Novelty Journals

ISSN 2394-9694

International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences
Vol. 6, Issue 2, pp: (13-19), Month: March - April 2019, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

The Vernacular Language in Richard Wright's *Native Son* as A Device to Dramatize W.E.B. Du Bois' Double-Consciousness

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Abstract: **W.E.B. Du Bois'concept of Double-Consciousness, as announced in his groundbreaking work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), has been dramatized in African-American narratives in a variety of ways. Each novelist has focused on one or many of the devices through which he has tried to highlight Double-Consciousness as a perennial trait of the African-American personality. In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the vernacular is a major device used by the author to underline the doubleness that pervades the novel, with a special focus on Bigger Thomas, as the epitome of African-Americans doomed to live a dual life – as Africans and as Americans, but not totally either. Highly conscious that the aforementioned character lives with a shattered self, the author makes him use two linguistic registers, the only successful way that would enable him to better express his unstable feelings. These two registers are, paradoxically enough, contradictory but complementary. Being the product of two opposing cultures, one African and the other American, Bigger can never sacrifice one side of his personality. Therefore, his bicultural background entails both the formal and the vernacular languages to interact with a context fraught with dualism. It is this dual use of language that helps the African-Americans to achieve a sort of equilibrium of their schizoid psyche. In making the Daltons speak one language, namely the forml one, and Bigger speak two registers of language, the author stresses the doubleness of Bigger, reflected in this very use of language. Bigger's vascillation between two registers of language is but a mere reflection of his perpetual twoness.**

Keywords: **Vernacular, Richard Wright, Double-consciousness, W.E.B. Du Bois.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of the vernacular language is a major device to reflect the African-American's double-consciousness, or twoness, to use Du Bois' both expressions, in Wright's *Native Son*. It is, undoubtedly, an inseparable part of this double-consciousness. The term 'vernacular' refers to non-literary, informal language, often regional or a dialect associated with a group or a class. In cultural studies, 'vernacular' connotes the popular and non-dominant language, usually linked to expressions of political resistance in cultural form. Conceived in this way, the vernacular is an instrument whereby the marginalized tries to strengthen his position in the face of the cultural, economical, and political domination of the white supremacist. Wright's interspersion of some passages with vernacular language is an indication that the African-American is linguistically torn between two worlds, the original one left behind him after his transportation to America, and the other lurking in front of him and within which he tries to integrate in spite of the barriers drawn by the supremacist White who considers the Black a second-rate citizen, with no linguistic or cultural heritage.

Wright's use of the vernacular in *Native Son* is meant to convey the message that the language, and by extension the cultural heritage, of the so unjustly called backward cultures is as expressive and effective as the language of the master. The integration of the vernacular within the formal language makes the two forms of expression emanating from persons racially and socially different stand on equal footing; they serve the same end, that of communicating and even, sometimes, imposing one's culture. To use one's original language is, in a sense, to struggle against cultural amnesia, for

"to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization."[1] However, if the African-American possesses two cultures, it should not be ignored that the fusion of them may be enriching as it may be devastating.

In fact, the opposition of two linguistic registers, one officially established and the other reflecting a cultural minority, contributes to the hybrid aspect of the novel. This counters the essentialist view of the distinction between cultures, as well as it bridges the gap between two diametrically opposed linguistic camps. This is achieved in the novel by opposing harmoniously the everyday language of the street uttered by Bigger, especially, and the formal one spoken by the Daltons. It is during the confrontation of Bigger with the Daltons or other white Americans like Boris Max that the linguistic dimension seems to enhance the differences between the oppressor and the oppressed, without causing any misunderstanding or a break of communication. In this particular situation, Bigger has to think doubly so as to achieve a harmonious contact with the Daltons. In his first contact with the Daltons, Bigger's speech is limited to answers that do not go beyond the utterance 'yessuh'. This is because first "[t] he long strange words they used made no sense to him; it was another language" (*Native*, p. 86), and second because the only secure choice he has in front of him is to comply with the supremacists' recommendations.

As the story progresses, there is an alternating use of the formal language and the vernacular. The use of the one in tandem with the other is meant to reflect the doubleness of the character and his experiencing of double-consciousness, for Bigger is the outcome of two cultures whose expression entails two modes of speech. As Bigger is the focal character of the story, and as he is the most frequently spoken to, the vernacular is as often used as the formal language; it is echoed in every conversation as an indispensable linguistic register that the novel cannot stand without. The reader waits patiently for Bigger's words because they outweigh all the other characters', and because they are decisive in elucidating and disentangling the motives of his horrible acts. Consequently, his speech acquires unequal importance. Ultimately, had the novelist condemned Bigger to the use of one single register among the two, the core of the novel would have been easily lost, for the protagonist's essence is intimately tied to double-consciousness, reflected in his every cultural aspect including, especially, his linguistic heritage.

The opposition of the vernacular to the formal language intends to show, paradoxically, the conflicting and yet complementary aspects of the two registers. Wright's use of both registers is intended to show that there are certain cultural aspects that the African-American cannot dispense with in any condition whatsoever. It is also a proof that the cultural differences embodied in language can never hinder communication and understanding between racially different people, much less if they live under the same sky. In the first meeting with the Daltons, even if the levels of language are totally different, no misunderstanding between the two parts occurs. Wright's use of both registers of language is meant to emphasize a linguistic, and by extension, a cultural reality characterized by difference and hybridity but which can never prevent cohabitation between two or more racially different people. Differences become, thus, a source of enrichment and enlightenment, and the African-American – because he imbibed from two different cultures – would, in this case, be inescapably endowed with double-consciousness and consequently be forced to think, speak, and act doubly.

More outstanding in the use of language is – and to highly stress doubleness – Wright's making the two levels of language come from the same mouth, namely from that of Bigger. Bigger's speech is highly hybridized, especially through the use of the Blues, as it is stated by Andrews Warnes: "Bigger's narrative, I suggest, also forces the 'black' blues into the 'white' literary domain, so disrupting the binary opposition into which these cultures are routinely placed."[2]When Mary asks Bigger to come with her and Jan in Ernie's Kitchen Shack, he retorts in formal language, "'I can stay here. Somebody has to watch the car"'; and when she invites him to eat, he responds, "'I don't want to eat"' (*Native*, p.111). But earlier, when addressing Jack, Bigger says, "Jack, I betcha two bits you can't make it" (*Native*, p.74), a form of informal speech known as 'eye dialect,' used for the first time by George Philpkrapp, to indicate the speaker's social status and illiteracy. This double use of language by Bigger, his employment of two registers, stems from his double-consciousness, as he is made up of two culturally different heritages. Seen from this perspective, double-consciousness is - in this particular context related to culture - an asset. It contributes largely to enliven Bigger's consciousness by

[1] -Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles LamMarkmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 8.
[2]- Andrews Warnes, *Richard Wright's Native Son* (N.Y.: Taylor & Francis, 2007), p. 21.

broadening his experience and sharpening his sense of perception. In fact, language cannot be disassociated from the general context governing the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, characterized by hegemony. This is made clear by Craig Hansen Werner when he states that "Bigger occasionally arrives at startlingly clear insights into the nature of discourse. Contemplating the social segregation that breeds double consciousness, Bigger realizes that the white power structure conditions all discourse."[3] And the use of the vernacular is just an attempt to weaken such conditioning, and sometimes to subvert that dominant discourse.

It should be stressed that the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is not reflected only in the spoken language, but through all the behavior including gestures, especially that the African-American is not allowed to commit mistakes in the presence of Whites. Consider, for example, the following passage taken from the novel when Bigger is in the Daltons' house for the first time. This passage shows clearly to what extent the black man is obsessed by the view the white man can formulate about him. Consequently, the former's gestures have to be minutely calculated.

He [Bigger] had not raised his eyes to the level of Mr. Dalton's face once since he had been in the house. He stood with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped; and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence; none had ever told him that in so many words, but their manner had made him feel that they did. (*Native*, p. 87)

The passage cited above reflects the degree of the African-American's obsession with conformity to the supremacist's rules, because the relationship between the White and the Black is tenaciously and uncompromisingly established. It is a relation governed by rigid rules that should never be trespassed. Those rules are not the result of a convention or a pre-established agreement between the two camps, but are imposed by the supremacist white on the Black, denying him any freedom of action or choice, which results in his doubleness and the conditioning of his behavior in a perpetual tireless adjustment to the white man's satisfaction. What is more striking is that there is no specific logic that governs this relationship; it is often arbitrarily left to the Whites' whims. If the passage above informs about the diktats that impose on Bigger a specific type of behavior, only one page later, does it dawn on Bigger that he has to act in the opposite manner:

he suddenly remembered the many times his mother had told him not to look at the floor when talking with white folks or asking for a job. He lifted his eyes and saw Mr. Dalton watching him closely. He dropped his eyes again. (*Native*, pp. 88-89)

No doubt, as far as language is concerned in the novel, there are, in reality, many levels of language threaded together, almost on equal parts. In *Native Son*, the language of the marginalized is deliberately voiced along with the language of the supremacist, and the language of the journalist is voiced concomitantly with the language of law and the language of the priest. These linguistic clusters do really reinforce the hybrid aspect of the novel, and give a right, particularly, to the marginalized to impose traits of his culture, ignored by the Americans, for "[h]ybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority - its rules of recognition."[4] In *Native Son*, the language of the marginalized or street language, represented by Bigger, invades the Daltons' house, and finds no difficulty in communicating with Jan and Mary, erasing, thus, the borders between the two clusters. While asking about Bigger's family, Mr. Dalton says, '"Now, you have a mother, a brother, and a sister?"' And Bigger answers, '"Yessuh."' Mr. Dalton asks once more, '"*Thereare* four of you?"', and Bigger answers, '"Yessuh, *there's* four of us"' (*Native*, p. 88 – Italics added).

In fact, Bigger naturally merges, in the DuBoisian sense, the two linguistic registers as if he possessed a third tongue, situated in a liminal state between two tongues, able to fuse successfully the two registers. It is to be noted, however, that only towards the end of the novel when Bigger has relatively become stronger by succeeding in assuming his acts with fortitude in jail, has he really begun to acquire the formal language of the supremacist and no longer "dwells at the margins of discourse,"[5] as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts.In this specific part of the novel, formal expressions really flow

[3]- Craig Hansen Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (N.Y.: University of Illinois Press, 1997), p. 199.
[4]-HomiBhabha, *The location of Culture*(New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 114.
[5]- Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*(New York: Oxford University Press, 1989),p. 52.

with relative ease and success. Bigger's sporadic recourse to the vernacular can be considered, however, a subversive act to signify on the Daltons as representatives of the white man and his culture.Bigger's tongue is, in this sense, an interracial tongue that resides in the threshold sphere of language and succeeds in resolving the tensions existing between the two opposed registers. As a participant deeply involved in the actions of the novel, Bigger accomplishes some of the roles attempted by the act of Signifyin(g) as defined by Carole Boyce Davies who says that "Signifying can affirm, critique, or build community through the involvement of its participants."[6]

It is to be stressed that this very exposure of the African-American to more than one culture that creates within him double-consciousness. Each time Bigger happens to be with the Daltons, he seems to experience a doubling of identity, making him almost schizophrenic; his vacillation between raising and lowering his eyes when he is in front of the white man testifies to this. The reader senses that Bigger struggles between two opposing poles, trying to merge them, as Du Bois explains. In no time does Bigger feel at ease in the presence of the Daltons, for in their presence a struggle, often between internal and external forces, between two warring souls and consequently between two linguistic registers, is generated due to double-consciousness with which the African-American is perpetually struck.

The importance of the use of the vernacular is summed up in the following passage by Grant Farred; for him, and for many other critics, the use of the vernacular by the African-Americans is not a choice but an imperative. "Vernacularize," Farred almost orders,

Explore and explicate the link between the popular and the political. Never underestimate the capacity of the popular to elucidate the ideological, to animate the political, never overlook the vernacular as a means of producing a subaltern or postcolonial voice that resists, subverts, disrupts, configures, or impact the dominant discourse. For disempowered constituencies, resistance against the domination is extremely difficult without a vernacular component.[7]

This importance is emphasized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.when he declares that the black vernacular has assumed the singular role as the black person's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue. It is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet communal cultural rituals.[8]

It is quite convincing that for the doubly constructed personality of the African-American, only the vernacular as another language, can express the real feelings of this peculiarly doubled personality.From this perspective, the vernacular is a mode of writing back. It is, in a word, a sort of counterculture and counter speech. Its primary role is to reverse the unnatural orders and conventions, especially linguistic, established by the supremacists. The use of the vernacular has put an end to a very persistent question which has always been raised in connection with the language in which the African-American should write. Many wonder why the African-American should always write in the language of the supremacist with the intention to defend his origins and to prove that his culture is of no less importance than other invading languages, while this very African-American does not make use of his original language which falls, by and by, in complete oblivion. The use of the vernacular is a concrete mediating solution for this long debate, and constitutes, perhaps, the most suitable solution for the African-American's linguistic predicament.

It should be borne in mind that the vernacular contributed highly to the formation of the black identity, because language is one of the fundamental prerequisites that constitute this identity. Wright's fusion of formal language and orality is but another instance of blending two parts of the African-American's linguistic gifts, a linguistic doubleness that singularizes his linguistic experience and reflects clearly his double-consciousness. He is American and African, benefitting from two linguistic clusters, which is a way of proving his cultural diversity. And if the so called modern world has broken with orality as a sign of backwardness, the African-American reminds this world of the importance and effectiveness of this mode of expression, and this is what justifies his ultimate standing in an inbetween position between two radically different modes of expression, as it is always the case with him in every situation. Undoubtedly, Wright tries to contribute to the revival of the oral tradition, making it stand on equal footing with the written word.

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[6] - Carole Boyce Davies, *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture* (ABC-CLIO, 2008).

[7] - Grant Farred, *What's My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 1.

[8]- Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. xix.

Wright, among other African-American artists, struggles to make the oral tradition retrieve its due importance. It seems that language as a mode of exteriorizing one's inner self is exploited by the novelist to convey that the language of the marginalized is a tool whose importance cannot be denied as a way of cultural resistance. The scene of the first encounter between the Daltons and Bigger is, unequivocally, one of tension, partly because of the use of many levels of language as a mode of communication, each denoting and connoting many social and intellectual racially charged implications. Bigger is terrified more by the Daltons' language than by their wealth or luxury. "Bigger," as the narrator informs, "listened, blinking and bewildered. The long strange words they used made no sense to him; it was another language" (*Native*, p.86). It should be added that Bigger's inability to understand the Daltons' language has to be understood in its broadest sense, meaning that he is capable, perhaps, to grasp the signifiers, but he has to grapple with the signifieds which are pre-established conventionally within a closed socio-cultural context that is totally alien to him, for language is not only a set of constructions isolated from their social, cultural, and ideological contexts.

The vernacular constitutes a way by which Bigger and his compatriots establish a psychological equilibrium by retrieving a lost part of their identity through the use of their daily language to counter the dominant language related to the dominant group. The use of the vernacular is also an attempt to get hold of at least a part of the world which is felt to refute the African-American, because a "man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power."[9] It is a means by which the African-American imposes his culture. But ironically enough, this very vernacular is also doubly used in the novel; it is, like the color of the skin, a trait that reminds the African-American of his difference from the purely Americans. The vernacular as part and parcel of the African-American's identity is doubly used by Wright to reflect and reinforce the doubleness within the black American. Like double-consciousness itself, the vernacular is used in *Native Son* in an ambivalent way; it at the same time serves and harms the African-American. By making use of the vernacular, the African-American undoubtedly asserts his cultural identity, but by this very use of the vernacular, the gap between him and the white man is relatively widened and the differences are somewhat strengthened. But what is of high importance is that the vernacular allows the African-American to explore a linguistic area never trodden by the White, by the mere fact that through the vernacular, the black man "dwells at a sort of crossroads, a discursive crossroads at which two languages meet, ...the black vernacular and standard English."[10]

In fact, Wright had always been convinced that "in order for a black or marginalized intellectual [more so than for other figures] to be politically efficacious, the historical injunction is overdetermined: vernacularity is an absolute prerequisite."[11] Also, Wright had always held the idea that no culture, minor or marginalized as it might appear, is to be ignored, for it has its own place within the cultural melting pot as a step towards multiculturalism; it has to struggle to find a respectable place within the universal cultural sphere. As early as 1937, before the appearance of *Native Son*, Wright stressed this idea under the form of a piece of advice delivered to the black writers. He sates, in this respect, that

Negro writers must have in their consciousness the fore-shortened picture of the *whole*, nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa, and of the long, complex (and for the most part unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a *whole* again.[12](Italics in the text)

Like major African-American thinkers, Wright had always been preoccupied by the notion of wholeness that guarantees the integration of all the parts without any elimination whatsoever. Judging by the fact that the African-American's identity is unquestionably doubly constructed, the expression of the African-American's feelings can be achieved only doubly through a blending of two opposing modes of expression. Nowadays, there is a radical change in people's judgment of the vernacular. Until recently, the vernacular has been rejected as a blemished form of expression especially in writing, manifesting traits of anti-intellectualism; but todaypeople seem willingto suspend their objections to printed vernacular dialect in literature where it is used to evoke cultural identity or social reality. The audience in this case is all

[9] - Frantz Fanon, "The Negro and Language", in: *The Routledge language and Cultural Theory Reader*. Edited: Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 419.
[10] - Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 65.
[11]- Grant Farred, *What's My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 1.
[12]- Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing." In: Venetria K. Patton, Maureen Honey, *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 59.

readers rather than only those who are vernacular speakers, and the works are selected for their literary value rather than their language form.[13]

Only the vernacular, associated with the formal mode of expression, can faithfully and truthfully reflect the real and exact inner situation of the African-American who belongs to the two cultures that gave birth to the two linguistic registers as a clear manifestation of double-consciousness.

No surprise, then, if the reader of *Native Son* can easily infer from the use of street vernacular the kind of characters who are speaking as far as their social status is concerned. A statement like, "You calling me scared so nobody'll see how scared *you* is" (*Native*, p. 65) is fraught with meaning, formally and linguistically speaking, for it betrays the very nature of the speaker. More often than not, the characters in the novel are distinguished, mainly, through their uses of language. The famous statement illustrating the vernacular use in *Native Son* is the one inscribed in Bigger's ransom note that reads as follows: "Do what this letter say" (*Native*, p. 216) instead of 'says,' and which will serve as a clue to indicate the nature, and why not the race, of the writer of the ransom.

Henry Louis Gates associates the vernacular with Signifyin(g), a kind of mimicry, among other things, often used by the subaltern for a variety of reasons. In *Native Son*, it is used, mainly, as a comic imitation of the Whites to mock their modes of life, and to deflate their affectation, particularly if we take into consideration that "[i]mitation is the Afro-American's central art form."[14] In this respect, the vernacular reflects a part of the double-consciousness the African-American is endowed / cursed with. It is a sign of the constructed identity of the Blacks in America. This vernacular, along with the formal language, constitutes a kind of linguistic collage that is part and parcel of the hybridized culture of Africans in America, reflecting their double-consciousness. It is also used as a kind of outlet through which the characters get rid of pressure, for they can do in mimicry what they cannot in front of the white man, "'Let's play 'white,' Bigger said, referring to a game of play-acting in which he and his friends imitated the ways and manners of white folks"' (*Native*, p. 56). The mention of the word game reinforces the idea that Bigger and his friend are consciously Signifyin(g) on white people, because "[t]o Signify, in other words, is to engage in certain rhetorical games."[15] When they see the plane flying, Bigger and Gus start to Signif(y) on the white men's manners of talking and behaving. Psychologically speaking, the two characters achieve through Signifyin(g) what they cannot in real life. While putting themselves in the rich white men's shoes, "both of them made gestures signifying that they were hanging up telephone receivers" (*Native*, p. 57), invoking the facilities of life the White enjoys. By their acts of imitating the white man's gestures, Bigger and Gus resort to the reversal of their social status through "substitutions in Signifyin(g) [which] tend to be humorous, or function to name a person or a situation in a telling manner."[16]Moreover, mimicry achieves, in itself, a double end. By this specific act of imiation, Bigger and Gus pretend integration within the white world, and by the same act attempt to tease and mock this world.

It becomes clear, then, that the vernacular in Wright's *Native Son* is not used gratuitously; it is functional, forit serves, primarily, to reflect the shattered self of the African-Americans, exemplified by Bigger. Through the use of two linguistic registers, Bigger is seen to embody two languages and two cultures, to none of them he totally belongs, and between which he keeps on vacillating. This is the inescapable destiny of the African-American, expressed through a variety of ways, among which figures the vernacular.

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[14] - Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 118.
[15]- Ibid., p. 48.
[16] - Ibid., p. 49.

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