing body of work that suggests that non-speakers of AAE overestimate their comprehension of AAE, and that certain AAE syntactic features are assumed to be understood when they are not (Labov 1972a; Spears 1982; Baugh 1984; Rickford 1997; Jones 2016a; Jones et al. 2019). This lack of comprehension has the potential to directly affect how people interact. In the case of *nigga*, because the term is *assumed* to carry negative affect, the end result is that institutions that implement policies around speech unintentionally but explicitly penalize black speakers of AAE for speaking their native dialect. For instance, in September of 2014 football player Colin Kaepernick was penalized and fined \$11,025 for “using inappropriate language” after saying the word to Lamarr Houston, a rival team player who in a later interview, when directly asked if he felt insulted by it, explained that he was not and that it’s more of a “cultural thing.”²⁵ This was the first clash after the league reportedly changed their rules to penalize use of the word.

This is therefore institutional policy predicated on the imposition of white cultural norms around language. It is predicated on the insistence that black explanations of the semantics and pragmatics of an AAE word should be discounted and ignored in favor of an interpretation imposed by linguistic outsiders who assume competence they demonstrably lack. And it is not just wealthy football players who feel the brunt of this well-meaning but misguided institutional prejudice. There is an enormous literature on the racially disproportionate rate of suspensions and expulsions in the United States and on the so-called “school-to-prison” pipeline for black children. A key component of the problem is “zero-tolerance” policies around behavior that have been extended “beyond the federal mandates of weapons, to drugs and alcohol, threats, or swearing” (Skiba and Knesting

25. <http://deadspin.com/colin-kaepernick-was-probably-penalized-for-saying-nig-1638222195>

2001). In fact, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) filed a suit in 2013 against the Bryan Independent School District in Texas for issuing Class C Misdemeanor tickets to children for “Disorderly Conduct-Language” which “generally means profanity.” As the LDF notes:

“In Texas, such ticketing can mean missed class time due to required appearances in adult justice of the peace or municipal courts, fines, and the potential for a criminal record in addition to any other school-based punishment.”

According to a 2014 report by the NAACP, LDF, and National Women’s Law Center (NWLC):

“white students are more likely to be disciplined for objective violations like smoking and vandalism, while African American students are more likely to be referred for subjective infractions like *showing disrespect*, loitering, or making excessive noise.” (emphasis added)

The camouflage nature of the above n-words, the fact that for many speakers these forms are grammaticalized markers of politeness and social distance, the erroneously assumed competence of (primarily but not exclusively white) non-speakers of AAE, and the ascription of malice and disrespect to those who use the forms is a toxic mix. It is, moreover, particularly toxic to precisely those people who are already at the greatest risk of racial prejudice, often in the still socially acceptable form of linguistic prejudice.

7 Conclusions

We have demonstrated above that, as has been discussed thoroughly elsewhere in the literature, *nigga* in AAE does not automatically bear negative affect (Spears 1998; Smitherman 1998; Lanehart and Malik 2016; Rickford and King 2016; Lanehart and Malik 2017). We further demonstrated that there is good reason to posit multiple “n-words” in AAE that perform a variety of social and grammatical functions: We showed that some AAE speakers make use of first person pronominal *a nigga*; we showed that there is a politeness distinction between terms of address, with *my nigga* indicating speaker deference to their interlocuter, relative to the less deferential *nigga*; we demonstrated that speakers make use of a range of social distance markers when introducing new people as subjects of discussion; and we showed that many speakers use bare *nigga* to refer to people already known from the discourse context, sometimes in ways that strongly suggest pronominal behavior.

The use of these forms in AAE is both historically and socially situated. AAE remains a highly stigmatized linguistic variety. Non-AAE speakers tend to stereotype AAE speakers as gratuitously using overwhelming amounts of obscenity (Spears 1998), and tend to consistently overestimate their ability to comprehend AAE, often because of the presence of camouflaged grammatical forms (Labov 1972a; Spears 1982; Baugh 1984; Rickford 1997; Jones 2016a; Jones et al. 2019). Add to this the strong taboo around the slur *nigger*, and it is not surprising that AAE n-words have gone understudied. However, with the grammaticalization of n-forms in AAE, it is increasingly important that we recognize the distinctions between AAE n-words and the slur, as failure to do so has potentially grave ramifications for black Americans who speak a stigmatized language variety.

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