

# On the Grammar of Afro-American Naming Practices

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IT IS WELL KNOWN that names are somehow related to grammar, and it is often suspected that linguistics may somehow be able to furnish the solution to any grammatical problem. Francis Lee Utley has dealt in general terms with the relationship between linguistics and names,<sup>1</sup> with some suggestion of syntactic analysis – limited therein, however, primarily to such formulations as that regarding co-occurrence of articles with naming nouns. The present essay deals with a more specific naming problem, limited to what is regarded for these purposes as one specific community, and with a somewhat broader approach to syntactic analysis.

The community selected may be called a part of the Afro-American (in the Herskovitsian sense) community, although the discussion here is limited almost entirely to the Negro community within the United States. Although I believe that a wider discussion of naming practices within an Afro-American cultural group would be valuable, the paper will center on the names of store-front churches in the Negro community in the U.S. It is the belief here that these naming practices are a peripheral manifestation of the linguistic differences which have motivated Stewart<sup>2</sup> to write of the language of the “culturally disadvantaged Negroes of a lower socio-economic stratum” as a “quasi-foreign language.” The differences between these church naming practices and those of standard English speaking communities is obvious to anyone looking over a list of names.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, ghetto naming practices are not characteristic of middle-class Negroes closer to the mainstream of American culture – and

<sup>1</sup> “The Linguistic Component of Onomastics,” *Names*, XI (1963), 145–176.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Stewart, *Non-Standard Speech and the Teaching of English*, Center for Applied Linguistics (Washington, D.C., 1964).

<sup>3</sup> Excellent lists have been published by James B. Strong, “Chicago Store Front Churches: 1964,” *Names*, XII (1964), 127–128; and R. S. Noreen, “Ghetto Worship: A Study of Chicago Store Front Churches,” *Names*, XIII (1965), 19–38.

incidentally, speakers of standard American English. Obviously peripheral linguistic phenomena of Non-standard Negro English (NNE) are the result of orderly historical processes,<sup>4</sup> not of "distortion" of either language or naming practices by any presumptive ecological factors in the urban ghetto. Regrettably, but undeniably, the culturally and linguistically naive members of the mainstream culture tend to view such a list with amusement. Writers such as Octavus Roy Cohen<sup>5</sup> and the creators of the even less accurate Amos n' Andy comedy show<sup>6</sup> have given unfortunate emphases to such tendencies. Although distressing from the point of view of racial relations, there is a core of fact upon which they could build.

It is my belief that there is a causative analogy between the humorous reactions felt toward NNE naming practices and the "Spanglish" naming practices in Puerto Rico.<sup>7</sup> The primary difference is that the isolation and description of the interfering language is a much subtler and more difficult problem where NNE is concerned.

Using the native mainstream speaker's reaction as a kind of linguistic discovery device, we may begin analyzing names on the order of

SACRED HEART SPIRITUAL CHURCH  
OF JESUS CHRIST, INC.

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<sup>4</sup> For a perceptive preliminary statement of the historical pattern indicated (creolization of a slave pidgin by field servants of slavery days, the ancestors in most cases of ghetto inhabitants, with subsequent decreolization in most areas except for Gullah territory), see W. A. Stewart, "Sociolinguistic Factors in the History of American Negro Dialects", *Florida FL Reporter*, V: 2 (Spring, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> See Inez Lopez Cohen, (Mrs. Octavus Roy Cohen), *Our Darktown Press* (New York, 1932).

<sup>6</sup> See, however, Marshall and Jean Stearns, "Frontiers of Humor: American Vernacular Dance," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, XXX (1966), 227-235, an article in which there is more than a suggestion that white "blackface" comedy is based upon a genuine Negro comic tradition. The Kingfish and his wife Sapphire of the Amos n' Andy show seem, on this evidence, to be modeled upon Stringbean and Sweetie May or Butterbeans and Susie. The store front church names under discussion here are superficially similar to the *Mystic Knights of the Sea*, although a really good grammar of NNE naming practice would probably not generate that name. The Amos and Andy taxi cab company, *The Fresh Air Taxicab Company of America* "Incorporated" is an approximately equal mixture of real and phony traditions. (Charles J. Correll and Freeman F. Gosden, *Here They Are . . . Amos 'n' Andy* [New York, 1931], p. 163.)

<sup>7</sup> See my articles in *Names*, XII (1964), 98-102; and XIV (1966), 178-180.

(This is a genuine name – some noted in Appendix A are even longer and more complex.) Length might be the first objective factor to be isolated as “different” in some way. In the more ordinary syntactic terms, there is nothing particularly unusual structurally. A singular noun preceded by modifiers and followed by a prepositional modifier is customary. *Inc.* may mark a somewhat unusual lexical item in this particular context, but it certainly occurs where *Inc.* would occur in any normal firm name, so that only in its occurrence in the church-naming field of discourse is it in any way unusual in English.

However, some of the same reactions are produced by the following names, without *Inc.*:

TRAVELING SOULS SPIRITUAL CHURCH

(Washington, D.C.)

THE TRUE TABERNACLE CHURCH OF THE FIRST  
BORN (Washington, D.C.)

THE OLD SAMARITAN BAPTIST CHURCH

(Washington, D.C.)

THE TRUE LEE BAPTIST CHURCH (Dallas, Texas)

In order to cope with this problem in some kind of objective manner, a corpus of ghetto store front church names (Appendix A) from the Washington, D.C. area was selected and compared with 20 names (Appendix B) taken from traditional churches from the Washington metropolitan and surrounding areas, where the congregations are middle class, or mainly so, and mostly white. An attempt was made to study these names through a phrase structure analysis, primarily through the device of *branching*, right or left, with the word *church* (or *temple*, etc.) considered as head. This process involves simply selecting a noun as “head” – or nuclear component – by arbitrary if intuitively reasonable procedures and counting as “branching” structures any components which occur to the left or to the right. Conventionally, a prepositional phrase would be considered as one component, even though composed of three or four words; a one-word adjectival modifier of the head noun would also be considered as one component. It is, of course, possible to write more complicated “generative” formulas; but it hardly seems necessary in the course of this discussion.

For the store front churches, the left branching expansion was far more numerous. It was made of noun forms and other pre-modifiers of mainly the adjectival type, with the occurrence of other form classes not generally part of nominal structure in standard English. Concerning the number of pre-modifiers of the head, it can be seen that, where standard English tends to use not more than one to three pre-modifiers, store front churches generally use from three to five of them, e.g.,

CHESTER GRAHAM RESCUE MISSION  
EAST FRIENDSHIP BAPTIST CHURCH  
MOUNT SION CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL CHURCH  
MOUNT ZION UNITED HOLY CHURCH  
NEW MOUNT NEBO BAPTIST CHURCH  
THE OLD SAMARITAN BAPTIST CHURCH  
FIRST RISING MOUNT ZION BAPTIST CHURCH

Where right branching is concerned, differences in usage from what is usual in Standard English are often to be found. These discrepancies are mainly of the type where the head of the nominal group is followed by two prepositional phrases, sometimes containing as many as nine words in post-modifiers like these two prepositional phrases. This is clearly observable in the following:

CANNANITE (sic) TEMPLE OF THE CHURCH OF GOD  
CHURCH OF GOD OF TRUE HOLINESS  
THE CHURCH OF GOD UNIVERSAL HOLINESS NO. 1  
THE REFUGE CHURCH OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST  
OF THE APOSTOLIC FAITH

It will be noted of course, that these examples are not without left branching as well. The most usual case, indeed, is multiple branching, which may be the chief source of the intuition that these practices are different from those of standard English. There are frequent nominal strings which not only offer from three to four pre-modifiers – with the inclusion even of verb forms – but also a post-modifier consisting of two prepositional phrases. Examples are

THE HOLY EVANGELISTIC CHURCH NO. 2 OF  
NORTH AMERICA

THE SACRED HEART SPIRITUAL CHURCH OF  
 JESUS CHRIST, INC.  
 MOUNT CALVARY HOLINESS CHURCH OF  
 DELIVERANCE OF THE APOSTOLIC FAITH  
 BETHLEHEM FIRE BAPTIZE HOLINESS CHURCH  
 OF GOD OF THE AMERICANS

The "traditional" churches chosen for this comparison do have much more simplified names (see Appendix B), than those of the Negro store-front churches. It will be noted, particularly, that right-branching is an uncommon device; where utilized, it consists entirely of institutionalized sequences like *of the Latter-day Saints* and *of Jehovah's Witnesses*. Although the traditional, predominantly white middle class churches display both right and left-branching, the former is quite limited. Multiple branching is almost nonexistent, except where there are institutionalized forms on the right.

Noticeable differences are to be found in the number of pre-modifiers of the head of the nominal group. In opposition to the four and even five pre-modifiers of Negro store front churches, the traditional ones do not appear to favor long strings of pre-modifiers. Three appears to be the maximum in this limited comparative list, with a frequency of usage of only one or two pre-modifiers being the most common. Most modifiers tend to be limited to the institutionalized forms.

A facile assumption would be that the store front church naming practice reflects a kind of exuberance of language – and, elsewhere popular writers apply such terms as *exuberant*<sup>8</sup> to the Afro-American dialects. After checking hundreds of city telephone books (including those from certain cities in the South where Baptist churches, for example, are still listed under *Negro* and *White*), I am inclined to believe that, insofar as *exuberant* has implications of "spontaneous improvisation", the truth may be a more pedestrianly grammatical one. Components like *Bethel (Church of XYZ)* recur very frequently, modified into *New Bethel XYZ* and *Greater New Bethel XYZ No. 2*, etc. As is the case with NNE in general, the components do not differ from those of SE; it is the putting together, the syntax, which differs. (A striking non-onomastic case is NNE *You been*

<sup>8</sup> Noreen, p. 19, writes of the "vitality and imagination expressed in the names of these churches," compared to which "traditional church names of established, sophisticated denominations are somber and colorless."

know that.) A few cases of deviational morphology (*Fire Baptize* in store front names; *he brother* in the NNE of relatively early age grades,<sup>9</sup>) call attention to themselves rather strikingly, yet their complete implications are not apparent until they have been placed in the total context. Admittedly this paper is only a halting first step in that placing in context for store front church naming practices. By implication, however, it would extend to other naming practices.

An additional dimension in grammatical complexity is suggested by a few names in Noreen's list

THE LORD IS ABLE HOUSE OF PRAYER  
LOOK AND LIVE COMMUNITY CHURCH  
RISE AND SUN SPIRITUAL CHURCH

where the first, particularly, is grammatically unlike the names of middle class churches. All three examples are apparently unembedded sentences, the last two being imperatives (not so unusual, admittedly, in Standard English naming practices as is the first) and the last being perhaps an original *Rising Sun* which was made to conform to the pattern. The use of the untransformed sentence as a modifier is the feature which I wish to call attention to, and hesitantly to compare to naming practices of the same type in West Africa and in the Caribbean. These are vehicles, and the head noun which would presumably be modified by the sentence is usually not overtly expressed. It would be easy to supply *Bus*, *Mammy Wagon*, *Voiture* or some other such name. *Bus* ("Mammy Wagon") names from West Africa include

People Will Talk of You<sup>10</sup>  
Love is Nice  
Life is War  
All Shall Pass<sup>11</sup>  
If It Must It Will<sup>12</sup>  
Rien n'est total dans la vie<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Noreen, p. 26, cites *State Street Move of God Church*, where *Move* is apparently *mother* — reflecting a well-known and very widespread NNE dialect pronunciation.

<sup>10</sup> Jan Harold Brunvand, "A Note on Names for Cars," *Names*, X (1962), 279–284.

<sup>11</sup> N. T. Keeney, "The Winds of Freedom Stir a Continent," *National Geographic*, Vol. 118, No. 3 (Sept. 1960), 303–359.

(Footnotes 12 and 13, see page 236)

even omitting the very frequent use of imperative sentences in such function. Equivalent unembedded sentences used in naming structures, again apparently without head noun, occur in Martiniquan canoe names

Dieu Seul Sait

Le Jour est Arrive

Ç.A.Q.F.CA Ç. D. LAR D

(Initial name, interpreted by owner as "Ça qui fait ça a cent dollars")<sup>14</sup>

Whether these naming patterns are to be explained as cultural survivals or in some other way, they provide interesting departures from "traditional" (European) naming practices.

#### APPENDIX A

The Bible Way Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ World Wide, Inc.  
 Bethel Commandment Church of the Living God  
 Bethlehem Fire Baptize Holiness Church of God of the Americans  
 Brookland Union Baptist Church  
 Brown Memorial AME Church  
 Cannanite (sic) Temple of the Church of God  
 Chester Graham Rescue Mission  
 Church of God of True Holiness  
 Deliverance Church of God in Son  
 Emmanuel Church of God in Christ  
 East Friendship Baptist Church  
 First Rising Mount Zion Baptist Church  
 Full Speed Gospel Church  
 Georgetown Psychic Healing Church  
 Gospel Union Church of Christ  
 Gospelite Full Gospel Church  
 Holy Mount Olives Church of Christ of the Apostolic Faith  
 International Constitutional Church Organizational  
 Marantha Gospel Hall  
 Montell Avenue Baptist Church  
 Mount Calvary Holiness Church of Deliverance of the Apostolic Faith  
 Mount Pleasant Baptist Church Inc.

<sup>12</sup> Langston Hughes, *An African Treasury* (New York, 1960).

<sup>13</sup> J. L. Dillard, *Afro-American and Other Vehicle Names*, Institute of Caribbean Studies, Special Study No. 1 (March 1965). Several other names of this type, primarily from Haiti, are included.

<sup>14</sup> Richard and Sally Price, "A Note on Canoe Names in Martinique," *Names*, XIV (1966), 160.

Mount Tabor Baptist Church  
Mount Zion United Holy Church  
New Bethel Baptist Church  
New Mount Nebo Baptist Church  
Old Way Baptist Church  
Peoples Church  
Royal Fellowship Center  
Second Eureka Baptist Church  
The Church of God Universal Holiness No. 1  
The Full Gospel Baptist Church  
The Holy Evangelistic Church No. 2 of North America  
The Old Samaritan Baptist Church  
The Refuge Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith  
The Sacred Heart Spiritual Church of Jesus Christ, Inc.  
True Baptist Church  
United House of Prayer

APPENDIX B\*

Foundry Methodist Church  
Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul  
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church  
St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses  
Washington Cathedral  
Church of the Epiphany  
Walker Methodist Church  
St. Dominic's Church  
The National Methodist Church  
Metropolitan Memorial Methodist Church  
Grace Lutheran Church  
Epiphany Episcopal Church  
St. John's Church  
Trinity Episcopal Church  
St. Agnes Catholic Church  
St. Mary's Church  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church  
Langley Hill Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

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\* Appendix B is shorter than Appendix A because of special conditions in the District of Columbia, which make it difficult to find "traditional" churches about which one can be certain that there is no mixture of store-front tradition. A few articles have appeared on names of "traditional" churches; e.g., Charles A. Ferguson, "Saints' Names in American Lutheran Church Dedications," *Names*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (June, 1966), pp. 76-82.