

LAVENDER, LILAC, AND LANGUAGE: A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC VARIATION IN  
ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

Sam Houston State University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

Mackenzie R. Campbell

December, 2020

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to anyone whose voice has been diminished or disregarded. Let the texts analyzed here and my analysis of them encourage you to tell your story and be unafraid of using your authentic voice. I hope that Alice Walker and Celie encourage you to use your voice to tell your story, no matter who tries to silence you.

## ABSTRACT

Campbell, Mackenzie R., *Lavender, Lilac, and Language: A Study of Linguistic Variation in Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. Master of Arts (English), December, 2020, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

Since its publication in 1982, *The Color Purple* has been widely discussed. However, few of these analyses focus on the novel from a linguistic perspective. That is not altogether surprising considering that stylistics (the linguistic analysis of literature) has a contentious place in literary criticism. In part, this thesis aims to bridge the gap between linguistics and literary criticism by demonstrating how linguistics can aid in literary analysis. More specifically, however, the objective of this thesis is to answer the following research question: How does Alice Walker use language variation and for what purpose? My claim is that Alice Walker uses language variation to negotiate power, construct her characters' identities, challenge the dominant culture, and expand the range of voices to be heard in American literature. To answer my research question, I collected data from all of Celie's epistles in *The Color Purple*, which amounted to 47,057 words. In this corpus, I analyzed dialect usage and dialogue. The data quantify the language variation over the course of the novel. What I found was that Celie's nonstandard dialect usage drops slightly over the course of the novel and she grows quantitatively in her conversations. Both of these represent her empowerment in her language. Ultimately, African American Vernacular English is a way for Celie and Walker to identify themselves and orient their position among speakers and authors who use Standard American English.

**KEY WORDS:** Sociolinguistics, Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Stylistics, Linguistic analysis of literature, Sociolinguistic analysis of literature, Dialects, Registers, Linguistic variation, Race, Gender, American literature, Twentieth-century literature, Literary criticism, African American Vernacular English.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge several people who have helped me get to this milestone in my academic career. First of all, my family who has always encouraged my academic pursuits and supported me through them. Thank you for believing in me and encouraging me to follow my dreams.

Secondly, Dr. Halmari. Your guidance, encouragement, and dedication in this process has been invaluable to me. Thank you for everything, from encouraging my use of the Oxford comma to encouraging me to use the entire novel as a corpus. From my first linguistics class in my undergrad, to history of the English language and the recent stylistics seminar in my graduate career you have been an inspiration.

Thirdly, my readers, Drs. Hall and Tayebi. Thank you both for your commitment to this thesis. My work is better because of your comments, questions, and guidance. My thesis would not be what it is today without you.

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*I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.*

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

Women writers have been a part of the American novel tradition since its inception with Susanna Rowson's publication of *Charlotte Temple* in 1791. Novels written by women continued to be successful in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well, with the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852), *Our Nig* by Harriet E. Wilson (1859), *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin (1899), *O Pioneers* by Willa Cather (1913), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (1937),<sup>1</sup> and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960)—to name a few. Within this brief list of novels written by American women, the trend of nonstandard American dialect usage already emerges. This trend—especially how it expanded and continued in the twentieth century—is of particular interest to my research. The novels listed above, and their authors, show a multi-vocal tradition in American literature, which is carried on and demonstrated by the publication of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982), the primary focus of this thesis. Even when Walker was writing this novel, she was in the company of other contemporary women writers of color, including Audre Lord and Toni Morrison. This brief history of novels written by women illustrates how the literary tradition in the United States has continued to expand to include more diverse voices from the margins of American society.

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<sup>1</sup> Zora Neale Hurston was “rediscovered” by Alice Walker in 1975. Hurston also writes dialogue using African American Vernacular English. Contrary to Alice Walker, however, who uses African American Vernacular English consistently in *The Color Purple*, Hurston's narration is in Standard English.

## Research Question and Areas of Focus

Research is lacking in several areas that will arise in the discussion of this thesis. Broadly speaking, there is a lack of sociolinguistic analysis of literature. In particular, criticism of *The Color Purple* has not focused on the language variation that is present and key to the stories the novel relates. This thesis seeks to contribute to these two areas through a sociolinguistic analysis of language variation in *The Color Purple*, with a focus on the dialect use in the novel.

My research question is the following: How does Alice Walker use language variation and for what purpose? I claim that Alice Walker employs language variation to negotiate power, construct her characters' identities, challenge the dominant culture, and expand the range of voices to be heard in American literature. The obvious function for her inclusion of elements from nonstandard dialects is to represent her characters' ethnicities realistically, but there is more to her choice than that. By utilizing language variation in her novel, Walker foregrounds the power difference between Standard American English and its nonstandard varieties.

## Literature Review

Since 1982, when *The Color Purple* was published, plenty of scholarship has been written on various aspects of the novel. The articles mentioned below represent only a small section of scholarship on *The Color Purple* and focus entirely on language and dialect. Despite all these critics' discussions of Walker's language use, only Rana Bhat, Hsiao, and Sauer take a linguistic or sociolinguistic approach.

Linda Abbandonato grounds her article, “‘A View from ‘Elsewhere’: Subversive Sexuality and the Rewriting of the Heroine’s Story in *The Color Purple*,” in theoretical work by feminist and psychoanalytic scholars to argue that Alice Walker appropriates the patriarchal tradition of the epistolary novel by writing Celie’s narrative in this form. She compares Walker’s work with that of *Clarissa* by Samuel Richardson to showcase the difference in epistolary narration of women written by men and women. Abbandonato argues that there are cracks in man-made language where women can reconstruct their identity outside of patriarchal definition. She insists that Walker does this, in part, by using African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Abbandonato compares Celie’s linguistic style to that of her sister, Nettie. She believes that Celie’s language is rich despite its perceived lower status and that Nettie’s more standard English is stilted and dreary.

Elizabeth Fifer’s chapter in *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies* focuses on how dialect usage and the epistolary form function in the scope of this novel. Her chapter, “The Dialects & Letters of *The Color Purple*,” highlights the power of Celie’s dialect in the novel as a rhetorical device but also as a means for Celie to construct her identity. Nettie’s dialect, more closely aligned with the standard, functions in the same way but also acts to differentiate between Nettie’s and Celie’s experiences. Fifer argues that Celie’s local experiences are enlarged globally with Nettie’s correspondence. In addition to building her individual identity, Celie’s dialect builds her community’s identity and marks this community as a group of outsiders and “speakers of a foreign language.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fifer, “Dialects & Letters,” 160.

In “Witnessing and Testifying: Transformed Language and Selves in *The Color Purple*,” R. Erin Huskey approaches language and self-identity in *The Color Purple* through what she calls “gospel ideology.”<sup>3</sup> This ideology focuses on transformation through sharing stories and experiences with others. To prove this, Huskey discusses Walker’s vernacular usage for Celie’s voice and how Walker appropriates and changes the *bildungsroman* genre and epistolary form. Celie’s language gives her power to form her identity and to change herself and the community around her. Huskey believes that Celie is transformed and grows to define herself through the vernacular. Huskey also identifies ways in which Walker resists tradition and changes the epistolary form that she uses.

Pi-Li Hsiao approaches the novel from an educational standpoint in her article “Language, Gender, and Power in *The Color Purple*: Theories and Approaches.” She teaches Walker’s novel to students studying English as a foreign language (EFL). The vernacular that Walker uses poses an obvious problem for students who are familiar with school-taught Standard English. Hsiao’s goal in teaching the text lies not in explaining to students that they are performing a linguistic study of the novel but in emphasizing how language is employed in the novel to intersect with other themes of gender, voice, agency, and race. Scholars have argued that *The Color Purple*—Celie’s narration in particular—transcends the domestic location.<sup>4</sup> Hsiao agrees and believes that “the instability of language, the fluidity of personal identity, and the combat for one’s silenced

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<sup>3</sup> Huskey, “Witnessing and Testifying,” 98.

<sup>4</sup> Selzer, “Race and Domesticity,” 68.

voice: those are . . . essential lessons for EFL learners to comprehend and analyze western literature and culture.”<sup>5</sup>

Shuv Raj Rana Bhat relies on qualitative data and indexes what role Celie plays, linguistically and grammatically, at various points through the novel. By utilizing case grammar, Rana Bhat explains how Celie goes from the patient role to the agent role within the sentence or clause. Rana Bhat pinpoints Shug Avery as a primary catalyst for Celie’s development, a notion that I echo in Chapters 2 and 3. Rana Bhat attempts to relate Celie’s growth through a sociolinguistic study, “a Semantic Analysis” as the article’s subtitle suggests, but the work would benefit from a closer reading of the text, paired with more concrete examples and data to convince the audience that a sociolinguistic reading was the article’s intended purpose. I agree with Rana Bhat’s argument and find some of the qualitative discussion of the novel to be well written and meaningful; nevertheless, the article left me wanting more in its sociolinguistic interpretation.

Hans Sauer identifies a lack of critical attention to language usage in Walker’s novel. In his article “The American Black English of Alice Walker’s Novel *The Color Purple*: Its Structure and Status,” Sauer thoroughly examines Walker’s usage of AAVE and documents it against known phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical properties of the dialect. This article pays particular attention to the “very conscious use of language [in the novel] and its effect is in no small part due to its linguistic peculiarities.”<sup>6</sup> Sauer’s documentation of Walker’s dialect features clearly and

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<sup>5</sup> Hsiao, “Language, Gender, and Power,” 114.

<sup>6</sup> Sauer, “American Black English of Alice Walker,” 123.

persuasively answers the question of how Walker uses this dialect, but he does not attend to *why* Walker is using the dialect.

### Literary Background

Just as female authors were part of the American novel tradition since its inception, African American women writers were the founding members of the African American literary tradition as well. This tradition led to Alice Walker's publication of *The Color Purple*. The first known literary work to be written by an African American and the first book published by an African American came from the pens of women writers, Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, respectively.<sup>7</sup> These poetic contributions begin the African American literary tradition in the eighteenth century, but it is not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the African American novel tradition begins. *Clotel*, by William Wells Brown, is considered the first novel published by an African American, but it was published in London in 1853. The first African American novel published in the United States followed six years later when Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* was copyrighted in 1859.

This long tradition of African American women writers was downplayed or ignored until the 1970s, which saw an "emergence of African American women literary scholars and African American women writers."<sup>8</sup> Anthologies focusing on African American women writers began being published in the 1970s and grew in magnitude in the 1980s. Alongside these anthologies were critical works by bell hooks and Barbara

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<sup>7</sup> Lucy Terry composed "Bar Fights" in 1746, and Phillis Wheatley's book of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*, was published in 1773.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell and Taylor, "Introduction," 2.

Smith, which became foundational texts in the burgeoning field of African American feminist criticism. These publications brought to light literary works and critical perspectives targeted at understanding and supporting works by African American women.

These anthologies and critical studies were not enough in and of themselves, however. At the time, it was equally important “to the development of literary and critical traditions that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings by African American women be recovered, reissued, and critiqued.”<sup>9</sup> Walker herself contributed much of her time in the 1970s to such endeavors. Cheryl A. Wall writes that while “she was establishing her own career, Walker was [also] recuperating the work of her forgotten predecessors.”<sup>10</sup> Walker famously did this with Zora Neale Hurston, but many other women were among her list: “Frances Watkins Harper, Nella Larsen, Anne Spencer, [and] Dorothy West.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, Walker also “sought to recuperate the reputation of Phillis Wheatley, whose name was known but whose words were mocked more often than honored.”<sup>12</sup> Walker has contributed to literature not just by the publication of her own novels and other literary works, but by bringing forward the voices of writers who would have otherwise been lost over time.

### **Nonstandard Dialect in Literature**

In addition to the long tradition of African American women writers, there is also a long history of literature written in nonstandard dialects. This history dates back to at

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<sup>9</sup> Mitchell and Taylor, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Wall, *Worrying the Line*, 143.

<sup>11</sup> Wall, 143.

<sup>12</sup> Wall, 143.

least the middle of the nineteenth century, when William Wells Brown used elements of AAVE in *Clotel* (1853). This was followed thirty-two years later by the publication of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), which represented multiple southern dialects alongside AAVE.

Critics argue that Twain's use of this vernacular opened the doors for the dialect to be used by African American writers in the twentieth century. Other scholars have also viewed *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in a positive light and as an integral piece to African American literature. By using this dialect in his novel, Mark Twain "endowed dialect with a degree of prestige unheard of in black fiction until recent times."<sup>13</sup> Arnold Rampersad believes that "in his stress on folk culture, on dialect, and on American humor, Mark Twain anticipated. . . Alice Walker."<sup>14</sup> The literary history of writing in a nonstandard dialect goes back to at least the middle of the nineteenth century, but for female writers, especially African American women, the history is not as long.

American women writers' usage of nonstandard dialect has its roots in the nineteenth century as well, but critics do not attribute Walker's tradition back to these earliest beginnings. Madhu Dubey believes that "Walker's experiments with narrative voice were made possible by Gayl Jones's novels published during the 1970s, *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976), which first validated black women's vernacular speech as a literary language in its own right."<sup>15</sup> There are several other noteworthy examples of nonstandard dialect in literature, in addition to Dubey's references. A nineteenth-century example is *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) by Rebecca

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<sup>13</sup> Rampersad, "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," 48.

<sup>14</sup> Rampersad, 52.

<sup>15</sup> Dubey, "'Even Some Fiction,'" 162.



Harding Davis. In this short story, Davis represents several dialects in dialogue. In the twentieth century, Walker is preceded by Flannery O'Connor, who wrote using a southern dialect in the 1950s. In the 1930s Zora Neale Hurston wrote her dialogue in AAVE, but *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was largely forgotten until the 1970s. As *Their Eyes Were Watching God* returned to the literary scene, new novels were being published that featured nonstandard dialect. In part, Walker uses AAVE as a way to connect with her literary foremothers. The dialect has covert prestige in this community, even as it stands out and is externally marked in fiction at large. At the time Walker's novel was published, the road was being paved for writers of color to make their voices heard and read, even if those voices were not in Standard English. For example, at the same time Walker was writing, Toni Morrison was also featuring AAVE in her literature.

### Linguistics in Focus

A tension exists between literary criticism and linguistic analysis. The debate, which has been ongoing since the middle of the twentieth century, has been concerned over whether or not a linguistic approach can be applied to literature. Historically speaking, on the side of linguistics "there has been almost universal confidence that this activity is entirely justified; and almost universal resistance by the critics, who have regarded the exercise with almost moral indignation."<sup>16</sup> Roger Fowler, a proponent of the stylistic approach, argues that, by viewing literature *as* language, literary critics and linguists can circumvent the question that is core to this polarizing issue. Roman Jakobson, a key figure in stylistic criticism, believes that "poetics deals with problems of

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<sup>16</sup> Fowler, "Studying Literature as Language," 196.

verbal structure, just as the analysis of painting is concerned with pictorial structure. Since linguistics is the global science of verbal structure, poetics may be regarded as an integral part of linguistics.”<sup>17</sup> Stylistics as an approach falls in between text- and culture-oriented schools of criticism. It is thus similar to reader-response and structuralism, which have an undisputed place in the realm of literary criticism.

It is likely that this divide between literary criticism and stylistics explains why linguistic analyses of literature are uncommon. A cursory look already shows that linguistic and sociolinguistic approaches to literature are few and far between. Fennell and Bennett noticed this trend in 1991: “Far too few researchers have taken advantage of the fundamental tools of sociolinguistics for the direct analysis of individual texts.”<sup>18</sup> As my literature review established, some scholarship of *The Color Purple* has included discussion of dialect, language, and identity formation, coming close to a sociolinguistic reading of this novel, but that was not the focus of these previous analyses. Considering the novel’s emphasis on language and writing, it is a rich text for linguistic analysis.

### **Sociolinguistics**

Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies the relationship between language and society, specifically through looking at language variation, speech communities, multilingualism, and discourse analysis. In this thesis, I will primarily focus on language variation, but discussion of speech communities and the methods of discourse analysis will aid in my primary focus. Language is our way of interacting and belonging to communities within society, so the scope of sociolinguistics is wide-

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<sup>17</sup> Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” 18.

<sup>18</sup> Fennell and Bennett, “Sociolinguistic Concepts,” 372.

reaching. It is so wide-reaching, in fact, that Wardhaugh and Fuller begin the seventh edition of their textbook, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, with the following remark: “Sociolinguistics is the study of our everyday lives – how language works in our casual conversations and the media we are exposed to, and the presence of societal norms, policies, and laws which address language.”<sup>19</sup> To that extent, sociolinguistics also focuses on identity formation through language. Individuals align themselves with different speech communities and prioritize different aspects of their identity at different times based on situational needs. It is important to note that “our identities are fluid and we do not have a single identity but multiple levels of identity, and shifting and sometimes even conflicting identities which emerge in different contexts.”<sup>20</sup> This identity is constantly being created in linguistic interactions, whether it be conversations between two individuals or two communities.

### **Language Variation**

There are two types of language variation: diachronic variation (change over time) and synchronic (variation at a specific moment in time). This thesis focuses entirely on synchronic variation, which includes dialect and register variation, although it is interesting to note that diachronic variation has likely occurred in the time since *The Color Purple*'s publication. Wardhaugh and Fuller define *linguistic variation* as “a term used to describe the different linguistic forms which can be used to express the same denotational meaning (which generally have different social meanings).”<sup>21</sup> Language

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<sup>19</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, 410.

variation includes variation between languages, dialects, and registers. To help clarify, *dialect* can be defined as “the term used to refer to a particular way of speaking a language which is associated with a particular region or social group,”<sup>22</sup> whereas *register* can be understood as “a way of speaking a language which is associated with a particular occupational or activity group” or with any other features of the speech situation.<sup>23</sup>

Dialects exist at the regional, social, and ethnic levels, and this thesis’s discussion of them will encompass several of these distinctions. Standard English, the version of English that is often regarded as the most “proper,” is still just a dialect, albeit an important and powerful one. All nonstandard dialects vary in distinct ways from the standard, whether it be phonetically, morphologically, syntactically, semantically, or lexically.

The terms *vernacular* and *dialect* can have socially negative connotations, but linguists do not share this belief. Wardhaugh and Fuller elaborate on these negative associations: “The term dialect often implies nonstandard or even substandard, when such terms are applied to language, and can connote various degrees of inferiority, with that connotation of inferiority carried over to those who speak a dialect.”<sup>24</sup> They also provide useful insight into vernacular that can help to alleviate this stigma: “Linguists use the term vernacular to refer to the language a person grows up with and uses in everyday life in ordinary, commonplace, social interactions.”<sup>25</sup> Dialect and vernacular are strongly connected to identity, which is inherently important within the scope of this thesis. To add to this, nonstandard dialect in writing goes against the conservative nature of the

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<sup>22</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, 403. Chapter 3 will focus on the dialect in the novel.

<sup>23</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, 415. Chapter 4 will focus on register variation.

<sup>24</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, 28.

written form. Historical linguists C. M. Millard and Mary Hayes provide insight into this conservatism: “the written language is, to a much greater degree than the spoken language, under the control of the highly educated or well-to-do, the most conservative groups in a culture.”<sup>26</sup> Considering how conservative the written language is, the fact that Walker is publishing using a nonstandard dialect further demonstrates how she is challenging the dominant culture.

### Conclusion

In the following chapter, I will provide my research methodology and present the data for the entire thesis. I will expand upon this and apply it to the text in Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3, I argue that Alice Walker leverages the covert prestige of African American Vernacular English and elevates this variety through the course of her novel. Chapter 4 demonstrates how Celie gains power through her conversations in the novel and how this relates to her gender identity. As concluding commentary, Chapter 5 explains how *The Color Purple* fits into larger literary contexts and social movements.

Within this thesis I am hoping to show, and give credit to, the multiple reasons for—and importance of—using nonstandard dialect in literature. Alice Walker is situated in a literary tradition of African American writers, all of whom have contributed to expanding the variety of voices heard in American literature. The voice that Alice Walker uses in *The Color Purple* challenges power structures in language and society, creates characters’ identities linguistically through the use of language variation, and challenges the dominant culture. In addition to discussing these important elements of the novel, this

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<sup>26</sup> Millward and Hayes, *A Biography of the English Language*, 16.

thesis aims both to broaden the scope of how critics and researchers analyze literature and to highlight the benefit that a stylistic approach has in the realm of literary criticism.

## CHAPTER II

### *Data and Methodology*

My data for this analysis consist of all of Celie's epistles in *The Color Purple*. Part of my hypothesis is that Celie's empowerment can be quantified through linguistic analysis. To track her empowerment through language most efficiently, I have separated Celie's narration into three sections that represent three phases of the novel. Each phase is discernible by a significant occurrence in the novel that influences Celie linguistically. These events mark various moments of Celie's journey.

The first portion covers the beginning of the novel until Shug arrives at the house. During this corpus Celie is abused and oppressed by the men in her life. Shug, a blues singer and Mr. \_\_\_\_'s long-term mistress, has a significant influence on Celie's confidence as she guides her through the most difficult moments of her life. Other characters in the first corpus have potential influence on Celie as well—Nettie and Mr. \_\_\_\_'s sisters in particular—but because of how Mr. \_\_\_\_ feels about Shug, she stays longer and is therefore able to be more of an influence.

The second segment begins when Shug is sick under Celie's care and continues until Celie signs her first letter to Nettie. This marks a drastic change in Celie's selfhood and linguistic representation as she begins to take ownership of herself. During this time Celie financially and physically separates herself from Mr. \_\_\_\_ and begins her pants-making business in Memphis.

The final section begins with Celie's resistance of an attempt to change how she speaks. This segment extends until Celie and Nettie are reunited. By dividing Celie's

narration into these three sub-corpora, all marked by significant events in the plot, the data will show how her language changes.

My data form a corpus that represents all of Celie's narration. The entire corpus is divided into three sub-corpora that align with the three segments I delineated above. Each sub-corpus does not always represent continuous pagination because Nettie's letters are interspersed in the middle and end of the novel. Table 1 details the corpus.

Table 1

*Celie's Corpus*

Corpus	Words	Pages	Epistles
Beginning	9,560	46	22
Middle	24,486	114	37
End	13,011	50	10
Total	47,057	210	69

Dialect Data

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has many salient morphological, syntactic, semantic, phonological, and lexical features. Some of these are more distinct in writing than others. As such, I have focused on morphosyntactic features. Table 2 represents the features of AAVE that I have selected to analyze Walker's use of this dialect in *The Color Purple*. I chose these features based on their prominence as



indicators for the dialect and for their ease of graphic representation. These features will be applied to Celie’s narration.

Table 2

*AAVE Features*

Feature	Definition	Example
Multiple Negation <sup>27</sup>	Presence of multiple negative morphemes in a clause.	“But I don’t never git used to it.” <sup>28</sup>
Copula Absence <sup>29</sup>	Absence of the <i>be</i> -verb for present tense actions or states.	“My mama dead.” <sup>30</sup>
Invariant <i>Be</i> <sup>31</sup>	Use of <i>be</i> for habitual or future actions.	“After that, I know she be big.” <sup>32</sup>

*Going forward all references to “features” or “instances” refer back to these selected features.*

These features are just a few of the many known aspects of AAVE. Nevertheless, they are sufficient to demonstrate how Celie’s language develops in the novel. Sauer hints at potential linguistic change in the novel but does not quantify it: “The proportion of genitives without {s} and with {s} seems to shift somewhat in the course of the novel:

<sup>27</sup> Rickford, *Features, Evolution, Educational Implications*, 8. This has also been called “negative concord.”

<sup>28</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Rickford, *Features, Evolution, Educational Implications*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Rickford, *Features, Evolution, Educational Implications*, 6. This has also been called “habitual *be*.”

<sup>32</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 5.

in Celie’s later letters, the use of the {s} genitive apparently increases: possibly Alice Walker thus reflects Celie’s growing experience, independence and linguistic competence in this linguistic detail.”<sup>33</sup> I am not looking at the genitive {s}, but the syntactic features I have tracked will corroborate in quantified terms what Sauer described.

Linguistic variation, as expressed through a character’s dialogue and narration, is among the easiest ways to give a literary character defining characteristics. Alice Walker does this by using AAVE for Celie’s voice. In a pilot study I analyzed 20 percent of Celie’s narration and found that her language became more standard within each section. For the purposes of this thesis, I have expanded my pilot data to include all of Celie’s narration. The results are shown below. Table 3 and Table 4 below represent the findings from Celie’s corpus for the select AAVE features, as listed in Table 2 above. Table 3 provides the total instances of all features across each corpus. Table 4 breaks down the data from Table 3 into each specific feature. Presenting the data in two different ways makes it possible to view the trends as the novel progresses, and feature-specific trends can be seen in a holistic view.

Table 3

*AAVE Instances in Celie’s Sub-Corpora*

Corpus	Instances	Words	Per 1,000 Words
Beginning	343	9,560	35.9
Middle	618	24,486	25.2

(continued)

<sup>33</sup> Sauer, “American Black English of Alice Walker,” 132.

Corpus	Instances	Words	Per 1,000 Words
End	337	13,011	25.9
Total	1,298	47,057	27.6

Table 4

*Features per 1,000 Words per Sub-Corpora*

Corpus	Multiple Negation	Copula Absence	Invariant <i>Be</i>
Beginning	5.4	26.7	3.8
Middle	3.3	21.2	0.7
End	4.6	20.4	0.9
Total	4.1	22.1	1.4

Table 5 below presents Celie's usage of Standard American English (SAE) features. These features are the standard counterparts to the AAVE features listed in Table 2 above. Therefore, the features are the following: single negation, copula presence, and *be*-verb conjugation. This table follows the same format as Table 3 and will be used to create an index of nonstandard feature usage.

Table 5

*SAE Features in Celie's Sub-Corpora*

Corpus	Instances	Words	per 1,000 Words
Beginning	430	9,560	45.0
Middle	911	24,486	37.2
End	546	13,011	42.0
Total	1,887	47,057	40.1

Since I tracked both standard and nonstandard versions of the selected features, I can compare their usage to create an index of how often nonstandard versions are used. By viewing the data in this way, we can see how much Walker prefers the vernacular to the standard. It also indicates a continuum that spans from standard to nonstandard; there is no clearly defined separation between the two. Celie's voice strikes the reader as distinctly nonstandard, but this is contradicted by a consistent presence of standard uses of the features selected.

To present Celie's dialect, I employ an index score inspired by the one that Trudgill used to quantify dialect in his article on covert prestige. The premise of this scale is that each feature has two options (standard or nonstandard), and each option is given a weight of one or two (to create a scale) that gets calculated to generate an index of how often a nonstandard feature is used. The index is presented in a range from 0 to 100. The closer the number is to 100 the more nonstandard features are used, and the closer the

number is to 0, the more standard features are used. I will explain step-by-step how this calculation is done using the index score for the beginning corpus, from Table 6 below:

1. For my index I have assigned AAVE features a weight of two and SAE features a weight of one. There are 343 AAVE instances in the first corpus, and 430 SAE instances. After applying the weights, this becomes 686 and 430.
2. These weighted features are added together:  $686 + 430 = 1,116$ .
3. The sum is then divided by the unweighted instances ( $343+430$ ), which equals 773. This creates a weighted average:  $1,116 / 773 = 1.444$ .
4. This average is then subtracted by one, to put the average back between 0 and 1:  $1.444 - 1 = 0.444$ .
5. Finally, it is multiplied by 100 to get the scale:  $0.444 \times 100 = 44.4$ .

I have broken this hundred-point index into the following three levels of usage: 0-33 – mild usage of the dialect; 34-66 – substantial usage of the dialect; and 67-100 – significant usage of the dialect.

Table 6

*Dialect Index by Corpus*

Corpus	AAVE Instances	SAE Instances	Index Score
Beginning	343	430	44.4
Middle	618	911	40.4

(continued)

Corpus	AAVE Instances	SAE Instances	Index Score
End	337	546	38.2
Total	1,298	1,887	40.8

The tables below show feature-specific data for all of Celie's corpus. Table 7 shows AAVE and SAE instances and the index score. Multiple negation is the only feature that falls within the range of mild usage of the dialect. Table 8 shows instances, instances per 1,000 words, and index score by feature to give a total view of these three characteristics of AAVE in the novel.

Table 7

*Dialect Index by Feature*

Feature	AAVE Version	SAE Version	Index Score
Multiple Negation	194	889	17.9
Copula Absence	1,040	929	52.8
Invariant <i>Be</i>	64	69	48.1
Total	1,298	1,887	40.8

Table 8

*AAVE Features in Celie's Corpus*

Feature	Instances	Per 1,000 Words	Index Score
Multiple Negation	194	4.1	17.9
Copula Absence	1,040	22.1	52.8
Invariant <i>Be</i>	64	1.4	48.1
Total	1,298	27.6	40.8

*n*=47,057

Because *The Color Purple* takes place over time, there is a possibility that Celie's change in language represents a fictional diachronic change in language. Feature counts per 1,000 words, as shown in Table 3 and Table 8, capture the proportional decrease in AAVE usage in the novel. Per 1,000 words, the AAVE usage decreases by 28 percent from the sub-corpus in the beginning to the third sub-corpus in end (Table 3), but the overall index score (40.8) still falls within substantial usage of the dialect (Table 7). Walker's preferred feature is copula absence, with it accounting for 80 percent of the total AAVE usage investigated here. Invariant *be* is the most uncommon among the features, accounting for only 5 percent of the AAVE usage. Based on the data in Table 3, it appears that part of Celie's empowerment comes with a more standard usage of English, as instances of AAVE per 1,000 words go down. However, it is important to note that Celie never abandons her native dialect in favor of SAE. In fact, the instances of

the SAE alternatives to the AAVE features also drop from 45 per 1,000 words in the beginning to 42 per 1,000 words in the end.

Another element of Celie’s empowerment is reflected in how much Celie talks, that is to say how much space she takes up expressing herself through language. Table 9 suggests that she grows linguistically by expressing herself more.

Table 9

*Celie’s Dialogue*

Corpus	Celie’s Dialogue	All Dialogue	Celie’s Dialogue Percent
Beginning	499	2,799	17.8%
Middle	2,285	10,985	20.8%
End	1,911	6,588	29.0%
Total	4,695	20,372	23.0%

*Speaking characters in the novel that account for the “All Dialogue” data include Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Shug, Harpo, Sofia, Nettie, Squeak, Grady, Odessa, and Jack.*

When Celie is first introduced, she is unsure of herself and her voice. Based on Table 9, her dialogue grows in each corpus, with her final dialogue taking up 61 percent more of the total dialogue (29 percent of total dialogue) than the beginning corpus (only 17.8 percent of total dialogue).



### Powerful Language Data

Part of Celie's empowerment is expressed through her conversations. To analyze this, I looked at both Celie's and Mr. \_\_\_\_'s conversations with all their interlocutors in the corpus. Mr. \_\_\_\_ was included because he is the dominant male figure who powers over Celie. Pa obviously begins the novel dominating Celie, but he is quickly phased out of that role as Celie is married off to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Additionally, Celie has six conversations with Pa versus twenty-six conversations with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. My focus on register variation as it applies to *The Color Purple* is power language. The combination of these various conversations allows us to see when Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_ are or are not in a position of power. The way I present the data below will also give visibility into how their power positions change, both over time and with different speakers. Mick Short, noted stylistic critic, argues that powerful speakers "have the most turns, have the longest turns, initiate conversational exchanges, control what is talked about and who talks when, and interrupt others."<sup>34</sup> Powerful speakers also use address terms that are not marked for respect; for instance, they may use first names only.

In addition to finding out how power is distributed between Mr. \_\_\_\_ and Celie in their interactions, I will examine how Walker has depicted her male and female characters. A part of my hypothesis is that Mr. \_\_\_\_ and Celie switch power roles (which are related to, but not dependent on, gender) at the end of the novel. To see whether or not this is true, I use the data below to define their speech in the beginning, middle, and end sub-corpora. If Celie's ending dialogue data matches Mr. \_\_\_\_'s beginning dialogue data, and vice versa, then my hypothesis that they switch roles will be proven true.

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<sup>34</sup> Short, *Exploring the Language*, 206-7.

Helena Halmari's article, "Power Relationships and Register Variation in Väinö Linna's *Here Under the Northern Star*," is guiding my own analysis of power dynamics in the dialogue from *The Color Purple*. Halmari looks at the conversations of Jussi, the protagonist, to gain "an understanding of the sociolinguistic manifestations of power relationships."<sup>35</sup> She looks at Jussi's interactions where power relationships varied between the interlocutors. By tracing the quantity of speech and register information (emphasizing morphology and lexicon), Halmari concludes that "power relationships can be seen as predictors for linguistic variation; that is, in dialogues between a powerful and a powerless person (as situationally defined), people in power-positions tend to use more elaborate expression than people in less powerful positions."<sup>36</sup> I will analyze Celie's conversations in such a manner while identifying where, and with whom, Celie exerts power.

There are a few important notes to share before I begin discussing dialogues in *The Color Purple*. First of all, Celie does not reliably present dialogue from all parties equally. This is obvious from early in the novel. For example, when Celie asks her stepmother about Shug Avery, Celie writes: "What it is? I ast. She don't know but she say she gon fine out."<sup>37</sup> Her stepmother's response is understood, but Celie's wording removes the exact quotation, providing the audience with a paraphrased version instead. This is a stylistic choice by Alice Walker, so I will exclude such paraphrases in the dialogue data that follows. Second, Walker excludes quotation marks around characters' speech. This complicates collecting all represented speech in the novel, so there may be a

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<sup>35</sup> Halmari, "Power Relationships and Register Variation," 37.

<sup>36</sup> Halmari, 46.

<sup>37</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 6.

slight deviation between what I have considered dialogue and what other researchers may view as dialogue.

Everything that I am quantifying comes from the turns in conversations that Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_ have with each other and other characters. Therefore, it is important for me to define a turn explicitly. I define *turn* in two ways. The first definition of a *turn* is when an utterance is framed with a reporting verb such as *tell*, *ask*, or *say*. For example, when Celie is talking to Corrine in town about Mr. \_\_\_\_, I count Corrine to have three turns despite the fact that they all occur in the same paragraph.<sup>38</sup> Celie retells: “She say, *Sure nuff?* Like she know all about him. *Just didn’t know he was married. He a fine looking man*, she say. *Not a finer looking one in the county. White or black*, she say.”<sup>39</sup> The second example of what I count as a *turn* is any expression without a reporting verb that is clearly a response. This is illustrated by Celie and Corrine’s exchange about Olivia: “*How long you had your little girl?* I ast / *Oh, she be seven her next birthday.* / *When that?* I ast.”<sup>40</sup> Both of Celie’s turns are marked by *ast*, but Corrine’s response is unmarked, yet it is clearly her turn as a response to Celie’s question. One turn that falls slightly out of these two definitions, because it does not occur in a conversation and lacks a reporting verb, is Pa’s threat at the beginning of the novel. This grounds Celie’s subordinate position in the novel and situates her letter writing as a means of expression while obeying her stepfather; therefore, I would be remiss not to include this crucial utterance in my data because it is highly relevant to Celie’s power (or lack thereof). There are some dialogues that I have counted for both Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_ because of group

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<sup>38</sup> In the examples that follow I have italicized turns for maximum clarity.

<sup>39</sup> Walker, 15.

<sup>40</sup> Walker, 15.

speech, which is marked by the first-person plural pronoun *us* in addition to a reporting verb. An example of this is when Celie, Harpo, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, and Shug go to visit Sofia in jail. Celie writes: “*How you manage? us ast.*”<sup>41</sup> This occurs in several points throughout the novel.

No dialogues were cut out in their entirety, but I have removed reported speech. All speech in Celie’s corpus is reported through Celie, of course, but if Celie’s representation of characters’ dialogue contains a report of another character’s speech, I have excluded it. There are only two dialogues with prominent reported speech: when Squeak tells Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ about her visit to the warden and when Sofia tells them about Eleanor Jane and her fiancé visiting her. Both of these function as back story; they fill in where Celie, as a narrator, was not able to be present, and they contain important information for the story. I have included all the data from all conversations that Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ participate in, with the exception of the turn, sentence, and word information pertaining to any speech that meets any of the following criteria: when a character is representing another character’s speech, as either reported or indirect speech; and if a character is reporting speech that they said to a third party, prior to the time of the conversation that is being documented. An example of this second criterion is when Shug is telling Celie about her and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s past and she relates to Celie what she told Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s father: “But they *his* I told old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_”<sup>42</sup> Squeak’s and Sofia’s conversations which contain much reported speech occur in the second and third sub-corpora.

To be able to see how their conversations change over the course of the novel, I organized the tables below to look at dialogue across each sub-corpus. The total

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<sup>41</sup> Walker, 88.

<sup>42</sup> Walker, 122.

conversations analyzed are 143 conversations for Celie and 65 conversations for Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. There may be a difference in how characters interact with each other based on age,<sup>43</sup> but there are few significant interactions between children and the characters that I have included in these data, so I have merely separated Celie's and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s dialogues based on the gender of their interlocutor. Table 10, 11 and Table 12 show the data from Celie's conversations. She primarily speaks with the following characters: Pa, Nettie, Shug, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Harpo, Sofia, Squeak, and Corrine. I have separated the tables in the following ways: Table 10 takes the total conversations from each corpus and represents the data in ratios.

Table 11 and Table 12 are formatted in the same way but separated by the gender of Celie's interlocutor. I present ratios instead of pure numbers because the ratio provides more information about the relationship between the character and their interlocutors. All numbers are rounded to the tenth decimal place. Any number over one indicates that Celie has more turns, sentences, or words than her interlocutor. The final column averages the other three ratios together.

Table 10

*Celie's Conversations*

Corpus	Dialogues	Turn Ratio	Sentence Ratio	Word Ratio	Discourse Average
Beginning	44	0.66	0.52	0.46	0.55

<sup>43</sup> Halmari, "Power Relationships and Register Variation," 42. Halmari found that Jussi, a father, was in a power position over his son while his son was a child, but this dynamic shifted when his son was 17.

Corpus	Dialogues	Turn Ratio	Sentence Ratio	Word Ratio	Discourse Average
Middle	64	0.66	0.53	0.47	0.55
End	35	0.70	0.56	0.58	0.61

(continued)

*One conversation from the end sub-corpus has both Harpo and Sofia responding in unison. I have included that conversation in both Tables 11 and 12 below, but I am not counting it twice in this aggregate view.*

Table 11

*Celie's Conversations with Women*

Corpus	Dialogues	Turn Ratio	Sentence Ratio	Word Ratio	Discourse Average
Beginning	21	0.66	0.57	0.52	0.58
Middle	43	0.63	0.48	0.42	0.51
End	19	0.56	0.29	0.19	0.35

Table 12

*Celie's Conversations with Men*

Corpus	Dialogues	Turn Ratio	Sentence Ratio	Word Ratio	Discourse Average
Beginning	23	0.67	0.44	0.36	0.49

Corpus	Dialogues	Turn Ratio	Sentence Ratio	Word Ratio	Discourse Average
					(continued)
Middle	21	0.77	0.71	0.72	0.73
End	17	0.84	0.87	1.05	0.92

Celie's data show that the only time Celie uses a metric more than her interlocutor is in the ending sub-corpus where she uses more words than her male interlocutors, with her word ratio being 1.05. This is significant because Celie is substantially less powerful in conversations with men at the beginning of the novel. For instance, her word ratio when conversing with men was 0.36 at the beginning of the novel, which means that her word usage with men increased 192 percent. Her overall discourse average with men increased from 0.49 to 0.92, which translates to an 88 percent increase. Aside from the end word ratio, she does not index higher than her male interlocutors, but she continues to expand in her conversations with men, which can be seen by the significant growth across every ratio from the beginning corpus to the end. Her discourse average grows 11 percent from 0.55 to 0.61. This is contrasted by the data in Table 11 where they show that Celie speaks less with women. The data do mean that Celie is in a less powerful position with women, but they also indicate that Celie listens to women more as the novel progresses.

Tables 13 through 15 present Mr. \_\_\_\_'s conversations in the same way as Celie's. Mr. \_\_\_\_ speaks with the following characters: Celie, Harpo, Pa, Sofia, Shug, and Squeak.

Table 13

*Mr. \_\_\_\_'s Conversations*

Corpus	Dialogues	Turn Ratio	Sentence Ratio	Word Ratio	Discourse Average
Beginning	21	1.28	0.79	0.73	0.94
Middle	28	1.00	0.97	0.82	0.93
End	16	1.18	1.02	0.81	1.00

Table 14

*Mr. \_\_\_\_'s Conversations with Women*

Corpus	Dialogues	Turn Ratio	Sentence Ratio	Word Ratio	Discourse Average
Beginning	10	1.29	1.50	1.97	1.59
Middle	21	1.03	1.11	0.91	1.02
End	15	1.16	1.02	0.81	1.00



Table 15

*Mr. \_\_\_\_'s Conversations with Men*

Corpus	Dialogues	Turn Ratio	Sentence Ratio	Word Ratio	Discourse Average
Beginning	11	1.27	0.46	0.41	0.71
Middle	7	0.88	0.59	0.59	0.69
End	1	1.00	1.00	4.00	2.00

*Mr. \_\_\_\_'s final dialogue with a male character is an unnamed man that Celie and Harpo brought around to introduce to Celie. Mr. \_\_\_\_'s function in this speech is to scare him off by announcing his status as Celie's husband.*

Mr. \_\_\_\_ loses power with women as the novel progresses, which proves that the women in *The Color Purple* are empowered. Throughout the novel, he is much more able to exert power over women than he is with men. Shug identifies this trait when she tells Celie that “he weak” and he “can't make up his mind what he want.”<sup>44</sup> This explains why, in the middle sub-corpus (

<sup>44</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 76.

Table 15), he does not assume a powerful position in his conversations with his father and his brother when they come to his house to discuss Shug. Old Mr. \_\_\_\_ comes to condemn his son's choices and his brother comes to flirt. In the beginning corpus (

Table 15), Mr. \_\_\_\_ comes to Celie's stepfather asking to marry Nettie. He is younger than Pa and is coming to ask for something, with nothing to offer. Both of these factors influence his powerless status in the dialogue.

Contrary to my hypothesis, the data do not support the idea that Mr. \_\_\_\_ and Celie switch gender roles as represented through their power-position in their conversations. For that to be true, Mr. \_\_\_\_'s discourse average in the final sub-corpus (which is now 1.00; see Table 13) would need to be half of what it is, to get close to Celie's beginning average of 0.55 (see Table 10). Celie's final discourse average (0.61) is only two-thirds of what Mr. \_\_\_\_'s beginning average is (0.94). Nevertheless, there is substantial growth in the quantity of Celie's language use, which can be associated with her gaining power in conversations. This matches her growth in other areas of life. One interesting finding is that Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_ reach an equal ground with their conversations with opposite sex speakers. Celie's discourse average with men in the end corpus is 0.92; Mr. \_\_\_\_'s average with women is 1.00.

## Conclusion

I use these quantitative data to drive my discussions of the novel in the chapters that follow. The dialect data show that Celie's empowerment, which is undeniable in the novel, is manifested linguistically through a decrease (but not erasure) of AAVE usage. It is also matched by her linguistic growth in conversations, as demonstrated in my powerful feature data. These data and my analysis go to show how a linguistic analysis of literature can aid in more traditional methods of literary criticism. A large part of scholarship on *The Color Purple* focuses on Celie's growth and attributes it to different facets of the novel. My analysis supports these arguments and quantifies how the empowerment is manifested linguistically. In Chapter 4 I discuss Celie's dialect in the novel and how it connects to her empowerment. In Chapter 5 I theorize what the powerful features represent in Walker's characterization of men and women.

### CHAPTER III

#### *Elevating African American Vernacular English*

The dialect of *The Color Purple* is the first aspect of the novel that the reader encounters. As such, it is fitting that this is the first sociolinguistic element that I discuss in this thesis. The nonstandard dialect imbues the novel with class, race, and geographic connotations. While AAVE usage in the United States transcends these class (poor and working) and geographic (southern) stereotypes that exist, a stereotypical southern, working class, uneducated speaker is the central character of *The Color Purple*. AAVE is represented in the novel through Celie's epistles. Her voice is the only signifier of this dialect. It is thus dependent on her representation of it to be expressed to the audience. In addition to foregrounding the dialect of the novel, Celie's stepfather's threat that she "better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill [her] mammy" also situates Celie under the power of men, something that she spends the majority of the novel fighting to overcome.<sup>45</sup> At the beginning of the novel, Celie is confined linguistically and physically by her abusive surroundings. She perseveres by writing letters to God and her sister Nettie, and by fighting to gain her physical and financial liberation from her abusive husband. Celie is empowered and liberated by the end of the novel; she is elevated out of her powerless position to take ownership of her life and her voice. Therefore, by connecting AAVE to Celie and her journey, Walker elevates the status of this dialect.

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<sup>45</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 1.

## African American Vernacular English

Various terms have been used in the past to describe the dialect that Walker uses in this novel, including Negro English, Black English, Black English Vernacular, and Ebonics (colloquial only). Negro English was the term used to describe this dialect up until the 1970s. Black English (BE), or Black English Vernacular (BEV), came about in the early 1970s as a replacement to “Nonstandard Negro English” when that term “became less acceptable to many people.”<sup>46</sup> BEV was used up until the time that our current terminology was introduced. The term African American Vernacular English came about in the early 1990s and is still the preferred terminology for many sociolinguists, but the term African American English is also being used.

Before delving into Alice Walker’s portrayal of AAVE, it is important to lay a foundation for some of the traits and qualities of AAVE. Like all dialects, AAVE has phonetic, syntactic, and morphological features. Some phonetic traits of the dialect are the following: reduction of word-final consonant or consonant clusters, including dropping of /r/ and replacing the velar nasal /ŋ/ with alveolar nasal /n/ (which is represented graphically by dropping the <g>); changes in /θ/ pronunciation to /t/ and /f/; changes in /ð/ pronunciation to /d/ and /v/; and metathesis of phonemes, including the popular /æsk/ to /æks/.<sup>47</sup> Morphological and syntactic traits of the dialect include the following: erasure of the *be*-verb; use of double modals; multiple negation; and absence of possessive -s, singular present tense -s, and sometimes plural -s.<sup>48</sup> Despite its

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<sup>46</sup> Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, xiii.

<sup>47</sup> Rickford, *African American Vernacular English*, 4-5.

<sup>48</sup> Rickford, 6-8.

morphological and syntactic differences from SAE, linguists argue that AAVE is just as grammatical as SAE; the rules of its grammar are just different.

Walker uses AAVE throughout her novel in both dialogue and narration. For phonological features she uses eye dialect to represent AAVE pronunciation. Eye dialect is a way to represent pronunciations graphically through nonstandard spelling. The use of eye dialect for AAVE is commonplace, as this dialect does not have a standardized orthography, so authors take their own creative liberty to visually represent the sounds of AAVE. Because of the difficulty of representing phonological features, these features are less representative in the novel. For example, Walker often represents the word-final alveolar nasal /n/ by dropping the <g> but rarely does she change /ð/ pronunciation to /d/ (for instance, *this* would be spelled as *dis*). Walker regularly uses all of the morphological and syntactic features listed above. Hans Sauer thoroughly surveyed the usage of all AAVE features in Walker's novel, coming to the conclusion that her inclusion of morphological and syntactic features are so well-represented that a grammar of AAVE could be created from analyzing Celie's letters.<sup>49</sup>

### **AAVE and Storytelling**

There is an inherent richness to this dialect which is demonstrated in storytelling. William Labov analyzes a variety of narratives by African American storytellers across multiple age groups in the final chapter of *Language in the Inner City*, coming to the conclusion that "many of the narratives. . .command the total attention of an audience in a remarkable way, creating a deep and attentive silence that is never found in academic or

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<sup>49</sup> Sauer, "American Black English of Alice Walker," 131.

political discussion.”<sup>50</sup> Celie’s narration is rich and captivating, just like the oral narratives that Labov collected for his work. Labov, like Walker, prioritizes this vernacular for storytelling: “The vernacular used by working-class speakers [such as Celie] seems to have a distinct advantage over more educated styles [such as the one employed by Nettie].”<sup>51</sup> Labov and his colleagues were not “comparing black and white vernaculars; but in this respect, it should be clear that the black English vernacular is the vehicle of communication used by some of the most talented and effective speakers of the English language.”<sup>52</sup> Exactly how this dialect came into the English language has been studied extensively.

### **History of the Dialect**

African Americans have a long history in America, and there have been enormous research efforts dedicated to their dialect. AAVE has been one of the most widely researched American dialects; Wolfram and Thomas cite that the dialect has five times as many publications as other dialects from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s.<sup>53</sup> Despite this extensive research, multiple theories abound in regards to the dialect’s origin and development.

Over the course of the twentieth century, linguists and dialectologists have shifted from the Anglicist Hypothesis to the Creole Hypothesis to the Neo-Anglicist Hypothesis.<sup>54</sup> The Anglicist Hypothesis puts emphasis on the beginning of the dialect in

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<sup>50</sup> Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, 396.

<sup>51</sup> Labov, 396.

<sup>52</sup> Labov, 396.

<sup>53</sup> Wolfram and Thomas, *The Development of African American English*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Wolfram and Thomas, 12-14.

the European American dialects as opposed to the African languages brought to the United States by slaves.<sup>55</sup> The proponents of this theory believe that AAVE of the nineteenth century was comparable to the dialects of the other immigrants in the country. In this perspective, the native languages that were brought with the slaves from Africa were erased within a few generations. This theory was dominant until the 1960s.

The Creole Hypothesis shifts emphasis away from European dialects to the creole language that was believed to be spoken in the African diaspora, including the language spoken by slaves in the southern United States.<sup>56</sup> Evidence for this theory is found in the unique grammar structures of AAVE that deviate from SAE. The Creole Hypothesis emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and was accepted by sociolinguists to varying degrees. Considering how similar AAVE and southern dialects are, an interesting side effect of this theory is that the creole language would have led to linguistic change in southern speech.

The Neo-Anglicist Hypothesis revisits the Anglicist Hypothesis and insists that AAVE was similar to the immigrant dialects in the nineteenth century, but the revision adds that the contemporary version of the dialect has evolved separately from that of white speech.<sup>57</sup> Millward and Hayes echo this belief claiming that “the historical separation of whites and blacks has been a contributing factor, permitting AAVE to develop somewhat independently of Standard English.”<sup>58</sup> Sociolinguists researching AAVE have found evidence that the root of AAVE is indeed English but that the features

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<sup>55</sup> Wolfram and Thomas, 13.

<sup>56</sup> Wolfram and Thomas, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Wolfram and Thomas, 14.

<sup>58</sup> Millward and Hayes, *A Biography of the English Language*, 359.



found in the modern dialect are new to the twentieth century, not carryover from the nineteenth century.

### Covert Prestige

Nonstandard dialects, such as AAVE, do not have prestige in wider society, but they can have covert prestige within their speech community. Covert prestige is a “prestige (of a linguistic variety or form) which is derived from its importance in ingroup interaction.”<sup>59</sup> AAVE has covert prestige in *The Color Purple* and in the literary tradition in which Walker is writing. Covert prestige was first identified by William Labov in his 1966 research on the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ (or lack thereof) in New York City.<sup>60</sup> At its core, covert prestige values group solidarity more than obtaining social status. Labov’s work was furthered by Peter Trudgill’s 1972 research, which focused on working-class speech in Norwich. I feature Trudgill’s research since it is more applicable to my own, given the impact that gender had on his findings of language variation in working-class speakers. Trudgill found that men spoke more in-line with the working-class dialect than women, who aimed at the speech of those in socioeconomic classes higher than their own. Previous research that looked at gender linguistic variation found that “women, allowing for other variables such as age, education and social class, consistently produce linguistic forms which more closely approach those of standard language or have higher prestige than those produced by men.”<sup>61</sup> Trudgill theorized several different reasons for this. One is that “the social position of women in our society

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<sup>59</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 401.

<sup>60</sup> Labov, “Social Stratification of (r).”

<sup>61</sup> Trudgill, “Sex, Covert Prestige and Linguistic Change,” 180.

is less secure than that of men, and, usually, subordinate to that of men. It may be, therefore, that it is more necessary for women to secure and signal their social status linguistically and in other ways, and they may for this reason be more aware of the importance of this type of signal.”<sup>62</sup> Appearance, including linguistic appearance, was an important factor for women in this study because they were not able to be evaluated by their occupation or occupational success.

Walker betrays Trudgill’s findings a decade later when she publishes *The Color Purple* using AAVE, a language variety that is less prestigious and less common in fiction than SAE. There are textual implications of Walker’s decision to employ this vernacular, but outside the confines of the text, Walker is engaging with the covert prestige of AAVE, which strengthens her connection to her literary foremothers and the tradition they founded.

### Elevating the Dialect

One of Celie’s first identifying traits in the novel is her voice. Because Walker connects AAVE to Celie, the dialect is dependent on her voice as its representation in the novel. Celie and her voice are indivisible. Her voice, as shown by the data in Tables 3-8, is presented as AAVE, and she consistently prefers this vernacular over the standard, even resisting external pressure from Darlene to change the way she talks (this is discussed in the following section). Through Celie’s epistles, Walker is demonstrating “that the ability to articulate thoughts and feelings both orally and in written form lends authority, agency, and identity to characters.”<sup>63</sup> Celie gains her authority, agency, and

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<sup>62</sup> Trudgill, 182-83.

<sup>63</sup> Rana Bhat, “Celie’s Transformation,” 116.

identity over the course of the novel, and because of the epistolary form these developments are solely dependent on Celie's ability to give her thoughts, feelings, and interactions linguistic representation. Walker's combination of the epistolary form and AAVE gives a clear voice to the narrator. It is the voice of the underrepresented female character, both black and lesbian. Celie's insistence on linguistic representation is significant: "Without the letters Celie's physical, psychological, social, and economic status would have made her both invisible and silent."<sup>64</sup> During points of emotional turmoil, Celie, the character, goes silent, but her writing of the events persists. She may not speak, but she will not be silenced.

Power and privilege are usually associated with the standard dialect of a language, but with Celie's letters accounting for 76 percent of the epistles, Walker shifts power to Celie and those characters who speak in AAVE as opposed to those who speak in a more standard dialect (such as Nettie).<sup>65</sup> Nettie, Kate, and Sofia all impress on Celie that she has to fight for herself, that is to say that she has to take the power. Nettie tells her she has "got to fight" to show the kids "who got the upper hand."<sup>66</sup> Later, when Kate stands up for Celie and is scolded by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, she tells Celie: "You got to fight them for yourself."<sup>67</sup> Sofia inspires Celie because she stands up to all the men in her life, most importantly her husband, something Celie would not even think about. After she presumes Nettie is dead, Celie believes that being alive is more important than fighting and dying. After Celie discovers that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ has been hiding Nettie's letters, the

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<sup>64</sup> Fifer, "Dialects & Letters," 159.

<sup>65</sup> It is important to note that since Celie is the protagonist, she is naturally going to be given more space in the novel.

<sup>66</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 17.

<sup>67</sup> Walker, 21.

fighting spirit sparks in her and refuses to be quelled. Before Shug takes Celie to Memphis, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ degrades her by insisting that “you black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam. . .you nothing at all.”<sup>68</sup> Celie fights back against him and this erasure, but she records the exchange without associating the words to her voice, it is merely *a* voice: “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I’m here.”<sup>69</sup> She has embraced her physical presence as indicated by repeatedly using the copula, and for her, simple being “here” has value. Being here is no easy task either; for years Celie has quietly survived sexual and physical abuse. When she fights back Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s erasure, she is triumphant.

Because Walker links Celie and AAVE so strongly in this novel, Celie is a signifier of this dialect. In this moment, Celie’s value is evident because she is present regardless of the redeeming qualities she thinks she lacks. Her presence is enough to matter. This is true of AAVE as well. Regardless of the social connotations of this dialect—which include traits Celie claims for herself (being poor and black)—it has value because of its existence. Walker proves that the value of AAVE ranges far beyond its existence: “For Walker, dialect provides its own world view, its own answers, its own determination: it does not reduce, it compresses; it does not simplify, it focuses; it achieves distinction without cliché.”<sup>70</sup> Walker expertly shows that this dialect, regardless of its perceptions, is a viable and powerful literary language, and it is able to tell Celie’s story.

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<sup>68</sup> Walker, 206.

<sup>69</sup> Walker, 207

<sup>70</sup> Fifer, “Dialects & Letters,” 160.

Celie's resistance to Mr. \_\_\_\_ demonstrates her growing confidence and fighting spirit, but she also uses the copula which is pivotal given the context of this conversation with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Copula deletion, as the data in Table 7 and Table 8 indicate, is Walker's preferred feature to demonstrate the dialect (it has the highest index score of all features at 52.8 and occurs 22.1 times per 1,000 words). Copula deletion comes as a final process of weakening the copula. The copula is omitted, not just contracted, when it is in an unstressed position, or "when characteristic features or firm relations are expressed."<sup>71</sup> Celie's resisting utterance clearly fits within the rule for the copula to be deleted in AAVE, but Walker keeps it. While the complements (*poor, black, ugly*), linked by the copula to the subject, are not all positive in their meaning, the fact that Celie is finally connecting herself to parts of her identity is significant. This is a marked improvement from where she begins the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Celie is "trapped in a gridlock of racist, sexist, and heterosexist oppressions, [she] struggles toward linguistic self-definition."<sup>72</sup> When Celie first begins writing, she doubts her agency. Because of her stepfather's assault, she questions everything she thought she knew about herself. She writes to God that "I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl."<sup>73</sup> By redacting two words she shifts her identification as being "a good girl" from the simple present *am* to present perfect *having been*, effectively questioning its persistence. When she begins writing to her sister, she is finally able to associate her name with the letters she is writing and take ownership of the voice that she has. This is indicated by the data

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<sup>71</sup> Sauer, "American Black English of Alice Walker," 134.

<sup>72</sup> Abbandonato, "A View from 'Elsewhere,'" 1106.

<sup>73</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 1.

in Table 9, which show that Celie's dialogue grows from 17.8 percent of all dialogue in the beginning section to 29 percent in the end.

Celie starts writing her letters to Nettie instead of God, which marks a pivotal step in her growth and emancipation. The sixty-ninth epistle (which occurs in my second subsection) is Celie's first letter to Nettie. She pens this letter to Nettie after soul-searching her connection to God and after her world is turned upside down with news of her family; she believes that God "must be sleep."<sup>74</sup> Eight letters after she begins writing to her sister, Celie signs her name for the first time. This letter coincides with Celie's physical and economic freedom from Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. She signs the letter:

Amen,  
Your sister, Celie  
Folkspants, Unlimited.  
Sugar Avery Drive  
Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>75</sup>

Owning her name, occupation (the business she started), and location for the first time gives her the strength to resist changing how she talks. Her occupation is no minor factor either. She is making pants, not dresses or skirts. Celie is appropriating a masculine image of power for her own use. She similarly appropriates covert prestige, something Trudgill theorized was only applicable to working-class men.<sup>76</sup>

Celie's empowerment can be represented by the linguistic data I have collected. The data show that Celie speaks more as the novel unfolds. Table 9 shows Celie's rise in dialogue presence, and Tables Table 10, 11, and Table 12 show dialogue-specific growth.

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<sup>74</sup> Walker, 177.

<sup>75</sup> Walker, 214.

<sup>76</sup> Trudgill, "Sex, Covert Prestige and Linguistic Change." Men used covert prestige to gain power and show solidarity within their speech community, while women tried to garner the overt prestige by elevating their language to the socioeconomic classes above their own.

She also uses fewer AAVE features in her epistles as the novel progresses. Table 3 reveals that Celie's usage of AAVE goes from 35.9 instances per 1,000 words in the beginning to 25.9 in the end. When these two different aspects are considered with Celie's development, a correlation can be drawn that speaking more and using fewer nonstandard features represent empowerment and confidence. However, Celie never abandons AAVE in her epistles, and in the section below it is apparent how strongly Celie connects to her dialect. Even in the ending section, where AAVE features have clearly dropped since the beginning of the novel, the index score of 38.2 still falls within the substantial usage of the dialect. In fact, all sub-corpora fall within the index range of substantial usage of the dialect.

Because Celie and her dialect are inextricably linked, when Celie is empowered, so is her dialect. By using AAVE in a situation where the standard dialect is usually called for, Walker is demonstrating the wide applications of this dialect. The dominant narratorial voice is AAVE as represented in Celie's 69 epistles, but it is contrasted with Nettie's 22 letters written in almost pure Standard American English (SAE). By contrasting these two characters and their voices, Walker expresses her "primary concern [which] is to preserve the black cultural heritage and to challenge the superiority of Standard English."<sup>77</sup>

### Resisting Change

Before Celie moves to Memphis with Shug, she is empowered to fight Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and stand up for herself. This confidence continues to grow when Celie is in Memphis.

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<sup>77</sup> Hsiao, "Language, Gender, and Power," 113.

Celie takes pride in her speech and resists changing it to alter the perceptions speakers outside of her speech community have of her. For Celie, the nonstandard dialect she uses is natural. Darlene, a woman who comes to help Celie with her pants business, attempts to impose a linguistic change toward SAE and explains how others view Celie's speech: "Colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amuse."<sup>78</sup> Celie's education is implicated in her dialect: "You say US where most folks say WE," Darlene tells Celie, "and peoples think you dumb."<sup>79</sup> Celie is not bothered by this perception: "What I care?" she responds, "I'm happy."<sup>80</sup> Even while Darlene is trying to change Celie's speech, her own speech is represented as nonstandard. As previously mentioned, because of the novel's genre, all speech is represented to the audience through Celie's voice. This is an indication that Celie is unable to accurately represent other's speech if it exists outside of her own nonstandard view of the language. It is highly unlikely that Darlene would speak in a nonstandard dialect given that her intention is to elevate Celie's own language.

By the time this interaction occurs, Celie is empowered as a woman and as a speaker; therefore, this attempt has no influence on her. She "refuses to enter the linguistic system of white people because she wants to keep her own autonomy."<sup>81</sup> She prioritizes her happiness and identity over the perception other speakers have of her. This moment represents Walker's defending nonstandard dialect usage in the presence of people insisting on assimilating to the standard. To Celie and Walker, group solidarity is important and representative of identity and background. They are aware of, and leverage, the covert prestige that AAVE has within its speech community.

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<sup>78</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 215.

<sup>79</sup> Walker, 215.

<sup>80</sup> Walker, 215.

<sup>81</sup> Hsiao, "Language. Gender, and Power," 97.



Celie outwardly resists the change that Darlene is imposing, but the data from her corpus show a decrease in nonstandard dialect usage. So, while Celie externally resists the superimposed changes, her language conforms to a certain degree. However, because the middle corpus occurs before this interaction with Darlene and Celie's language is already becoming more standard, her AAVE feature usage begins to drop before she has been pressured by any outside influence to make adjustments. It is important that her voice changes of her own volition (whether consciously or subconsciously) because it further emphasizes her independence. She is empowered to make her own decisions, even if that means a slight change in language, which is marked by shift toward SAE.

### Conclusion

By writing *The Color Purple* predominantly in a nonstandard dialect, Alice Walker is elevating the status of this dialect to be equal to its standard language counterpart. Walker incorporates SAE through Nettie's 28 percent of the novel's epistles. Despite Nettie's letters adhering to a more standard dialect, which is expected both in the epistolary genre and in published fiction, her narration is dry compared to Celie's: "If Celie's letters read like a diary, Nettie's letters remind one of a textbook."<sup>82</sup> Through contrasting Celie's and Nettie's letters, not just in style, but in content, Walker showcases "that [AAVE] is not a restricted code—on the contrary, not only does it function as a means of communication, but it can also be used very effectively as a literary language."<sup>83</sup> Walker privileges Celie's dialect as it is the dominant narratorial voice in the text. Similarly, this usage and validation showcases the richness of AAVE. Nettie's

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<sup>82</sup> Hsiao, 100

<sup>83</sup> Sauer, "American Black English of Alice Walker," 143.

narration occurs predominantly in SAE, but the richness is missing. When Nettie first writes to Celie, she expresses that “there is so much to tell you that I don’t know, hardly, where to begin—and anyway, you probably won’t get this letter, either.”<sup>84</sup> Celie’s language, while nonstandard, is vibrant and poetic. For instance, when she is describing Nettie to Shug, Celie says that Nettie is “smart as anything. Read the newspapers when she was little more than talking. Did figures like they was nothing. Talked real well too.”<sup>85</sup> She compliments Nettie’s grasp of the English language, not knowing that her own dialect has its distinct grammatical features with which Celie is well versed.

Celie grows in the novel from questioning her identity as a good girl at the beginning to embracing the qualities that Mr. \_\_\_\_ uses to demean her. Language is the means available to her to gain power, and she uses it to do so. She struggles with linguistic expression at first, but “language gives Celie the power to affirm her own existence.”<sup>86</sup> Her language is externally marked, that is, it is “deviant and unexpected” when compared to other literary texts.<sup>87</sup> However, within the confines of the novel, Celie’s dialect is unmarked as it becomes the “normal and expected” style.<sup>88</sup> By foregrounding Celie’s vernacular in this way, Walker is accentuating this linguistic aspect of her character, emphasizing its importance to the text. By prioritizing identity and group solidarity over social status and perception, Walker relies on the covert prestige that is inherent in the dialect. Celie rejects changing her language to elevate her appearance. She is empowered while still maintaining a substantial use of the dialect.

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<sup>84</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 117.

<sup>85</sup> Walker, 118.

<sup>86</sup> Fifer, “Dialects & Letters,” 159.

<sup>87</sup> Adamson, *Linguistics and English Literature*, 120.

<sup>88</sup> Adamson, 120.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Representing Gender and Power*

In a scene from the end of the novel, Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_ are both sitting on the porch smoking and sewing, something that would have been unbelievable at the beginning of the novel when Celie was completely under Mr. \_\_\_\_'s thumb. Before she goes to Memphis, Celie confronts him and fights against her subordinate position; she enters creation as a woman free from her patriarchal prison. Mr. \_\_\_\_ tries to reassert his power when Celie is leaving by threatening to "fix her wagon!"<sup>89</sup> He tells her she is not getting any of his money to help her live in Tennessee, to which she rhetorically asks him "did I ever ast you for money?"<sup>90</sup> She claims her power by rebuking their marriage: "I never ast you for nothing. Not even your sorry hand in marriage."<sup>91</sup> When Mr. \_\_\_\_ actually asks for her hand in marriage, she asserts herself by telling him "naw, I still don't like frogs."<sup>92</sup> The power position between them has clearly shifted. When she marries him as a young girl, Mr. \_\_\_\_ only asks Pa to marry Celie, and even then, he wanted Nettie; he does not ask Celie for her own hand in marriage. Celie decides at the end that instead of being married they can be friends. The power struggle between them is over; they are finally equal.

Linguistic power is asserted to different degrees by Walker's male and female characters. The men in *The Color Purple* have power from the beginning, but the women have to fight for their power (Shug and Sofia are exceptions to this). The female characters grow from accounting for 58 percent of the total dialogue spoken in the

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<sup>89</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 207.

<sup>90</sup> Walker, 201.

<sup>91</sup> Walker, 201.

<sup>92</sup> Walker, 283.

beginning section to 73 percent of the dialogue in the final segment. In Chapter 3 I discussed how Celie’s growth is expressed through her usage of AAVE and SAE features. Another way to view this is to take a closer look at her conversations in the novel to see how those dialogues change or remain stable over time.

### Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is the means through which sociolinguists analyze dialogue and conversations between two or more speakers. Linguistically speaking, it is through dialogue that “we establish and maintain relationships with others while at the same time both reflecting and creating our social reality.”<sup>93</sup> Celie reflects and creates her reality through her letter writing, but she also does this through her conversations that she relates in her epistles. Conversation, for sociolinguists, is unplanned—but not unorganized—speech occurring between two or more speakers. Since my corpus is composed of Celie’s letters from Walker’s novel, it does not fall into the category of unplanned speech. Regardless, previous scholarship has shown that literary conversations (including drama and prose) present adequate corpora for analysis of conversational situations.<sup>94</sup> Within these conversations, whether literary or real life, turn-taking occurs. Turn-taking can be defined as a “switch from one speaker to another within a conversation.”<sup>95</sup> My data collection for this chapter focuses on turns (and the details of them) in conversations that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Celie take part in. Conversation analysis “has demonstrated that conversation is systematically structured and that there is evidence of the orientation of

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<sup>93</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 280.

<sup>94</sup> Halmari, Short, and Simpson, to name a few.

<sup>95</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, 419.

participants to these structures in the ways in which they design their own conversational turns and react to those of others.”<sup>96</sup> Because of this, it is especially apt for handling the topic of linguistic expressions of power. Before I discuss the dialogue, I want to address some features of the epistles and how the novel’s genre adds a unique element of power.

### **Turns out of Epistles**

At several points in the novel, there are addresses that exist outside the confines of an epistle. The first one of these is most pronounced, as it is Pa’s threat against Celie that begins the novel. Nettie reminds Celie, “I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn’t even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was.”<sup>97</sup> Writing is the only vehicle of self-expression Celie has, and it is one in which she has little confidence. Nevertheless, it is through her act of writing that she is able to run “counter to Pa’s desire to stifle [her] voice forever.”<sup>98</sup> Implicit in Pa’s threat is that Celie needs to be silent. However, the syntax of Pa’s threat—“*You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.*”—creates a space for Celie where she can speak and find her voice without betraying his threat.<sup>99</sup> She obeys his threat for more than half the novel. She first tells of her rape to Shug in epistle forty-seven, and she addresses her first fifty-four epistles to God. Her fifty-fifth epistle is addressed to Nettie, and the remaining twenty percent of Celie’s epistles are addressed to her sister. Pa’s pre-epistle turn—the epigraph—is used to assert power over Celie. This dominates her in the epistles that follow.

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<sup>96</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 11-12.

<sup>97</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 130.

<sup>98</sup> Roshnavand, “Rape as Catalyst,” 30.

<sup>99</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 1.

For stylistic analysis, repetition of words, phrases, and syntactic structure is a way of associating meanings across a text. Because out-of-turn addresses take place multiple times in *The Color Purple*, this understanding of repetition can help give meaning to the remaining addresses, after Pa's threat. Although following much later in the narrative than Pa's first out-of-turn address, Celie's introductions to Nettie's letters exist outside the confines of an epistle, are spoken by a character, and are graphically linked by an italic typeface. When Celie first gets Nettie's letters, she introduces them to the audience, either breaking Nettie's epistle, or prefacing it. Celie does this with five of Nettie's letters. Celie's out-of-turn addresses introduce the fifty-second through fifty-sixth epistles. Her introductions are as follows: "*the first letter say;*"<sup>100</sup> "*Next one said;*"<sup>101</sup> "*Next one say;*"<sup>102</sup> "*Next one, fat, dated two months later, say;*"<sup>103</sup> and "*The next letter after that one say.*"<sup>104</sup> The first out-of-turn address was a way for Pa to exert his power over Celie. If all out-of-turn addresses follow the same function, then Celie is using her voice to assert power over Nettie's intruding narrative. If we interpret the novel as a conversation with long turns taken by Celie and then Nettie, then we can understand these introductions as Celie's marking the end of her turn and transitioning the conversation to Nettie's turn (long overdue as it is). This explanation could hold for the first introduction where it marks the ending of Celie's epistle (turn) and the beginning of Nettie's epistle (turn). However, the other four introductions would not hold to this same understanding, as they occur between Nettie's continued narration and turn. As Nettie

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<sup>100</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 126.

<sup>101</sup> Walker, 127.

<sup>102</sup> Walker, 128.

<sup>103</sup> Walker, 130.

<sup>104</sup> Walker, 134.

tells her story to Celie with each letter, Celie's interspersions seem as if Celie is encouraging Nettie to continue her tale as a sort of naïve "and then what?" In discourse terms, she is not interrupting; she is backchanneling.

### Power in Language

In addition to dialect variation, the study of register variation can add another layer of interpretation to a text. Registers differ from dialects in that registers vary based on aspects of the speech situation, whereas dialects are used regardless of the setting. Common understanding of registers can be found in occupation-specific language, such as legal, medical, and advertising lexicons. These registers are perhaps most easily identifiable based on their lexical specificities, but registers vary across all linguistic fields as well. In addition to occupational registers, another common type of register variation is formal versus informal language. All registers are clearly dependent upon the speech situation, context, purpose, and interlocutors, and formal or informal language demonstrates that. Another trigger behind register variation, and the one that is the concentration of this analysis, is the power relationships between participants.

Power, in part, is connected to how the speaker identifies socially. There is understood power in language, which is why advertisements and propaganda are so impactful. "Poets and authors too have always been aware of the power of words, in which lie [sic] their own possibility of influence."<sup>105</sup> Rolv Blakar argues that it is not possible to express oneself neutrally. All utterances influence the audience's understanding of the speaker. Power does not stand alone; instead, "it is related to another

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<sup>105</sup> Blakar, "Language as a Means," 134.

feature, like gender or ethnicity or occupation, and combined with a particular set of contextual circumstances.”<sup>106</sup> Gender, age, and dialect can all have negative impacts on accessing power in a conversation. Celie is impacted by all of these elements, as illustrated in the data from Chapter 2.

Norman Fairclough provides a useful definition which fits well into the context of power in *The Color Purple*. For him, “one aspect of power is the capacity to impose and maintain a particular structuring of some domain or other—a particular way of dividing it into parts, of keeping the parts demarcated from each other, and a particular ordering of those parts in terms of hierarchical relations of domination and subordination.”<sup>107</sup> His usage of *domination* and *subordination* resounds within the confines of this analysis as I underscore the position of men and women through their conversations, in particular Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_.

### **Powerless Language**

The features of powerless language were first analyzed in the early 1970s. The term was first coined as “Women’s Language” by Robin Lakoff (1973). In Lakoff’s initial analysis she was already doubting whether she could pinpoint these linguistic features to a single variable such as sex. Within a decade, Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O’Barr (in 1978) and O’Barr and Atkins (in 1980), researchers studying women’s language (WL) in the courtroom, found that male witnesses used WL features as well. This led O’Barr and Atkins to suggest “renaming the concept ‘powerless’ language due to its close association with persons having low social power” which is “a condition that

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<sup>106</sup> Coultas, *Language and Social Contexts*, 45.

<sup>107</sup> Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 13.



can apply to men as well as women.”<sup>108</sup> This change removes the sex bias and also indicates the situational impact on when speakers do or do not employ features of this register.

### **Powerful Language**

To the linguist, all language variations are equal. No one dialect or language is linguistically superior to another. However, the standard dialect brings prestige and notions of correctness from the speakers of that dialect. This prestige artificially promotes the standard variety and leads other speakers to believe that all other dialects are nonstandard and inferior. So, one way to understand powerful language is to equate the standard dialect to powerful language. From this view, it is evident that Celie, with her nonstandard dialect, does not fit into society’s designation of powerful, overtly prestigious language. Although my discussion of covert prestige in Chapter 3 demonstrates that there is some in-group power to be gained through the usage of AAVE, this power, rendered by covert, in-group prestige, does not transfer to the larger scope of society.

### **Naming Conventions**

The way that characters address one another is an indication of the power dynamic between them. Celie does not use last names for the men around her, but she does use them with unmarried women. This is why the audience knows of Sofia Butler, Shug Avery, and Miss Beasley but only knows of Harpo, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, and Grady. Halmari

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<sup>108</sup> O’Barr and Atkins, “‘Women’s Language,’” 94.

emphasizes that address terms are a viable indicator of powerful language.<sup>109</sup> The speakers with more power in a conversation have more terms available to them to address their interlocutors. They can use first names and second person pronouns. The speaker with less power will address the other with titles—or titles and last names—instead. Early on in the narrative, Pa refers to Celie and Nettie’s schoolteacher by her first and last name, when he tells his daughters “whoever listen to anything Addie Beasley have to say.”<sup>110</sup> This is contrasted by Celie’s consistent use of *Mr. \_\_\_\_\_* instead of *Albert* for most of the novel. This difference in naming is another way to delineate their power, in addition to the quantity of speech, as shown in the data presented in Chapter 2. Tables 10 through 15 detail Celie’s and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s conversations. The data show that in all conversations they use more power features (in Table 10, Celie’s discourse average grows from 0.55 to 0.61 and in Table 13 Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s discourse average increases from 0.94 to 1.00), but with opposite sex interlocutors their trajectories are reversed. Celie’s power features increase in her conversations with men (discourse average moves from 0.49 to 0.92, Table 12) while Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s power features diminish in his conversations with women (his average goes from 1.59 to 1.00, Table 14).

The use of titles without last names in the novel has been discussed before. Sauer vaguely theorizes on Celie’s use of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, although it is not a main feature of his overall discussion. He mentions that “a striking feature of Celie’s letters is that she avoids mentioning her husband’s name (Albert); she usually refers to him as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. . .by presenting him as anonymous Celie probably shows her emotional distance from her

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<sup>109</sup> Halmari, “Power Relationships and Register Variation,” 40.

<sup>110</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 10.

husband.”<sup>111</sup> While there is logic behind this, and while Celie certainly is not Mr. \_\_\_\_’s wife in any other way but legally, there is more to uncover from this masculine abstraction. Celie does not address any man by his last name following his title, which leads to a pseudo-anonymous male figure in multiple situations. The male character is easily detectable by the context, but the erasure nevertheless presents an interesting linguistic phenomenon.

The elision of men’s last names stereotypes and pigeonholes men into a place where their names do not matter. This could be giving power to the male or to the female, depending on perspective. The man’s last name could be part of a speech community that Celie does not belong to, and, therefore, she feels that she does not have access to its lexicon. This would further emphasize the power imbalance that exists between Celie and the men around her. On the other hand, Celie could be erasing their last names as a way to erase the men’s identities and their individuality. Whether the surname erasure is done as a way to empower men or women the role that gender plays cannot be ignored. Referring to Albert as Mr. \_\_\_\_ through the initial and middle sections makes this phenomenon much more than just a way for Celie to distance herself emotionally from her husband. At the end of the novel, Celie’s pattern of addressing her husband as Mr. \_\_\_\_ has ended. She finally calls him Albert. This demonstrates part of her empowerment that I discussed at length in Chapter 3 and is matched by the data indicating her growing linguistic presence in her conversations with men. Table 12 shows that her discourse average increased 88 percent from the beginning sub-corpus to the end sub-corpus.

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<sup>111</sup> Sauer, “American Black English of Alice Walker,” 141.

### Gender Role Reversal

My initial hypothesis was that Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_ switch gender roles, which would be reflected through their conversations. Looking at power features in conversations serves two distinct purposes. Primarily, these markers would show when Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_ were in positions of power with an interlocutor. Additionally, these markers are a way to codify Celie's and Mr. \_\_\_\_'s language in the beginning section to see if their speech positions in the ending sub-division match each other's beginning discursal identification. I have used their quantity of powerful language as a way to characterize the speech patterns of Mr. \_\_\_\_ and Celie to be able to identify how Alice Walker writes her male and female characters.

Research has shown that both men and women use powerful features in conversation. Because it is a register, the context of the speech situation impacts which interlocutor accesses this register, regardless of gender. Even though gender may not assign a speaker to a powerful or powerless register, registers are the way through which speakers identify conversationally. At the beginning of the novel then, Walker has identified Celie as a less powerful speaker and Mr. \_\_\_\_ as a more powerful speaker. If men were depicted as more powerful speakers and women as less powerful (Mr. \_\_\_\_'s beginning average of relative quantity of speech was 0.94 compared to Celie's 0.55, see Table 13 and Table 10 respectively), then falling in between this range puts the characters in between the gender binary. It is true that powerful language cannot automatically be assumed to be used by men, and the reverse is also true that women cannot be assumed to use powerless language. However, because registers (such as powerful or powerless language) are a way people create their linguistic identity, gender and power language

can be associated based on how a person speaks, but the register cannot be assumed based on the speaker's gender. Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_'s relative power positions are completely based on the data; their power positions are wholly independent of their gender.

Since language and identity are intertwined, language overlaps with gender. Penelope Eckert believes that gender variation should be viewed on a continuum. To her, "variation on gender may not always be adequately accounted for in terms of a binary opposition."<sup>112</sup> The data that I have presented also resist a firm binary classification, with many findings falling in between two distinct poles. Celie's dialect usage, for instance, shows that her language becomes more standard, but still retains elements of her nonstandard dialect. Nonstandard dialect has its own gender associations and falls under "certain features of language" that "are associated with masculinity" whereas "other features, such as standard varieties, are associated with femininity."<sup>113</sup> Celie betrays this with her consistent usage of AAVE, so she moves into a traditionally masculine linguistic category. Mr. \_\_\_\_ is less powerful than his male interlocutors in the first two corpora, which contradicts his overall power position in his conversations. These subversions of expected norms demonstrate that gender, like language, exists on a continuum with an unclear delineation between the binaries.

### **Androgynous Identity**

What the data indicate is not a complete reversal of the usage of powerful features and their correlation with gender but instead a blurring of the binary in the register. This

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<sup>112</sup> Eckert, "The Whole Woman," 247.

<sup>113</sup> Dawson and Phelan, *Language Files*, 439.

amounts to a linguistically androgynous identity for Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, which is matched physically at the end as they both “sit sewing and talking and smoking [their] pipes.”<sup>114</sup> There is also an equality between their genders as they both are partaking in a traditionally masculine activity (smoking on a pipe) and a feminine activity (sewing). To Marie Buncombe, androgyny is the way in which Walker expresses “the totality of the black experience, male and female, sharing and caring in the struggle for freedom, harmony, and unity.”<sup>115</sup> Part of this androgyny is found through linguistic analysis, as I have shown. Another part is expressed through Walker’s use of metaphor.

Walker constantly compares her characters to the opposite sex. For example, early on Celie is described as being able to “work like a man.”<sup>116</sup> Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ does not display any feminine characteristics, but he does assume the less powerful position in his conversations with his father and his brother. In the last corpus in the novel, after Celie’s explosive outburst with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, he works as hard as she used to, and he “clean that house just like a woman.”<sup>117</sup> As Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ are repairing their relationship, he explains that “this the first time [he] ever lived on earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience.”<sup>118</sup> He has embraced the feminine and masculine sides of himself, which allows him to enter into the androgynous wholeness that Walker emphasizes.

Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s androgyny is mirrored in Harpo and Sofia’s relationship. When Harpo is working hard in his father’s fields, “his face begin to look like a woman face.”<sup>119</sup> Harpo is further feminized when he begins eating more food as a way to gain

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<sup>114</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 247.

<sup>115</sup> Buncombe, “Androgyny as Metaphor,” 427.

<sup>116</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 8.

<sup>117</sup> Walker, 217.

<sup>118</sup> Walker, 235.

<sup>119</sup> Walker, 27.

weight to be able to physically overpower Sofia, who does not obey him the way he wants her to. This attempt to gain weight backfires and results in him looking “big,” that is to say, pregnant. Sofia exerts power linguistically in her conversations with Mr. \_\_\_\_; she matches him equally in turns and takes longer turns than he does. Physically, she is described as “not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking.”<sup>120</sup> She also takes charge with Harpo from the beginning when she walks ahead of him down the road as they approach Mr. \_\_\_\_’s house. Walker’s metaphors allow her characters to “free themselves from being typecast as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ and embrace the best characteristics of both genders,” which allows them to “rise to a high level of self-perception and understanding never before realized.”<sup>121</sup>

### **Understanding Metaphors**

Metaphorical concepts such as TIME IS MONEY guide how people live their lives. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) argue “that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action.”<sup>122</sup> Metaphorical concepts are so culturally ingrained that we do not always perceive when a metaphorical concept is discussed because we cannot think of that concept in any other way. Metaphors usually help us to grasp intangible ideas by grounding them in easily understood concepts. Metaphorical concepts vary culturally, so a critic can gain an understanding into a culture’s priorities and values by analyzing what metaphors that culture uses. The same can be said about authors’ use of metaphors in their literary

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<sup>120</sup> Walker, 30.

<sup>121</sup> Buncombe, “Androgyny as Metaphor,” 423.

<sup>122</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 3.

works. Since Walker repeatedly uses metaphors to give her characters a sense of androgyny, she values blurring the binary between male and female.

In the case of *The Color Purple*, Walker's consistent metaphorical switching of characters' genders expresses how Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_ are able to coexist happily at the end of the novel. When Celie marries Mr. \_\_\_\_ in the first section of the book, their linguistic gender identities are set, but in the second and third segments their conversational identities change. Celie becomes empowered through self-discovery and linguistic self-expression, and Mr. \_\_\_\_ gets in touch with his femininity when Celie leaves him to go to Tennessee. This equalizes their differences and unites them in friendship.

### Conclusion

Celie gains power linguistically in her communication with the people around her. She grows in her conversations to take up more space with her interlocutors, but she does not achieve widespread control across her conversations at all levels (Table 10 shows her growth across all power features analyzed here, but even at the end of the novel her features still fall under 1.00, which means she does not use any feature more than her interlocutor). Celie prioritizes her community and her connection to it. So, it is fitting that Celie's empowerment does not come at the expense of losing other voices in the narrative; she makes space for other characters' voices, both male and female. What does come with her empowerment, however, is an important shift in her relationship to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. She balances the power dynamic; through "her own independence" she is able "to get an equal position in the relationship between her and Albert, and to give an identity to



this person rather than regard him as a nameless authority that controls her life.”<sup>123</sup> At the end of the novel she rids herself of the patriarchal power that she was under at the beginning. She gradually does this as she stops writing her letters to God. When she does address God again, she upends the power structure by writing “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.”<sup>124</sup> The European version of God that Celie had in her head has been replaced by an interconnected and equal force.

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<sup>123</sup> Zhou, “Focalization Theory and the Epistolary Novel,” 301.

<sup>124</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 285.

## CHAPTER V

### *Framing The Color Purple*

As I have mentioned, stylistics is situated between culture-oriented and text-oriented criticisms. Thus far, my application has focused entirely on Walker's novel, but this novel and the language from it that I have discussed are situated in a larger context that is worth at least a brief discussion. When Alice Walker was writing this novel, African American women's literature was growing in prominence, but she was also situated in a newly conservative political atmosphere that challenged and negated progress that was made in the previous two decades. Adequate representation of lived realities for African Americans were hard to come by. Political statements of this community came not from the "95 percent of television executives and print journalists [who] were white," but "from the cultural realm, from the pens of black women novelists to the rhymes of militant rappers."<sup>125</sup> This suggests that to garner a true understanding of the lived experiences of racial minorities, especially in this time, one must turn to their cultural documents and ephemera, not to the stories being aired and the narratives being enforced by the dominant culture. Walker's decision to write in African American Vernacular English connects her to her literary tradition, notably Zora Neale Hurston, but it also disrupts the longer tradition of writing fiction (certainly the narration) in Standard American English. There is motivation in this dialect decision: "if a poet [or writer] chooses to write in a non-standard form this often counts as a socio-political act of some kind."<sup>126</sup> Walker, therefore, is using the publication of *The Color Purple* to make a stand for the value of nonstandard dialects in literature.

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<sup>125</sup> Martin, *The Other Eighties*, 122-23.

<sup>126</sup> Short, *Exploring the Language*, 87.

### A Literary Conversation

Stancetaking occurs naturally in conversation; it is how speakers orient themselves. A stance is taken by what is said or *how* it is said. The content of what Celie says positions her, just as much as the vernacular that she employs to say it. At a larger level, Walker is also taking a stance by writing this novel in AAVE. Wardhaugh and Fuller explain the importance of hegemony in understanding power relationships in discourse analysis. Within the understanding of hegemony, alongside the expected military and economic resources, is the concept of standard languages. Standard languages of course are merely preferred dialects but they nevertheless have social power because of speakers' belief that the standard dialect is superior. The power of this standard is ingrained in all speakers of the language. Speakers of a nonstandard variety, such as AAVE, "have often internalized and naturalized the idea that the standard is superior."<sup>127</sup> This imbalance creates an artificial binary that pits "Standard Language" against "Nonstandard Language." By employing a nonstandard dialect, Celie and Walker are resisting this internalized ideal of Standard American English.

Walker comes from a long lineage of African American women writers. Whether directly or indirectly Walker is engaging with this history. Her choice of the epistolary form for Celie's story is representative of the dialogic situation she finds herself in. As Dubey articulates, the letters exchanged between Celie and Nettie are representative of the larger framework of African American women writers' conversations: "As the novel progresses, Celie starts to address her letters to her sister Nettie and the novel

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<sup>127</sup> Wardhaugh and Fuller, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 299.

begins to include letters from Nettie to Celie, establishing a literary genealogy in which writing becomes a reciprocal exchange among black women.”<sup>128</sup> This conversation is reminiscent of the African American women’s literary tradition where conversations occur across time and texts. Just as Celie is part of dialogues in the text, Walker is in conversation outside of the text and participates in the literary conversation through her novel.

### Promoting Language

Celie is empowered by the end of the novel and so is her dialect. On a larger scale, outside the course of the novel, this equates to Walker’s promotion of AAVE in literary usage. This promotion and elevation are a result of “black authors such as Alice Walker and her immediate precursors, e.g. Warren Miller, who have used Black English in a serious context and as the language of the narrator, thus raising Black English to the status of a literary language.”<sup>129</sup> By raising the status of this dialect, Walker is challenging the dominant culture and expanding the range of voices to be heard in American literature.

Julia de Bres researched television advertisements from 2000 that promoted the Māori language in New Zealand. The goal of these promotional advertisements was to encourage the usage of Māori among Māori speakers and to raise appreciation of the Māori language with non-Māori speakers. The two commercials de Bres discusses in her article demonstrate an elevation of the status of Māori and model ideal behaviors for non-Māori speakers. The commercial that elevates Māori features two young New Zealanders

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<sup>128</sup> Dubey, “Some Fiction Might be Useful,” 162.

<sup>129</sup> Sauer, “American Black English of Alice Walker,” 125.

speaking Māori in an Italian café. With the international setting of this commercial and one of the servers complimenting the language, the commercial attempts to break a “preference for European languages over Māori among non-Māori, suggesting that, like Italian, the Māori language can be a sophisticated, worldly, romantic, and indeed ‘beautiful’ language.”<sup>130</sup> This elevation of Māori validates its usage both in and outside of New Zealand.

Ultimately, de Bres found that the ads of the minority language to majority language speakers were successful in transmitting the intended message: elevating the status to non-Māori or modeling behavior for non-Māori. If minority languages can be promoted through commercials and have their reception changed among the dominant language users, it seems logical that the same outcome is possible through the promotion of minority languages (or language varieties) through novels and other media. This offers insight into how promoting minority languages, and in Walker’s case, minority dialects, can impact the view of that language or dialect to the majority language speakers.

Walker is using a nonstandard dialect in a situation that typically calls for a standard dialect because of the conservative nature of the written language. This situation matches the commercial showcasing Māori usage in an Italian café. The commercial broadens the scope of the Māori language allowing it to exist and extend beyond its traditional boundaries. This is also matched in Walker’s novel. The usage of AAVE expands the scope of the novel to the larger AAVE speech community, which is much larger and more varied than Celie’s domestic Georgia backdrop.

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<sup>130</sup> de Bres, “Promoting a Minority Language,” 521.

## Conclusion

The stylistics debate will continue despite the attempt here to bridge the gap. What should be apparent, however, is that there is significant understanding that can be brought to a literary text from a linguistics perspective, especially in texts rich with linguistic variation that foreground a discussion of the literary language. As critical approaches such as feminist criticism and queer theory continue to expand and focus on intersectionality, it should be apparent that other methods of literary criticism will benefit from a similar expansion. Stylistics is one such expansion that will broaden the horizons and abilities of the literary critic. Some elements of my arguments are not new ways of approaching *The Color Purple*, but because of the gap between linguistic analysis of literature and literary criticism, these arguments have rarely been framed with a linguistic lens.

This thesis should sufficiently demonstrate that novels using nonstandard dialect provide rich corpora for sociolinguistic study, including, but not limited to the study of dialect, powerless and powerful language, code switching, and discourse analysis. By continuing to publish, analyze, and document usage of nonstandard dialect, linguists are ensuring that the synchronic variation of the twentieth century is saved to be studied by future sociolinguists. After all, “we study speech by means of writing, and we use writing to represent the phonetics of speech. Most of our information, and certainly all of our information about the history of languages, is in writing.”<sup>131</sup>

Reading and discussing books like *The Color Purple* continues to be important not only for their literary merit but for the stories they tell. In the wake of recent social

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<sup>131</sup> Millward and Hayes, *A Biography of the English Language*, 35.

movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, it is increasingly apparent that listening to people of color and victims of abuse, whose voices and experiences have been marginalized, is critical to our ability to grow to become a society that treats all of its citizens with equity. These marginalized voices are rarely heard, let alone written about. When multiple marginalized identities intersect, it becomes even harder to make one's voice heard. Celie is an exemplum of this. Linda Abbandonato argues that "she is an 'invisible woman,' a character traditionally silenced and effaced in fiction."<sup>132</sup> By reading, writing, and examining these invisible women characters we affirm that, like Celie, they are here.

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<sup>132</sup> Abbandonato, "A View from 'Elsewhere,'" 1106.

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