

1-10-2021

## The Language Surrounding Huckleberry Finn's Jim

Tristan Quinn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Quinn, Tristan (2021) "The Language Surrounding Huckleberry Finn's Jim," *Emerging Writers*: Vol. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters/vol3/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Emerging Writers by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

Tristan Quinn

Third-Place Winner

Academic Category

2019-2020 Emerging Writers Contest

### The Language Surrounding *Huckleberry Finn's* Jim

The n-word is a derogatory word with a history that stretches back to the era of African American enslavement in the United States. It has been a point of controversy for decades, and one work that has contributed greatly to this controversy is Mark Twain's American classic, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In order to illustrate the offensive nature of the word, I have used the word multiple times, and I have redacted all the following instances with Xs. The story follows the exploits of a young white boy named Huckleberry Finn, or Huck, and the African American slave known as Jim, who is just introduced as "Miss Watsons's big [XXXXXX]" (Twain 22), as they go up and down the Mississippi River. Over the course of their journey, Huck begins to accept Jim more as an equal human being rather than just another slave.

The book has long been a center of controversy mainly due to how Twain develops the character Jim's identity, particularly concerning Twain's use of racially offensive language. Some believe that Twain's inclusion of stereotypes into Jim's 19<sup>th</sup> century African American slave identity promotes a negative racial perspective, regardless of whether such stereotypes were intentionally included or done unwittingly. Others claim that Twain presents a historically accurate depiction of an African American slave during the time despite the established

prevalence of stereotypes in American society. Over the years, the ethical standards and understanding of language have since evolved. The views and opinions of modern readers are significantly different from readers of Twain's time.

It is commonly understood that one of most characterizing features of Jim's identity is the speech that surrounds him. When reading *Huckleberry Finn*, failing to notice the use of a certain derogatory word is, in any case, impossible. The word XXXXXX is perhaps one of the most offensive words in the English language and the reason why *Huckleberry Finn* remains one of the most challenged books in the United States, with exactly 211 uses of the word throughout the book (Sloane 71). Usually intended to reference Jim, the word is considered demeaning not only towards the novel's characters, but also towards African American identity as a whole. The XXXXXX gained widespread use during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the African slave trade (Sloane 71), leading to the word's association with racial inferiority. In CBS's transcript of *60 Minutes* episode "'Huckleberry Finn' and the N-Word Debate," University of Oregon instructor David Bradley explains that, "[... XXXXXX] has to do with shame. [XXXXXX] has to do with calling somebody something. [XXXXXX] was what made slavery possible" (3). The historical connotations of the XXXXXX causes *Huckleberry Finn* to be an emotionally challenging read for descendants of African American slaves, even disturbing those who do not identify as African American.

One section reader may find disturbing is Huck's earliest description of Jim's behavior, which is a result Tom taking off the sleeping Jim's hat and moving it to a nearby tree limb as a prank (Twain 23). According to Huck, Jim became the most revered XXXXXX in the country as he bragged to the others about being taken away by witches and the five-cent coin given to him directly from the devil (Twain 24). This description is possibly the most dehumanizing reference

to African Americans in the book. In a time when Christianity was a necessary part of the community and witches were considered emissaries of the devil, Twain uses the XXXXXX to create a link between African Americans and the devil. As all Christians know, the devil is a representation of all things evil and immoral and something proper human beings would strive to avoid association with. Jim's status among the other African Americans and the pride he takes in his story suggests that African Americans admire the devil. The allusion drawn from Huck's description is dangerously damaging to African American identity as it portrays the people as harboring an innate immorality. While under the care of the Widow Douglas, Huck even mentions that being civilized involves learning about religion and wanting to go to "the good place" (Twain 19). So, the open reverence and awe for witches and the devil gives whites justification for using the XXXXXX to suggest that blacks are an uncivilized and inferior people. Whether in the modern era or the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the XXXXXX remains a powerful symbol of the oppression faced by African Americans such as Jim. However, while uncomfortable, the language Twain uses to create Jim's identity should not solely focus on the XXXXXX.

Identities are formed through the perceptions and beliefs of others. The way that people talk about specific groups also becomes a part of identity. This form of identity is felt more intensely with groups that are heavily stigmatized. An example would be speakers of non-standard dialects who are attacked with stereotypes resulting from the "out-group homogeneity effect" (Edwards 26) produced by socially-superior groups. In *Huck Finn*, Huck meets Tom's Aunt Sally who mistakes him for Tom and questions him about the arrival of the river boat. Not being Tom and not having taken the boat, Huck makes up a story of a riverboat accident that killed an African American. Aunt Sally responds that it was lucky that no one was hurt (Twain 280). Huck and Aunt Sally refer to the commonly accepted belief that African Americans are

inherently subhuman, expendable, and stupid, and immoral (Smith 5). In other words, African Americans are stereotyped and considered outsiders to those that identify as white. But, as seen with Huck's narration and interaction with Jim through the story, he does not fully believe in this idea and is only speaking according to context.

In a similar example where the XXXXXX now refers to Jim, Huck arrives at the Phelps's Sawmill and encounters the duke, one of the two conmen Huck and Jim meet during their journey. Huck claims that the king, the other conman and the duke's partner, stole the raft and his "[XXXXXX]," which was his only property that he wants back (Twain 273). Huck's language here is a strong example of the relationship between language, identity, and social context. As explained in chapter 5.4 of Jess K. Alberts's book, *Human Communication in Society*, "[c]ulture impacts verbal communication primarily through its influence on language and perception (par. 1). One aspect of cultural influence that Albert discusses is the Cocultural Theory, which describes the influence of power and social hierarchy on language. The theory explains: the privileged groups of a social hierarchy define social norms, values, and language; language enforces the power of these groups; expectations are imposed on the language of specific social groups; and people whose speech does not reflect social values, or not conform to norms, may be excluded and stereotyped and their progress in society hindered (Albert ch. 5.4, par. 6-11).

In the example, initially, it seems that Huck has regressed to his original character at the beginning of the book, where he was very aligned with the identity of Southern whites. Using the XXXXXX and calling Jim his property also parallels his initial introduction of Jim as Miss Watson's property. But, Huck is keeping in mind the social norms of the time while subtly expressing his concerns for Jim's safety. The norm being that whites are superior to blacks and

any black person is, by default, someone's property. The social expectations of white people are that their language will enforce these norms. By expressing the norms in his language and following social expectations, Huck is able to effectively communicate and subtly express his desire for Jim to return safely while maintaining the duke's perception of Jim's identity as a piece of property the owner wants back. If Huck were to say that the king stole his raft and abducted his black friend, then the identity of Jim that Huck gives would have conflicted with the perception of Jim in the duke's mind. According to Cocultural Theory, Huck would be stigmatized for opposing norms and his search for Jim inhibited by those around him, likely resulting in him never seeing Jim again. Therefore, Huck's seemingly racist statement is actually expressing concern for Jim's safety and denying the previously mentioned belief that African Americans are expendable.

Equally as important as the language directed towards Jim is the language from Jim himself. From Jim's dialect it can be seen that Twain is drawing on African American stereotypes. Given the heavy influence of minstrelsy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that introduced caricatures such as Jim Crow and Dandy Jim (Mahar 284), Twain would have been using the stereotyped minstrel dialect to enforce negative perceptions of African Americans. The purpose of minstrel language is to support mocking minstrel characterizations that portrayed African Americans as intellectually inept and unable to learn the standard English dialect. Some critics claim that Twain's frequent visits to minstrel shows has undermined the development of characters like Jim (Minnick 120). Comparing the dialects used by Jim and other white characters enforces this. The most evident comparison would be with Jim's owner, Miss Watson. Miss Watson is the sister of the Widow Douglas and portrayed as being strict with Huck on his manners, academic studies, and religion. She is repeatedly quoted by Huck to display her

displeasure with his behavior. When Huck attempts to throw salt over his shoulder to keep away bad luck, he quotes her reprimand, ““Take your hands away, Huckleberry; what a mess you are always making!”” (Twain 35). Twain expresses Miss Watson’s fluency in the English language with the proper spelling of all her words, which shows that she has proper pronunciation. On the other hand, Jim’s speech is the almost complete opposite. After faking his death, Huck startles Jim with his appearance. Thinking Huck is a ghost, Jim pleads for his life and for Huck’s spirit to rest peacefully, saying, ““You go en git in de river agin, whah you b’longs, en doan’ do nuffn to Ole Jim, ‘at ‘uz awluz yo’ fren’”” (Twain 67). The butchered spelling of most words and apostrophes inserted into the speech regularly emphasize Jim’s failure to properly pronounce English words. This butchered form of dialect also makes comprehending Jim’s speech challenging for new readers. Even Pap, Huck’s father and a town drunk, is able to speak English more fluently than Jim. When Pap is berating Huck for going to school he states, ““None of the family couldn’t [read or write] before *they* died. I can’t; and here you’re a-swelling yourself up like this”” (Twain 40).

Despite both characters lack of literacy and formal education and Pap’s perpetual drinking problem, Twain’s use of language indicates Pap’s ability to almost speak proper English. There exist no shortened or alternatively spelled words and the structure of his speech is considerably better than Jim’s. The is strange because while Pap has spent most of his time drinking, Jim has spent most of his time following the orders of two educated and well-spoken women. Twain shows a bias in the language of black and white characters that parallels the bias shown in black minstrelsy and diverges from his statement of precision found in the opening notes of the book. Therefore, Twain’s implementation of Jim’s dialect is likely meant to show a Jim’s lack of education and inability to learn the proper English dialect. If Jim’s dialect is related

to African American Vernacular English (AAVE), then Twain's ethical shortcoming become clearer. AAVE is one of the most stigmatized dialects of the English language and racist perceptions often cause AAVE speakers to be labeled as language deficient and retarded (Edwards 77). This stigma is similar to the false representations of African American slaves and just as hurtful towards the African American identity.

The dialect that is used for Jim is indeed further from standard English than the dialects used for white characters. However, through dialect, Twain is attempting to create an identity for Jim that accurately represents that era. In *Huck Finn*, one of the main ways that Twain attempts to express Jim's character is through his language. To accomplish this form of characterization, Twain extensively utilizes eye dialect throughout the novel. Eye dialect is defined as "(The use of) nonstandard respelling [...] to represent dialectal or colloquial pronunciation [...], or standard pronunciation not predictable from regular orthography" ("Eye Dialect"). He states in the book's opening explanatory notes that for each form of speech, including the African American Missouri dialect, "[t]he shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guess-work; but pains-takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech" (4). Twain's intent is to formulate characters with language patterns that represent an identity as close to reality as possible. His genuine representation of African American speech is important because it contrasts with the ridiculing representations of Black English promoted by the widely popular minstrel shows of the era. These shows grew increasingly stereotypical during the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century as comedians replaced the previously Black English-based stage dialects with a more conventional stage dialect better suited for a variety of caricatures (Mahar 262-263). The trend led to the more

familiar image of the minstrel shows being comedies containing simplified and inaccurate portrayals of African Americans' behavior and speech in order to showcase inferiority to whites

Twain acknowledges the possible stereotyped views that could emerge from his dialects when he mentioned that without his explanatory, many would believe the characters to be consistently failing to communicate in the same dialect (4). Unfortunately, his personal claim is not enough to determine the possible degree of stereotyping in the African American dialect used for Jim. To determine the degree of authenticity of Twain's eye dialect, Lisa Cohen Minnick identifies what she determined to be the thirty-five most notable grammatical and phonological features of AAVE speakers in her article, Jim's language and the issue of race in *Huckleberry Finn* (117). She compares the AAVE features to the grammatical and phonological features found in Jim's Missouri dialect and concludes that there is enough similarity between Jim's direct speech and the selected set of AAVE features that Twain's claim is defensible (118). For example, from the list of AAVE grammatical features, Jim frequently uses multiple negation in sentences like, "I couldn' get nuffin else.(47)" (qtd. in Minnick 127). And from the list of phonological features, Jim's dialect uses "en" for "and" and "doan" for "don't" (Minnick 123). Minnick's research showing that Jim's dialect is not as stereotypical as it can seem enforces Twain's claim that he tried to make Jim's dialect as accurate as possible. Her research is supported by the neo-Anglicist Hypothesis of AAVE, that states that African American communities developed a dialect that diverged from postcolonial British English dialects (Wolfram 284). The other two hypotheses are the Creole hypothesis, where AAVE developed from African American creole languages around the state, and the Anglicist Hypothesis, where AAVE is directly derived from British dialects and identical to rural Southern white speech (Wolfram 284). The latter two hypotheses are inappropriate because Jim clearly speaks an

English dialect and his dialect is distinct from the dialects used by the white characters. Due to Minnick's supportive research, Jim's identity becomes a more genuine representation of a 19<sup>th</sup> century African American slave.

One of the most essential components of identity is language. The use of language and communication is how an identity is defined and how an identity is perceived by others. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the identity of the character Jim contrasts with African American stereotypes through the language used by the character himself and through the language used by other characters to describe him. Twain's use of language to describe Jim contributes towards an identity that authentically represents 19<sup>th</sup> century African American slaves. And despite frequent challenges and regional bans, his book will remain an outstanding example of classic American literature showing modern readers the importance of language in identity.

## Works Cited

- Alberts, Jess K. *Human Communication in Society*. Pearson Education, Inc., 2019, *Pearson Revel*, [revel-ise.pearson.com](http://revel-ise.pearson.com).
- Edwards, John. *Language and Identity: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, *Kindle Cloud Reader*, [read.amazon.com](http://read.amazon.com).
- “Eye Dialect: Definition of Eye Dialect by Lexico.” *Lexico Dictionaries | English*, Oxford University Press, [www.lexico.com/en/definition/eye\\_dialect](http://www.lexico.com/en/definition/eye_dialect). Accessed 6 Nov. 2019.
- “‘Huckleberry Finn’ and the N-Word Debate.” *60 Minutes*, CBS Interactive, 12 June 2011, [www.cbsnews.com/news/huckleberry-finn-and-the-n-word-debate/3/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/huckleberry-finn-and-the-n-word-debate/3/).
- Mahar, William J. “Black English in Early Blackface Minstrelsy: A New Interpretation of the Sources of Minstrel Show Dialect.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1985, pp. 260–285., [www.jstor.org/stable/2712901](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712901).
- Minnick, Lisa Cohen. “Jim's Language and the Issue of Race in Huckleberry Finn.” *Language and Literature*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2001, pp. 111–128., doi:10.1177/0963-9470-20011002-02.
- Sloane, David E. E. “The N-Word in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Reconsidered.” *The Mark Twain Annual*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, pp. 70–82. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/marktwaij.12.1.0070](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/marktwaij.12.1.0070).
- Smith, David L. “Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse.” *Mark Twain Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1984, pp. 4–12. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/41641246](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41641246).
- Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Library of Congress, [read.gov/books/huckfinn.html](http://read.gov/books/huckfinn.html). Accessed 13 Oct. 2019.

Wolfram, Walt. "Reexamining the Development of African American English: Evidence from Isolated Communities." *Language*, vol. 79, no. 2, 2003, pp. 282–316. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/4489420](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489420).