The Voice of the Voiceless

The use of African American Vernacular English and linguistic discourses in
Tupac Shakur's *Changes*

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Abstract

Tupac Amaru Shakur was a successful African American musician, poet, and actor most renowned for tackling controversial subject matters in his music as well as using it as a platform to highlight his political opinions and social activism. Tupac used African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in his music. AAVE is a form of English, with its own unique vocabulary, typically spoken in urban communities and historically rooted in the American South. The aim of this study is to analyse how Tupac uses language to represent the voiceless America. This research essay focuses on answering two sub-questions. First, what topics/discourses does Tupac rap about in the song *Changes* and second, how is language used to represent these topic/discourses? *Changes,* one of Tupac's most prominent song, is studied in a qualitative discourse analysis where AAVE (African American Vernacular English) is in the focus. Also, a minor study is presented in three different tables to compare AAVE words with Standard American (SAE). The results of this study indicate that AAVE in Tupac's music is purposeful, plays a strong role in his persona, presentation, and can be linked to his political activism. In conclusion, through analyzing *Changes,* this essay illustrates several examples on how Tupac uses linguistic features to explore several themes and highlight the African American struggle in his society.

"We talk a lot about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., but it's time to be like them, as strong as them. They were mortal men like us and every one of us can be like them. I don't want to be a role model. I just want to be someone who says, this is who I am, this is what I do. I say what's on my mind." -Tupac Amaru Shakur (T.I.P).

Content Table

1. Introduction

Hip Hop is a widely misunderstood art form that many people consider misogynistic, violent and overtly aggressive. However, Hip-hop music and artists like Tupac Shakur have much more to offer. Many of Tupac's lyrics could almost be considered prophetic, and we can see many of his observations play out in today's modern society, making his work a subject worthy of an academic study.

Tupac Amaru Shakur (1971-1996) was a rapper, poet, and a social activist. He was born and raised in Harlem New York, where he lived in an African American working-class neighborhood with its own speech culture. His mother was a political activist and heavily influenced Tupac's choices and interests as he developed his love for words. Tupac was well known for his charisma and warrior-like persona that challenged white supremacy, discrimination, and injustice. Tupac is one of the best-selling music artists in history with over 75 million albums sold worldwide (Wikipedia, 2017). His impressive achievements include six solo rap albums, over 30 singles, starring or significant roles in six movies and a body of poems anthologized as *The Rose that Grew from Concrete* and published posthumously by his mother, Afeni Shakur. (Edwards, 2002) states that Tupac was clearly a performer with multi-dimensional abilities whose contributions to his art deserve to be studied from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints. Sadly, Tupac was murdered on the 13th of September 1996 in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Many analysts believe that the reason he was killed was that his music politically charged subject matter and how he developed into a prominent figure represents the voice of disenfranchised African Americans.

Tupac's lyrics carry political weight, and the main purpose of this essay is to analyze how Tupac uses language to represent himself, his ideas and political views and speak to his community through his lyrics. This is important to further understand how artists like Tupac utilize language and the linguistic features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that Tupac used to influence his target audience.

To reach this aim the following research questions will be asked:

1. How is the African American Vernacular (AAVE) language used to represent these topic/discourses?
2. What themes/discourses does Tupac seek to communicate about in the song *Changes*?

2. Previous research & Theory

The first section of this chapter will provide a background on Tupac Shakur's life and his involvement in political activities. Furthermore, an introduction of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) will be provided in section 2.2, and finally, other artists with social and political intentions in section 2.3.

2.1 Tupac Shakur

In his raps, Tupac put himself and his life into the context of the street. He therefore, used the so-called street language. This language contrasted with his usage of poetry, which had more to do with Tupac as an individual in the world at large. It would seem, therefore, that each of these artistic styles was dependent upon the context in which Tupac placed himself: he was of the street and in the street, yet there was more to him. Stanford (2011, p.7) claims,

> "Tupac's lyrics underscore his refusal to accept economic inequality and inadequate employment opportunities. He also continues his attack on patriotic symbolism. In 1992, Tupac discussed the unfairness of the capitalism of MTV: "Because I feel like there's too much money here. Nobody should be hitting the lotto for 36 million and we got people starving in the streets. That is not idealistic, that's just real. That is just stupid" (Shakur, Toffler, Gale, & Lazin, 2003)."

Tupac was born in 1971 and raised in poor inner-city neighborhoods in New York. Edwards (2002) claims that his father, Billy Garland, as well as his mother Afeni Shakur, had been politically active in the Black Panther Party since the 1960s. The party was co-founded by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton in 1966 to challenge police brutality against the African American Community. Stanford, (2011, p. 8) writes that "although at birth, he was named Lesane Parish Crooks, Afeni eventually changed her son's name to Tupac Amaru, in honor of an 18th-century Incan revolutionary of Peru killed by Spanish priests."

According to Edwards (2002. p. 61), "Tupac was immersed in the culture of the African American urban working class while simultaneously being influenced by the political views, militant passions, and wider social exposure of his mother and her Black Panther colleagues." However, Tupac's mother also encouraged her son to develop his creative skills and enrolled him in a drama school at an early age, which may have contributed to his passion for music and poetry. Eventually becoming a successful rapper with a hardened persona, drastically different than the poetry he had created earlier in his artistic life.

Tupac's poetry, while not as successful as his rap career, would present him in a different light. Edwards (2002, p. 63) further states, "In the love poems in *The Rose that Grew from Concrete* Tupac's classical training can be felt through the many references to fairy tales and Greek mythology, especially tales of Cupid."

In contrast, the musical genre that Tupac was particularly interested in was "gangster rap," a popular form of hip-hop music. Campbell (2002, p. 1) describes,

> "Tupac and many gangster rappers were criticized for their violent lyrics and misogynistic claims. Gangster rappers became symbols of the best and worst of American musical creativity. Throughout the early 1990s, Tupac became the voice for a generation of young, often frustrated, African Americans."

Tupac's presentation of this alter ego which eventually became his reality is what makes him a legendary and influential figure in hip hop that has led to him being studied on multiple occasions. Stanford (2011, p. 4) states that:

> "Even more than twenty books and hundreds of articles have examined Tupac's complex life. Using biography, critical analyses, photography, and poetry, two perspectives have emerged. On one side, Tupac's critics emphasize his impetuous and reckless behavior, accentuate his confrontations with the criminal justice system, and condemn his angry lyrics. On the other side, there are authors who emphasize Tupac's intellectual gifts, humanitarian impulse, and outspoken critique of racism and injustice."

2.2 African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

This section presents the Background of AAVE, its features and the development.

Jones (2014) describes that "AAVE is an acronym for African American Vernacular English and resembles the speech of the Southern American accent but was originally born from the dark history of slavery." What mainly bothers the speakers of Standard English is that they feel that the continued use of AAVE is a rejection of mainstream-often perceived as White-middle-class values (Wardhaugh, 2017). Wardhaugh (2017, p. 446) further suggests that "linguistics has referred to this variety of speech as *Black English*, *Black Vernacular English,* and *African* or *Afro American English.*" This form of American English shares a similar cadence to the southern American accents, spoken by the majority of the African American population or the non-Americans in the United States of America. Jones (2014) states that in popular culture, it is largely misunderstood, and thought of as bad English, and even called Ebonics (originally coined in 1973 by someone with good intentions, from ebony and phonics, but now starting to become a slur), "ghetto talk" (*definitely* a slur). However, with "misunderstood" it is stated that it is a

> "full-fledged dialect of English, just like British English. It is entirely rule-bound, meaning it has very clear grammar which can be (and has been) described in great detail. It is not simply 'ungrammatical'. If you do not conform to the grammar of AAVE, the result is *ungrammatical* sentences in AAVE." Jones (2014)

Finegan (2015) claims that the history of African American English (AAE) is not completely understood. However, like all other social groups, speakers of AAE share characteristic ways of interacting. As instructed by Wardhaugh (2017, p. 46), the interest towards AAVE grew in part out of the observations that the speech of many Black residents in the "Northern United States, In New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Baltimore, Detroit and Chicago, resembles the speech of Blacks in southern states in many respects, yet differs from the speech of the Whites in respective region." Pullum (1999, p. 39) on the other hand, claims that "African American Vernacular English is not standard English with mistakes."

According to some, AAVE words might sound like standard English with mistakes, but Pullum (1999) states that AAVE is not a slang. He highlights a case in which a school board

of a small-town high school in Oakland, U.S.A, recognized AAVE as acceptable for use in all classroom activities. This is an important step towards validating AAVE and changing peoples' perception towards it. In fact, linguistic analyses have shown that AAVE is a rule-governed, systematic language with every bit as much sophistication as any other variety of English.

There are different features found in AAVE. Wardhaugh (2017, p. 47) claims that the "features of AAVE which have been researched include *phonological, morphological* and *syntactic characteristics*. On the phonological level, the consonant cluster has often been noted where words such as *test*, *desk* and *end* may be pronounced without their final consonants. Other phonological characteristics in AAVE is the so-called *r-lesness* and /ai/ monophthongization, and the realization of 'th sounds as /t/, /f/, /v/, or /s/."

(Tottie, 2002) states that like in southern white English, monophthongization takes place with words like side (sad) and time (tam), whereas words with short /e/ before nasals are pronounced similarly to /i/, so that *been* and *bin* sound identical, as in southern white dialects. Further, she adds that it is not uncommon in AAVE that /l/ disappears in words like *told* and *toll*, which are consequently pronounced like *toe*, and in contracted forms, which leads to sentences like I'll do it sounding like (a du it). Contracted forms like *you'll* and *I'll* are pronounced (ju) and (a) because of this l-reduction (Andersson 2003, p. 6); Fromkin & Rodman (1988, p. 265). Also, Standard English *–ing* and *–ink* is often replaced by *–ang* and *–ank*, so that *thing* is pronounced (thang), and *drink* yields (drank) (Alim 2006, p. 15).

Linguists, such as Pullum (1999) and Ezgeta (2012) have gathered the most distinctive grammar rules of the AAVE. Some important syntactic features of AAVE are double negation, absence of third person singular, absence of copula, negative concord, habitual be, deletion of verbal copula, got instead of have, contractions and negative inversions. The following present some AAVE grammar features with examples:

- Double negation: standard English *I haven´t ever seen anything like it* corresponds to AAVE *I ain´t never seen nothin´ like it*. Obviously, double negation does not belong to standard English grammar, but it is an important feature of the AAVE dialect.

- The absence of third person singular –s on present tense singular verb forms such as *She talk* for "She talks",
- The absence of possessive –s in Noun-Noun possessive constructions *Jack Money* instead of "Jack's money",
- The absence of plural –s suffix on semantically plural nouns *Fifty cent* instead of "Fifty cents".
- The absence of copula, the absence of *is* and *are* as in *He tall* for "He is tall" or *They working* for "They are working."
- Negative Concord (NC): the phenomenon where two (or more) negative elements express negation in isolation yielding a single semantic negation" (Zeijlstra 2007:504), as in *I ain't got no money.*
- Habitual *be*: according to Wardhaugh (2017, p. 48), this feature is called invariant *be* because the copula is not conjugated, but used in the form of be for all subjects (i.e. I be, you be, he/she/it be, etc.) It is called habitual because it marks an action that is done repeatedly

In addition to the above features, the deletion of the copular verb *be* being perhaps the most obvious and frequent expression of AAVE. In some contexts, copula, be can be left out, as in e.g. *They big. They fat and they gorgeous* (see e.g. (Jones, 2014) and Trotta & Blyahher, (2011, p. 21) Another *feature of AAVE, discussed by Trotta* & Blyahher (2011), is the use of *got* instead of *have.* The verb *got,* which denotes 'obtaining or gaining possession of something',* replaces the verb *have* or *have got* to indicate possession or ownership, as in *He got no money.* Further, (Trotta and Blyahher, 2011) address that the pronoun *y'all*, a contraction of *you-all*, is not only extremely recurrent in the AAVE but also white southern American English. Interestingly, they also state that the plural *y'all* is sometimes used to address a single speaker, as in *Right now, I need some assistance from y'all.* The final example is negative inversions, which frequently occur in spoken language, but also in hip-hop. Claps (2010, p. 7) explains that "examples like *'Can't nobody beat 'em.' ('Nobody can beat them.')* in African American Vernacular English have the inverted form of questions but the falling intonation and sentence meaning of (emphatic) declaratives (Labov et al. 1968 in Sells, Rickford, Wasov (1996, p. 591)."

The development of AAVE has been presented by few scholars. For example, Wolfram, Thomas & Green (2000, p. 315) state that "no other dialect has received more scrutiny with

respect to its past and current development than AAVE. They also add that during the past decades the research publications of AAVE has doubled the combined total of all other ethnic variations in the English language."

Further, they also state that between the 1950s to the 1960s, there was a phenomenon called the Anglicist hypothesis, which they claimed was the so called British based dialect that AAVE was originally derived from. This was replaced in the 1970s by the Creolist hypothesis. The dialectologists claimed that AAVE was historically rooted and widespread through creole found in the African diaspora, and since then several other corpora have emerged to challenge the Creolist hypothesis. During the 1980s one important type of data was examined that proved to be written records of ex-slaves and they're as well as a limited set of ex slave recordings.

Wolfram (2003, p. 314) and Wolfram and Thomas (2002) take a slightly different position towards the emerging of AAVE, favoring the neo-Anglicist root which they think brought them certain characteristics from local dialects of English. Another scholar, Diametrically, opposed to this view and maintained that AAVE is or Creole origin. (Wardhaugh, 2017).

However, based on research conducted by Labov and his colleagues in Philadelphia (Labov 1987; Myhill & Harris 1986; Dayton 1996), and by Bailey and his colleagues in the South (Bailey & Maynor, 1985, 1987, 1989), some researchers have concluded that AAVE is actually diverging from European American vernacular varieties, mostly due to the rather than the independent development of a tense mood aspect system that makes it more distant from comparable.

Trotta and Blyahher (2011, p. 34) quote (Wideman,1976), who stresses the difficulties of categorizing and deconstructing the AAVE dialect:

> "There is no single register of African American speech. And it's not words and intonations, it's a whole attitude about speech that has historical rooting. It's not a phenomenon that you can isolate and reduce to linguistic characteristics. It has to do with the way a culture conceives of the people inside of that culture. It has to do with a whole complicated protocol of silences and speech, and how you use speech in what's

other than directly to communicate information. And it has to do with, certainly, the experiences that the people in the speech situation bring into the encounter." (p. 34)

2.3 Other Artists with Social and Political Intentions

Expressing social and political opinions through music is an area that is not unique or limited to Tupac. This section will present two examples of other artists that have used their musical platform in this way, namely John Lennon of the Beatles in section 2.3.1 and Bob Marley in section 2.3.2.

2.3.1 John Lennon vs. Tupac

Another artist who used his musical platform to express his social and political opinion in his music was John Lennon (1940-1980) of the Beatles. Unlike Tupac, Lennon's musical approach was not as aggressive and focused on positivity highlighted by his song *Revolution.* Platoff (2005) states that the 1968 song *Revolution* is the most controversial and overtly political song the Beatles produced so far, created by Lennon at the time of profound turmoil of his life, and in the time, that was the turning point of the social and political upheavals of the 1960s Vietnam War.

The theme of change seems to also be a common denominator between Lennon and Tupac but conveyed very differently. Lennon was inspired to write *Revolution* after a two month stay in a yogi retreat in Rishikesh, India. Platoff (2005) further states that *Revolution* was created at a time of uncertainty and change both for Lennon's personality and for the word at large. This brings similar parallels to Tupac's song *Changes* where he manifests his inner desire for change and embodies the voice of the urban communities. However, Lennon used it through a peaceful message whereas Tupac out of rage. Also, both artists were active and inspired to send across a message during a time of war, Lennon during the Vietnam war and Tupac during the Gulf War and inner-city turmoil.

To further indicate difference between these two artists, Lennon did not use AAVE in his ways of communication which likely also spoke to a broader audience than Tupac's urban community focused music.

2.3.2 Bob Marley vs. Tupac

Similar to Tupac, Bob Marley (1945-1981) was an artist who focused in protest music. *No Woman No Cry*, one of Marley's popular songs released in 1975, represented a fight for peace and love for his nation.

However, Marley still had a peaceful approach in his ways of communication and used his platform to spread information about universal injustices, human rights, and the urgent need for peace in the world. Giroy (2005) states that Marley became not only the first truly global pop icon, but a historic figure whose revolutionary art connected the old, modern culture of slaves, and slave descendants with the very different political tempos of the post-colonial world.

In parallel to Tupac, Marley also used his voice to fight racism. Giroy (2005) further states that Marley chronicled the destructive attachment to Christianity among blacks, the systematic hypocrisy of church, state and government, the capricious brutality of police and the violence of mis-education, these are characteristics that also could be found when analyzing Tupac as an artist.

Although Tupac and Marley both shared the same political and social correlated ideologies, Marley's rhetoric was shaped by his Jamaican-American dialect, religion, and heritage just as Tupac's was shaped by his.

3. Method

3.1 Materials

I have chosen to analyze the song *Changes* by Tupac. The reason why I selected this song as a focus of my study is two-fold. First, on a personal level, I am a fan of Tupac's music and consider him an important figure in pop culture. Second, Tupac's use of AAVE in *Changes* makes for an interesting study with a plethora of tangible examples. *Changes,* one of Tupac's most popular releases, is a song that presents subject matter that is still relevant today as ironically not much has changed since its debut. In *Changes*, Tupac gives an inside look on

social problems afflicting African Americans and suggests possible resolutions. In order to view the full lyrics of the song, refer to Appendix.

Changes was initially recorded in 1992 but was released posthumously in 1998 as part of his *Greatest Hits* album. Tupac was a prolific writer and was known to spend extensive hours recording music that would not ever be released during his lifetime, and *Changes* is the highlight from those unreleased records. *Changes* follows Tupac's most common musical themes exploring the African American struggle in the United States, justice, inequality, street life, and police brutality to name a few subjects.

3.2 Analysis

In order to analyze *Changes,* I began by studying the artist behind the lyrics as his music was heavily influenced by his experience and challenges. Next, I reviewed the lyrics and listened to the song while taking notes of the use of AAVE and other linguistic features relevant to the subject matter. When analyzing the material, I searched for the song lyric *Changes* and listened to it numerous times and took notes simultaneously.

Moreover, I searched for different interpretations and compared them and found that most of them where similar to mine. Some of the analyses that I found, were non-scientific, which for academic purposes are not ideal. However, I still chose to use some of them as I had been observing the same points. Still, a majority of my study is based on scientific academic papers written by different scholars. The advantages of analyzing one song is that it allows you to gain a thorough understanding of all its linguistic features.

In section 4.1, I chose to analyze different linguistic features that appears in *Changes*. In section 4.1.1 *Grammatical features*, I have conducted a comparison of all the AAVE featured sentences and vocabulary that appear throughout *Changes* in two different tables. All of these words are compared with SAE.

Further, in chapter 4.2, I chose to analyze different themes that appears in *Changes.* There is a brief review of stylistic features as well as Tupac's' use of language as a tool to reach out to his target audience.

To aid my research efforts, I also used different books and scientific articles that specialized in methodological theories in linguistics, especially when conducting the AAVE analysis. The greatest challenge I faced in this study was to find a proper focus and stick to it. As I kept writing, I was introduced to new theories that I thought were interesting and felt compelled to include in my essay. However, I concluded that I had to organize my thoughts, have a clear concise direction, and stick to a solid standpoint.

4. Results and Findings

In this section, the focus will be to provide a qualitative analysis based on different segments of Tupac's song *Changes*. Refer to Appendix for the lyrics.

4.1 Linguistic features of AAVE

This section will explore linguistic features of AAVE in Tupac's song lyric, in answering the first research question: How is the African American Vernacular (AAVE) language used to represent these topic/discourses? In order for this, comparison between the features and the grammar of Standard American English (SAE) is made. Both single words and sentences will be highlighted and compared in tables in section 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 The first section (4.1.1) will illustrate examples of the grammatical features found in the song *Changes*. This will include *Copula suppression, Future prospective, negative inversion and multiple negation, got instead of have, Non-standard plurals, Contracted forms, Deletion of verbal copula* and *R-lesness*. All these linguistic features have been explained in chapter 2.2 "AAVE". The second section (4.1.2) will highlight slang vocabulary used in *Changes,* while the final section will highlight characteristic sentences of AAVE used in the song lyric.

4.1.1 Grammatical features

In this section, features of AAVE will be analyzed, represented in the song *Changes* (for a presentation of the features of AAVE, see section 2.2).

Table 1: It states clearly that the *Contracted forms* are what appears the most in the lyric.

AAVE FORMS (Total 8)	AVVE Featured Sentence	OCCURRENCE (Total 15)
Copula suppression	*"Cops give a damn about a negro"* *"Pull the trigger kill a nigga he's a hero"*	**2**
Future/prospective gonna/gotta	*"You gotta operate the easy way"* *"We gotta make a change"*	**2**
Ain't: negative inversion* and multiple negation:	*"We ain't ready, to see a black President"* *"It ain't a secret don't conceal the fact"* *"momma didn't raise no fool"*	**3**
Got instead of have:	*"Instead of war on poverty they got a war on drugs"*	**1**
Non-standard plurals:	*"Things will never be the same"*	**1**
Contracted forms:	*"Don't let 'em jack you up"* *"Give 'em guns step back watch 'em kill each other"* *"Cause I always got to worry 'bout the pay backs"* *"First ship 'em dope and let 'em deal the brothers"*	**4**
Deletion of verbal copula:	*"I'm tired of bein'.."* *"I'm lookin' for a.."*	**2**
R-lesness:	*"Brother-Brotha"* *"Never- Neva"*	**2**

Note: The speech of African American carries specific negation type. *Ain't* can also be found in the Southern White Vernacular English (SWVE), however *did* and *ain't* are more common in AAVE. (Ezgeta 2012, p. 12) Negative Inversion refers to the phenomenon where Negative Concord takes place under subject auxiliary inversion only. (Veenendaal et. al, 2014)

4.1.2 Vocabulary expressions

Table 2 illustrates the use of AAVE words found in *Changes*. It shows that there are twenty-seven words with AAVE features, however those words appear fifty times in total throughout

the lyrics. I also include as AAVE words present participles ending in "in" instead of "ing" such as; smokin', sellin', givin', which are semantically equivalent to the standard form. The words in the table are AAVE words that normally get labeled as slang, which is predominantly considered taboo or improper English. However, as reviewed previously, many argue that AAVE is its own language possessing its own grammatical rules and communication dynamics. (Jones, 2014)

Table 2: It states clearly all AAVE words used by Tupac Shakur in *Changes* along with a translation of what they mean in SAE.

AAVE WORDS (Total 27)	OCCURRENCE (Total: 50)	Meanings in SAE
Nigga	1	African American
Crack	4	A form of cocaine
Snatch	1	Steal
Dope	1	Heroin
Brother	6	Close male friends
Jack	1	Steal
Smack	1	Hit or Attack
Ya	3	Your
Bust	1	To shoot a gun
Buck	1	One dollar
'Cause	1	Because
'Bout	1	About to
'Em	5	Them
Gotta	5	Have to
Givin'	1	Giving
"G"	1	Experienced street person
Sellin'	1	Selling
Givin'	1	Giving
Blast	1	Shoot
Makin'	1	Making
Comin'	1	Coming

Strapped	1	Armed with a gun
Ain't	4	Not
Smokin'	1	Smoking
Lookin'	1	Looking
Bein'	2	Being
Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat	1	Sound of gun shot

From this table, we can see that that the *sound of a gun*, described as *Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat* is an *Onomatopoeia[1]*. This seems to be specific to AAVE unlike in SAE where the onomatopoeia for gunshot is either *Bang* or *Pow!*

This feature only appears one time throughout the song *Changes*. Again, here we find Tupac utilizing familiar language tools that his target audience would recognize, further establishing his street credibility or "realness."

If we take a look at all the AAVE words illustrated in this table, we can find that the most frequent words are the syntactic features of the *Contracted forms* such as*: makin', comin', givin', bout', em' etc.*

However, the specific AAVE word that occurs the most is the word *Brother.* In the second place comes *Gotta* that is a replacement for *have*. In third place, we find the word *crack* that is slang to describe *a form of cocaine.* The word *Negro* deliberately didn't make it to this table, (for explanation refer to section 4.3.2 *Being Oppressed*) however, the word *Nigga* did, as it is a common AAVE word.

Table 3: It states the sentences that carry AAVE features in *Changes.*

AAVE SENTENCES (Total 20)	Meanings in SAE (Total 20)
Cops give a damn about a negro?	Do cops care about black people?

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[1] Onomatopoeia is sound imitating expressions, such as *cuckoo, meow, honk,* or *boom.* According to (Chang, 2018, p.1) Onomatopoeia could be seen in different categories. In our daily life where we hear the telephone, *ring, ring.* Also, there are the sound of animals, like the dog *woof, woof,* Other sounds can be derived by action such as *ouff.*

Pull the trigger killa nigga he's a hero	If he kills a black person, he is a hero
One less hungry mouth on the welfare	One less person to pay social welfare to
I got love for my brother	I care for my fellow African Americans
Devil take a brother	The devil influences one negatively
Take the evil out the people they'll be acting right	Remove evil, so people can behave morally
'Cause both black and white is smokin' crack tonight	There is no racism, everyone is equal
It takes skill to be real	It is hard to be honest
Stayin' in the dope game	Staying criminal
What's a mother to do	What choice does a mother have
Bein' real don't appeal to the brother in you	Being honest will not get you anywhere
I made a G today	I earned a grand today
I gotta get paid	I have to earn some money
Can't a brother get a little peace	Can't one get peace of mind?
But now I'm back with the blacks givin' it back to you	What you see is what you get
Don't let 'em jack you up	Do not let them rob/ruin you
You gotta learn to hold ya own	You have to learn to be independent
My mama didn't raise no fool	My mother raised a smart son
'Cause I always got to worry 'bout the pay backs	I worry about retaliation
Some buck that I roughed up way back	Some guy that I previously assaulted

Some of the sentences illustrated in this table have been explained further in section 4.2 *Themes in Changes*. The purpose of this illustration is to demonstrate the total AAVE featured sentences in the lyric and conduct a "translation" into what it actually means in SAE. All of these sentences carry some sort of AAVE feature. (For more explanation refer to section 2.2 AAVE) This extensive use of AAVE makes Tupac's' music more relevant with his target audience and could almost be considered a requirement when creating "gangster rap."

4.2 Themes in *Changes*

In answering the second research question: What Topics/discourses does Tupac seek to communicate about in the song Changes? the following elements were selected to represent different themes found in Tupac's music: being African American, violence, inequality, religion and politics.

4.2.1 Being African American

If you never saw Tupac and only heard his music would you be able to identify his racial background? Most probably! One of the reasons is that the themes of his lyrics generalize the life of an economically challenged inner-city African American. Another reason is how he utilizes language, specifically AAVE. It can be argued that Tupac is speaking in a coded language understood by his target audience, young African Americans. To fully understand and appreciate his music, one must familiarize themselves with AAVE and slangs used. This familiarization of language can break down barriers and help bring perspective to others outside his target audience. Utilizing AAVE further emphasizes his perceived street credibility, an important element of Hip-Hop culture. To have the authority to speak on the themes Tupac chooses to focus on, it is imperative to have lived through these experiences. As such, central themes in a majority of Tupac's catalogue of music are race and poverty, and *Changes* is no different. Examples of these themes are found in different stanzas in *Changes*. One in following example:

> *I wake up in the morning and I ask myself,*
> *is life worth living should I blast myself?*
> *I'm tired of bein' poor and even worse I'm black,*
> *my stomach hurts so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch.*
> *(lines 2-5)*

The above lines start by illustrating Tupac's negative thoughts toward life and questioning if it is worth living with a bad financial situation. He is devastated and considers taking his own life with the help of a gun. The word *blast* is a typical AAVE word that means to fire a gun. He also says *my stomach hurts* which means that he is hungry, further emphasizing the fact

that he is poor. Tupac further talks about if being poor wasn't enough of a burden, he also is black, which is an additional hurdle in his pursuit for equality in a racially conscious America. He also describes that he is in thoughts of stealing a bag, *a purse to snatch. Snatch* is also a word that is a typical AAVE feature. Other features of AAVE could be found such as *bein'* and *lookin'* and known for *deletion of verbal copula*. Here Tupac pronounces words in a way that is once again familiar to his target audience, further emphasizing his perceived street credibility.

4.2.2 Being oppressed

During Tupac's life, he witnessed different types of violence, both direct and indirect. This particular theme has therefore a large impact on his lyrics, especially in *Changes,* more specifically the subject matter of police brutally as it relates to race. Example of this could be found in following stanza:

> *"Cops give a damn about a negro?*
> *Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero,"*
> *(Changes, lines 5-6)*

In this stanza, Tupac is questioning if the police care about black people. Specifically, referring to black people using the derogatory term *negro* when questioning the police's motives in the first line. However, in the following line, Tupac refers to black people utilizing the AAVE term *nigga* as opposed to *negro*. This is an intentional differentiation that demonstrates the subtle differences in meaning that a word can take on based on its spelling and contextual use. Here, the word *negro,* no longer an acceptable term, is used to demonstrate Tupac's view of racist police that target African Americans. Since the word *negro* carries negative connotations, Tupac uses it to great effectiveness when questioning the police to further his point and shock the listener. In contrast, the term *nigga* has been adopted by African Americans as term of endearment or salutation, closer to meaning brother. Tupac could have said *Pull the trigger, kill a brother, he's a hero* instead, which would have resulted in the same conclusion but with less impact to the listener. His use of subtle changes in the meaning of a word based on its AAVE counterpart to reach his goal, is what makes Tupac's works worth studying.

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> *And as long as I stay black I gotta stay strapped*
> *And I never get to lay back*
> *'Cause I always got to worry 'bout the pay backs*
> *(Changes, lines 78-80)*

In the first line, Tupac uses irony to get his message across and utilizes the AAVE word *strapped* meaning to carry a weapon, specifically a gun. When he says *as long as I stay black*, knowing we are unable to change our skin color, he is attempting to emphasize the lack of choice associated to being black and carrying protection whether it be from other members of the community or even law enforcement. Further emphasizing the stress of living in areas with high levels of violence, he mentions that *I never get to lay back 'Cause I always got to worry 'bout the pay backs.* Utilizing *contracted forms* to shorten words almost seems to emphasize a sense of urgency due to the lack of time Tupac has when expressing himself as he is constantly on high alert worrying about retaliation. This retaliation while not specified from a certain group is most likely the police or even others within his community.

4.2.3 Inequality

The theme of inequality is also explored in *Changes*, more specifically the view of American society towards those living in poverty. An example could be found in following stanza:

> *"Give the crack to the kids who the hell cares*
> *One less hungry mouth on the welfare"*
> *Changes* (lines 7-8)

One AAVE vocabulary word *Crack,* is an illicit drug and is a form of highly addictive cocaine that drastically affected inner city communities in the 80's. Dunlap, Golub & Johnson (2006, p. 1) states:

> Numerous African American families have struggled for generations with persistent poverty, especially in the inner city. These conditions were further strained during the 1980s and 1990s by the widespread use of crack cocaine.

Tupac saw first-hand what the drugs did to African American communities, especially to their children. The *kids* that Tupac is referring to in this stanza are the children of minorities,

typically living in these inner-city areas. Many families in these neighborhoods were reliant on the welfare system to provide their basic needs. Hungerford (2017, p. 427) explains, "The social welfare system is conventionally thought of as public spending that improves the welfare of a nation by changing the distribution of well- being with an eye to achieving social goals." The stanza is written with a sense of sarcasm meant to capture the view of considering the welfare system a burden rather than real care and help for those that depended on its existence to survive.

4.2.4 Having religious values

One theme Tupac explores in his music is religion. Here Tupac seems to give a religious value to the situation, by means of allusion[2]:

> "*Take the evil out the people they'll be acting right,'*
> *Cause both black and white is smokin' crack tonight."*
> *(Changes, lines 33-34)*

The above stanza could be interpreted in different ways. One way is when referring to *the evil*, as most traditional religions associate the *evil* with the *devil,* and in general, all negativity. Another way of interpreting the word *evil* in this context could be seen as drugs in general, perhaps another of the devils' tools. With the first line, Tupac explains that if drugs were removed, people would be acting in a decent way. What is interesting with this stanza, is that Tupac is now putting both blacks and whites in the same state, and with that he is reaching out to people beyond the AAVE community. Tupac eludes that drugs are not an issue only for the black community but also for the white community as well. By including the white community, Tupac's message may not fall on deaf ears outside of his target audience. The above line also has AAVE features such as *contracted forms* like *smokin'*, *right'* and *cause.'* The word *Crack*[3], as mentioned in section 4.1.3 also appears once again.

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[2] Allusion is when you pass a reference indirectly to something. It could be a song that has a reference from the bible or a theme on a novel that is seen in a famous movie.

[3] Crack is a common AAVE word that means a form of drug in SAE.

Another example of Tupac's use of allusion to explore a religious theme could be found in:

> *"How can the Devil take a brother when he is close to me."*
> *(Changes line 18)*

Again, Tupac is referring to the devil as an entity that is capable of affecting reality. Here Tupac seems to be exploring the notion that the Devil is the cause of much of the violence plaguing the inner cities. Tupac seems to suggest that if we view each other as brothers and maintain close relationships then we would not be vulnerable to the influence of the devil.

The word *brother* is frequently used in AAVE slang and is generally a heartfelt way of calling a friend, often between black males. The use of this word emphasizes a closer relationship and indicates that there is an intangible bond between the parties, where you are included and treated as family.

Tupac's has in many of his lyrics referred to himself as "Black Jesus," interestingly incorporating religion into his music and capturing the listeners attention with a controversial statement that challenges the status quo. While he does not refer to himself as Black Jesus in *Changes* one can infer that the religious influence remains and still carries weight here.

Another theme Tupac explores in his music is politics clearly influenced by his activist background and affiliation to the Black Panther party. Political influences can clearly be seen in *Changes* and some of them are going to be illustrated here. Political themes are found in the following example through allusions:

> *First ship 'em dope and let 'em deal the brothers*
> *Give 'em guns step back watch 'em kill each other*
> *(Changes, lines 10-11)*

Here Tupac seems to allude that the government is providing drugs and weapons to his community. He seems to suspect that the government may hope that minorities would wipe each other out. This clearly follows the train of thought among the members of the Black Panther party that the established government was attempting to oppress blacks and minorities.

"It's time to fight back", that's what Huey said,
2 shots in the dark now Huey's dead."
(Changes, lines 10-11)

The person "Huey" that he is referring to is actually Huey Newton, a social activist and one of the co-founders of the Black Panther Party. Tupac expressively illustrates Huey as a symbol that challenged black oppression. Arnopole (2017) claims that when Huey was killed, the plan for fighting back the injustices died with him, but the dream of getting equal social rights for the African Americans grew larger than ever. Similar symbolic qualities could be found in people such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Bob Marley and now also, Tupac himself.

An additional allusion in the text can be found where Tupac refers to the war in the Middle East:

"And still I see no changes can't a brother get a little peace,
It's war on the streets and the war in the Middle East."
(Changes, lines 63-64)

Tupac continues to explore his political views by comparing the violence in inner city streets to the Middle East, claiming that both are war zones. This could also be translated as Tupac's commentary on the American government's involvement in overseas conflicts without truly addressing their own issues at home. This segment also shows Tupac's empathy, that he is not only concerned about his own community, but also the struggles of people in the Middle East. (Kobrin, 2016) adds that *Changes* was released in 1998 and at that time there was a major conflict in Iraq so he compared the war on the streets with the war in the Middle East so it would add impact to the listener.

The last political stanza taken from the lyric is found when Tupac speaks about a black president:

"And although it seems heaven sent
We ain't ready, to see a black President, uhh."
(Changes, lines 37-38)

(Campbell, 2002) interpretation on above stanza is that when Tupac states that the world isn't ready for a black president, he assumes that the world is still racist and more importantly black people are still under oppression.

Politics and religious beliefs have inspired musicians from all walks of life across many genres of music. Like Tupac, John Lennon, and Bob Marley used their music to effectively communicate their political opinions along with religious commentary using their native forms of English to speak to their respective audiences. Each one of these artists tapped into topics relevant to their time in history using current events as inspiration and motivation.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This essay has undertaken a linguistic analysis of Tupac's song *Changes*. In particular, I presented the grammar and vocabulary features of AAVE in the lyrics and sought to show how certain themes that Tupac wants to communicate with his fans were created by means of such AAVE features. As illustrated in chapter 4.2 (Themes), the lyric has been divided into four different themes. Under each topic, segments from *Changes* has been selected to illustrate what linguistic features are being used. As Table 1 demonstrates, Tupac uses many AAVE features in his song *Changes*.

With the illustration of Tables 2 and 3, the study has shown that a significant amount of AAVE grammar and vocabulary used in Tupac's lyrics. I also compared the AAVE in *Changes* with SAE, in order to help clarify the messages expressed in the song.

With the result of the study, we can see that the activist Tupac effectively uses AAVE to make linguistic effects for communicating his religious and political messages. It is no coincidence that Tupac's political views manifested in his lyrics mirror his background, experience and Black Panther Party, and the influence of his mother.

As revealed in this essay, Tupac uses different linguistic effects to highlight his political stance which plays a significant role in shaping his music and lyrics. This is supported by scholars like (Campbell, 2002) who highlighted that Tupac was politically active and criticized for his violent lyrics and became the voice of frustrated African Americans.

(Edwards, 2002) also claims that the politically rooted influence Tupac has in his lyrics are influenced by his affiliation with the Black Panther party. (Stanford, 2011) is another scholar who studied Tupac and mentioned the two-sided persona he represented, one being the dark frustrated criminal, and the other, the intellectual humanitarian who was an activist fighting racism and injustice.

Edwards & Ash (2004) claim that Tupac himself considered being real to be a very positive personal characteristic and my findings support this when looking at his use of AAVE and the themes he covers in his music. These themes and AAVE use are used effectively to highlight issues relevant to the African American and minority communities in the United States. Speaking on these issues using street vernacular capture Tupac's values and ties into the concept of "Keeping It Real." (Edwards & Ash, 2004) defines this concept as a mantra in the working-class African American community. They mention that "in talk, performance, song and every other form of communication, inner-city African Americans express a preference for realism and straightforwardness. People who "keep it real" eschew fakery, deception, mind games and lies, and have realistic expectations for life in the "hood."[4]

Studying the lyrical content of a song such as *Changes* and understanding the history of a prolific artist such as Tupac demonstrates the complexity associated to AAVE and any study covering this topic. Hip Hop is no longer as controversial as it once was in the 90's thanks to its popular position in pop culture, so much of AAVE language has now become a part of common speech culture. As a result, it is important to develop an understanding of the roots of influential artists like Tupac and AAVE.

For future studies, I would like to compare not only an African American rapper but also other rappers to see what similarities and differences in characteristics could be found. I would also like to conduct a more thorough comparison on speech and writing. Tupac has an ability to code switch from SAE to AAVE and I would like to analyze and compare his use of language as a rapper versus a poet. When you listen to his lyrics and hear his interviews, you can find more significant characteristics of AAVE as opposed to when reading his lyrics due to the fact that words like *brotha* and *gonna* are spelled correctly when written.

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[4] Short for "hoodlum". Someone from the inner city in the urban culture.

A reason why Tupac inspired me to choose him as a focus in my study is that he was a martyr for his people and similar to other influential figures like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Bob Marley and Mahatma Gandhi, he tried to use his power to change the world and make it a better place.

At one point in the song, Tupac stops rapping and recites the following words:

> *"We gotta make a change*
> *It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes.*
> *Let's change the way we eat, let's change the way we live*
> *And let's change the way we treat each other.*
> *You see the old way wasn't working so it's on us to do*
> *What we gotta do, to survive."*

Tupac's influence can still be felt across the globe and through his music he continues to be the voice of the voiceless.

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Appendix Changes by Tupac Shakur

Come on come on

I see no changes wake up in the morning and I ask myself

Is life worth living should I blast myself?

I'm tired of bein' poor and even worse I'm black

My stomach hurts so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch

Cops give a damn about a negro

Pull the trigger kill a nigga he's a hero

Give the crack to the kids who the hell cares

One less hungry mouth on the welfare

First ship 'em dope and let 'em deal the brothers

Give 'em guns step back watch 'em kill each other

It's time to fight back that's what Huey said

Two shots in the dark now Huey's dead

I got love for my brother but we can never go nowhere

Unless we share with each other

We gotta start makin' changes

Learn to see me as a brother instead of two distant strangers

And that's how it's supposed to be

How can the Devil take a brother if he's close to me?

I'd love to go back to when we played as kids

But things changed, and that's the way it is

That's just the way it is

Things will never be the same

That's just the way it is

Aww yeah

That's just the way it is

Things will never be the same 27

That's just the way it is

Aww yeah

I see no changes all I see is racist faces

Misplaced hate makes disgrace to races

We under I wonder what it takes to make this

One better place, let's erase the wasted

Take the evil out the people they'll be acting right

'Cause both black and white is smokin' crack tonight

And only time we chill is when we kill each other

It takes skill to be real, time to heal each other

And although it seems heaven sent

We ain't ready, to see a black President, uhh

It ain't a secret don't conceal the fact 40

The penitentiary's packed, and it's filled with blacks

But some things will never change

Try to show another way but you stayin' in the dope game

Now tell me what's a mother to do

Bein' real don't appeal to the brother in you

You gotta operate the easy way

"I made a G today" But you made it in a sleazy way

Sellin' crack to the kid. " I gotta get paid,"

Well hey, well that's the way it is

That's just the way it is 50

Things will never be the same

That's just the way it is

Aww yeah

That's just the way it is

Things will never be the same

That's just the way it is

Aww yeah

We gotta make a change

It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes.

Let's change the way we eat, let's change the way we live 60

And let's change the way we treat each other.

You see the old way wasn't working so it's on us to do

What we gotta do, to survive.

And still I see no changes can't a brother get a little peace

It's war on the streets and the war in the Middle East

Instead of war on poverty they got a war on drugs

So the police can bother me

And I ain't never did a crime I ain't have to do

But now I'm back with the blacks givin' it back to you

Don't let 'em jack you up, back you up,

Crack you up and pimp smack you up

You gotta learn to hold ya own

They get jealous when they see ya with ya mobile phone

But tell the cops they can't touch this

I don't trust this when they try to rush I bust this

That's the sound of my tool you say it ain't cool

My mama didn't raise no fool77

And as long as I stay black I gotta stay strapped

And I never get to lay back 79

'Cause I always got to worry 'bout the pay backs

Some buck that I roughed up way back

Comin' back after all these years

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat that's the way it is uhh

That's just the way it is

Things will never be the same

That's just the way it is

Aww yeah

That's just the way it is

Things will never be the same

That's just the way it is

Aww yeah

Some things will never change

Songwriters: Bruce Hornsby / Tupac Amaru Shakur / Deon Evens

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