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Black *Langue* and White *Parole*

Signifiers and Signifieds in the Grammar of Racism

Abstract

Our paper aims to carry out a stylistic and linguistic study of the representation of cultural, racial and linguistic hegemony (Gramsci 1975) in Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad (2016). First of all, we will use Simpson's (1993) point of view framework to analyse the representation of the slave identity through the eyes of the protagonists as filtered by the narrator but also that of the white masters, especially in their dialogical contacts with the black characters. Point of view will be studied in particular with reference to the characters' perspectives in moments of doubt, to illustrate how they question the American society of the time. Secondly, we will discuss Whitehead's linguistic depiction of white oppression and black subordination. The author normally translates the slaves' dialect into standard English (leaving, nonetheless, some occasional vernacular elements to preserve the 'spirit' of the original) apparently disregarding linguistic 'authenticity.' However, he shows episodes where there is a contrast between the idiolects of the characters who take part in a dialogue (generally in conversations between black characters and the white man) and instances where such contrast is absent (usually in dialogues between black characters only). Our twofold hypothesis is that the overwhelming prevalence of white over 'incorrect' black parole not only makes the text more comprehensible to a wider public, but it also shows how, by delegitimizing black speech, the white master enforces his hegemony, which, according to Gramsci (2014), can be more effectively sustained "through cultural leadership" (Dale Parker 2008, 218). All in all, our analysis will attempt to show how the racism issue addressed through the stylistics and dialect theoretical frameworks manages to show the impact of hegemonic forces on social and cultural relations.

Keywords: *hegemony, modality, AAVE, coloring ear, multilingualism*

Break through the wall!

Find my dream!

Help me to shatter this darkness,

To smash this night.

(Langston Hughes, *As I Grew Older*)

*The Underground Railroad*¹ (Whitehead 2016) received the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2017. The novel narrates the predicaments of the 19th century slave girl Cora and her attempts at fleeing her terrible conditions. In her journey, she relies on her wit and strength to rebel against the violence and predominance of white and black men—be them slaves or freemen (Fodde and Pesci 2021). However, the book does not merely tell of the simple quest for freedom of a young black slave, though witty and full of physical and inner strength. In the prize motivations, we read that the novel was chosen “for a smart melding of realism and allegory that combines the violence of slavery and the drama of escape in a myth that speaks to contemporary America” (The Pulitzer Prizes 2017). The present authors aim to study such smart melding from a linguistic point of view, looking at how the protagonist’s journey is embedded with and by changes of rational and irrational perspectives, on the one hand, and changes in the use of dialect varieties on the other, which in turn interestingly match such perspectives.

Section 1 of the present work will concentrate on the psychological shifts in Cora’s stance and perspective towards her tragic fate—her modal journey, as we have called it—by referring specifically to Paul Simpson’s theories on point of view (Simpson 1993). The changes in the use of dialect varieties characterizing the complex socio-linguistic architecture of *The Underground Railroad*² will be illustrated in Section 2. Here we will introduce the concept of ‘grammar of racism’ which follows the evolution of the protagonist’s idiolect according to a set of adjustments she adopts—either consciously or not—depending on the several topical events of her life.

The grammar of racism, like any other grammar, has its own rules. Cora needs to learn them in order to consciously master them—maybe break them—and surely adapt them according to the events marking her quest towards freedom, symbolically and physically represented by the Underground Railroad.

As is well known, the Underground Railroad was a network of people, African American as well as white, offering refuge and aid to fugitive slaves from the South. The exact dates of its existence are not known, but it operated from the late 18th century to the Civil War. The fugitives were taken to stations by any available means of transport; they did not know the names of their guides nor the location of each station they hit during their trip north. By the 1840s, the term ‘Underground Railroad’ was part of the American vernacular (History.com

¹ Although the present work was conceived as a whole by the two authors, the Introduction and Section 1 are to be attributed to Luisanna Fodde, while Section 2 and the Conclusions are the work of Alessio Pesci.

² From now on *TUR*.

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In the novel, the Underground Railroad is both the physical means through and thanks to which Cora attempts and finally succeeds in escaping, but also her reason for hope and survival. However, before getting to such a realization, to the mere idea that such a network of good people and transport existed, she had to deal daily with her tragic predicament:

Sometimes a slave will be lost in a brief eddy of liberation. In the sway of a sudden reverie among the furrows or while untangling the mysteries of an early-morning dream. In the middle of a song on a warm Sunday night. Then it comes, always—the overseer’s cry, the call to work, the shadow of the master, the reminder that she is only a human being for a tiny moment across the eternity of her servitude. (Whitehead 2016, 29)

1. Cora’s modal journey

To analyse Cora’s journey towards freedom, from the poignant realization of her miserable conditions to her feeble hopes for emancipation, this chapter will take advantage of Paul Simpson’s theory of point of view (Simpson 1993). In particular, we will consider his reference to the Reflector Mode (B). The term identifies the character whose point of view is represented in the text. According to Simpson, the Reflector Mode may appear in a narrative in three possible shadings: positive (deontic and boulomaic systems foregrounded), which illustrates the reflector’s opinions, wishes and obligations mediated by the narrator in the third person; negative (epistemic and perception systems foregrounded), which appears in moments of confusion or indecision to represent the reflector’s doubts and insecurity; neutral (unmodalized) where the reflector is only apparently taking an objective stance, and where events are told dispassionately (Simpson 1993, 62-76).

In the extract showed at the end of the Introduction, we are in the presence of the Reflector Mode in the neutral shading, B(R) neutral, which, according to Simpson, “tends to be the most impersonal, with the narrator providing little or no modalized language” (Simpson 1993, 67). Characterized by the lack of causal or adversative conjunctions, as in this case, this passage also confirms the predominance of categorical assertions, another typical feature of the B(R) neutral, which points at the dramatic and fatal conditions of being in bondage.

When Cora and Caesar—her friend, mentor, and guide—decide to escape, all her certainties start to crumble. She is now in unknown territory, having to meet and trust people, both white and black, a situation she has never dealt with before. The next passage shows an example of the Reflector Mode in the negative shading, B(R) negative, characterized by a high level of

epistemic and perception modality that according to Simpson generates “a comparable quality of ‘alienation’ and ‘bewilderment’” (Simpson 1993, 65):

The underground railroad—Caesar had been very busy. **Did they really operate this deep in Georgia?**³ The idea of escape overwhelmed her. Apart from her own preparations, **how would they alert the railroad in time?** Caesar had no pretext on which to leave the grounds until Sunday. He told her that their escape would cause such a ruckus that there would be no need to alert his man. (Whitehead 2016, 50)

The reflector (Cora) is here considered as the “site of epistemic and perception modalities” (Simpson 1993, 66):

Before they could figure his words, Fletcher [an Underground Railroad agent] informed them it was time for him to return to his wife: “My part is finished, my friends.” He embraced the runaways with desperate affection. Cora couldn’t help but shrink away. Two white men in two days had their hands around her. **Was this a condition of her freedom?** (Whitehead 2016, 66)

In her quest for freedom Cora is recaptured twice by Ridgeway (a slave catcher). However, on both occasions she manages to escape before being brought back to her original plantation and to her old masters. Yet, each time she experiences the new realities of freedom, she grows more aware of her destiny, of her conditions and of the inevitability of her attempts and she becomes stronger and bolder. After fleeing from the plantation, she reaches an unknown town in South Carolina, where she gets a job first as a housemaid and then, later, thanks to her merits, at the museum of Natural Wonders, because they need “a special kind of girl [...] and not many of the residents have adapted as well as [she has]” (2016, 107). For the first time in her life, she has a salary and people treat her with a new kind of respect which was unimaginable when she was in Georgia. Thus, she tricks herself into thinking that, after all, she has really made it and is finally free from bondage, so much so that she and Caesar seriously consider the possibility of settling down in South Carolina for good. She has changed so much that she even thinks she can defy a white woman:

One day **she decided** to retaliate against a red-haired white woman who scowled at the sight of Cora’s duties at sea. **Perhaps** the woman had wed a seaman of incorrigible appetites and hated the reminder—Cora didn’t know the source of her animus, or care. (Whitehead 2016, 125)

³ From now on bold texts are to be intended as emphasis of the present authors.

The point of view is now in the positive shading, B(R) positive. The narrator is almost invisible, non-participating, with foregrounded deontic and boulomaic modality (e.g., ‘she decided...,’ ‘she didn’t care...’). However, deep down inside Cora knows, maybe only unconsciously, that she is not free yet, and with good reason: unknown to her, Ridgeway, the slave catcher engaged by her master to find her, has not given up his job and gets closer by the day. Consequently, now and then a shadow of doubt mars her certainties, and when this happens we have a rebound towards the negative shading, expressing her constant doubts and fear. Sometimes the relapse is caused by trivial matters like in the passage above (“**perhaps** the woman...”); some other times it is brought about by more pressing issues, like in the following extract:

Once Valentine lay before her in its seductive plenty, **there was no question of Cora leaving**. She contributed to the life of the farm. This was labor she recognized, she understood the elemental rhythms of planting and harvest, the lessons and imperatives of the shifting seasons. Her visions of city life clouded—**what did she know about places like New York City and Boston? She’d grown up with her hands in the dirt**. (Whitehead 2016, 266)

Here we find the same contrast, from positive to negative shading, from Cora’s resolved attitude not to leave the Valentine farm where she has found a new life among freed blacks (“**there was no question of Cora leaving**”), to the doubts which have accompanied her throughout the book (“**what did she know about places like New York City and Boston?**”)

Finally, in the pages that mark the dramatic breakthrough of the book, Cora and Ridgeway are together, going towards the ghost station of the Underground Railroad. She is torn, full of doubts about the place she has found:

There was only the darkness of the tunnel, and somewhere ahead, an exit. Or a dead end, if that’s what fate decreed—nothing but a blank, pitiless wall. The last bitter joke. [...] **Was she going deeper in or back from where she came?** (Whitehead 2016, 304)

The point of view is B(R) negative again. Cora is faced by many doubts, surrounded by the ghosts of those “who excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth for the deliverance of slaves like her” (Whitehead 2016, 303). However, her determination, her strength and willingness to never give up is predominant and the narrative shifts to the positive shading, with a short and poignant sentence, full of boulomaic modality: “[s]he’d find the terminus or die on the tracks” (Whitehead 2016, 304).

This dramatic passage gives the impression of closing down on Cora and her predicament. The

novel could end here, leaving the reader with the rightful awareness of a horrible destiny. However, there is more to this story and more to the analysis of the book, as we shall see in the following chapter which focuses on the analysis of the changes occurring in the protagonist's idiolect.

2. A sociolinguistic analysis of *TUR*

As pointed out at the end of the previous Section, the sentence “[s]he’d find the terminus or die on the tracks” seems to signal the dramatic end of the novel. However, it is not quite so: Cora does not die on the tracks. Eventually, she comes out of the tunnel to an unknown place: “[p]erhaps she wasn’t in America anymore but had pushed beyond it” (Whitehead 2016, 305). She then finds a trail and sees three wagons. The first and the second are driven by white men. She decides to stop the third one when she realizes that the coachman is an African American whose “eyes were kind” (2016, 306). He offers her food and a ride to her new life. This is what they say (the reflector is Cora):

“**You hungry?**” the man asked. He was from the south, from his voice.

“I’m very hungry,” Cora said.

“Come up and take something for yourself,” he said.

[...]

“There’s plenty,” he said. [...] “Shall we catch up?”

“That’s good,” she said.

He barked at the horses and they proceeded on the rut.

“**Where you going?**” Cora said.

“St. Louis. From there the trail to California. Us, and some people **we going** to meet in Missouri.” When she didn’t respond he said, “**You come from down south?**”

“I was in Georgia. I ran away.” She said her name was Cora. [...]

“I go by Ollie,” he said. (Whitehead 2016, 306)

It is the final dialogue in the novel, and it is mostly in Standard English, although there are some parts which deviate from the standard (e.g., “You hungry?” and “Where you going?”) This is how Cora used to speak when she was still a slave at the Randall plantation before and immediately after she ran away at the beginning of the story.⁴ However, many things have happened during her long and painful journey towards freedom, also from a linguistic perspective. As we shall see in Section 2.2, her idiolect changes over time: as a slave, she spoke the vernacular and she was illiterate; then, after her escape, she started to learn Standard English and how to read and write because, like many others, she thought that this was the key

⁴ See, for example, dialogue 1 in Section 3.

to permanent emancipation. She believed what Miss Lucy once told her: “the lessons in reading and writing [...] optional but recommended [are essential] in keeping with their mission of colored uplift” (Whitehead 2016, 98). The problem is that, especially in the South, white people are afraid of black people who speak and act like them, and think that they are too dangerous. That is why they want to destroy them, which is exactly what happens to the Valentine farm (a haven for former slaves and fugitives where Cora had lived for some months). For this reason, when she realizes how wrong she had been, she goes back to the vernacular she used at the beginning of her adventure.

The sociolinguistic architecture of the novel is extremely complex and it would be impossible to describe it thoroughly in just a few pages. Here, we will thus stick to a few basic elements. First of all, it must be pointed out that Whitehead’s Plantation English⁵ (Baugh 2007) is not authentic—slaves did not speak like this. It is rather a literary representation, similar in many ways to what can be found in the works of authors such as Toni Morrison—but not exactly the same—as can be seen by comparing the following examples:

Colson Whitehead – <i>TUR</i>	Toni Morrison – <i>Beloved</i>
“If he’s free, why don’t he go?” [Cora] (2016, 202)	“Grown don’t mean nothing to a mother. [...] In my heart it don’t mean a thing.” [Sethe] (2022, 59)
“ You going north and I’m going to eat,” she [Cora] said. (2016, 26)	“ You forgetting how little it is,” said her mother [Sethe]. (2022, 5)
“Your man ain’t the only one come around last night,” Sybil said. (2016, 281)	“I’ll protect her while I’m live and I’ll protect her when I ain’t .” [Sethe] (2022, 60)
“Molly didn’t make no sound,” Sybil said. (2016, 244)	“It wasn’t no whiteboy at all. Was a girl.” [Sethe] (2022, 42)
“ You sick and out of sight or you up and outside when Master Terrance come tomorrow.” [Nag] (2016, 38)	“We was talking ‘bout a tree, Sethe.” [Paul D] (2022, 21)

Tab. 1: Plantation English (Whitehead vs Morrison)

⁵ In the novel the narrator uses the expression “plantation speech” (in lower case). From now on, we will write “Plantation Speech” (in upper-case).

On the other hand, it is very different from the vernacular in novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) or Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Black Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), which may sound like a caricature to a modern reader:

“**Mose done, Mas'r** George,” said Aunt Chloe, lifting the lid and peeping in,—“**browning beautiful**—a real lovely brown. Ah! **let me alone** for **dat**. Missis let Sally try to make some cake, **t' other** day, **jes to larn her**, she said. ‘O, **go way**, Missis,’ said I; ‘it really hurts my **feelin's**, now, to see good vittles spilt **dat ar way!** **Cake ris** all to one side—no shape at all; no more than my shoe; **go way!**” (Beecher Stowe 1986, 69)

“Honey, it ‘**pears** when I can read **dis** good book I shall be nearer to God. White man **is got** all **de** sense. He can **larn easy**. It **ain't** easy for **de** black like me. I only **wants** to read **dis** book, **dat** I may know how to live. **Den I hab** no fear ‘**bout** dying.” (Jacobs 2009, 94)

Slave caricatures—intended and unintended—such as, for example, blackface travesties (Meer 2014, 81-86) are strongly condemned in the novel because, either wittingly or unwittingly, they ridicule slaves in ways which are often not only disrespectful but also very cruel. For instance, Mabel (Cora's mother) was forced to act in travesties “so imaginative in their monstrousness that the mind refused to accommodate them” (Whitehead 2016, 15). However, for the white man “this seemed to be the source of the humor” (2016, 157), and when Cora hears for the first time how “they molded their voices to exaggerate colored speech” (2016, 157) she does not seem to understand why white people find it funny. Moreover, “[t]he vignettes and parodies [...] about cranky old widows and simple darkies [...] confused her as much as the moral lessons in the holy book. Both described human behavior beyond her ken” (2016, 182).

Whitehead represents Plantation Speech by grafting syntactic and lexical elements taken from Afro-American Vernacular English (Fodde 2002; Mufwene et al. 2022; Rickford 1999) onto Standard English. However, most of the vernacular structures he selects to create his representation of Plantation Speech are normally found also in informal American English, which makes them easier to understand for readers not familiar with the vernacular. The following list, though incomplete, reports some of the main features:

- **Auxiliary deletion** → “**You going** north and I'm going to eat,” she [Cora] said. (Whitehead 2016, 26)
- **Non-inverted questions** (with auxiliary deletion) → “**When we going** to sleep?” Cora asked. (2016, 58)
- **Non-inverted questions** (without auxiliary deletion) → “**They're not** coming back?” [Cora] (2016, 127)

- **Negative concord** (multiple negation or pleonastic negation) → “Jasper **wasn’t** killed by **no** mob,” Cora said. (2016, 220)
- **Omission of the verb to be** → “**That my daddy’s** name. My mother, **she a** Randall.” [Cora] (2016, 97)
- **‘Ain’t’** → “How we know he **ain’t** tricking us?” [Cora] (2016, 53)
- **‘Gonna’** (instead of ‘going to’) → “What your mother **gonna** do?” Cora asked. (2016, 58)
- **Absence of the plural marker** → “**Lot** of folks, they fond of Canada now,” Lindsey said. (2016, 245)
- **Absence of the subject-verb agreement marker of the present tense third person singular** → “Call things by other names as if it changes what they are. But that **don’t** make them true.” [Cora] (2016, 220)
- **Use of plantation vocabulary** → “You taught these pickaninnies⁶ how to give a proper talk, that’s for sure.” [Cora] (2016, 239)

Authentic Plantation Speech is ‘translated’ into a fictitious variety which could be described as a slightly modified version of Standard English with a few vernacular elements grafted here and there (very easy to understand for a modern reader). We could say that most of the original ‘black’ signifieds—the ‘black’ *langue*—are represented by ‘white’ signifiers—the ‘white’ *parole*. However, some ‘black’ signifiers are left to preserve the ‘spirit’ of the original, while, at the same time, they constantly remind the reader that the text is a translation from a different variety. When all the interlocutors involved in a communicative event use some vernacular elements there is no contrast. These dialogues, which usually—but not always—involve only black characters, can be categorized as black *langue*/white *parole*, with no stigma attached. When not all the interlocutors use vernacular elements there is indeed a contrast: this occurs more frequently in dialogues between black people and white people, but in some instances also when only black characters are involved in the communicative event. In this case, the category is black *langue*/black *parole*, which is stigmatized.

Plantation Speech has its own rules and lexicon, and it can be used to communicate just like any other variety of English—if one is proficient enough. It is not ‘inferior.’ Unfortunately, however, it is still highly stigmatized, and an extensive use of it (such as, for example, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) might induce a more naïve reader to unwittingly fall into the trap of linguistic profiling (Baugh 2003), which “can have devastating consequences for those [...] who are

⁶ ‘Pickaninny’ instead of ‘child.’

perceived to speak with an undesirable accent or dialect” (2003, 155). Unfortunately, even to this day, racism is still deeply rooted in Western culture (even though some Westerners may not be aware of it). As a consequence of this, consciously or unconsciously, “[p]erceptions of intelligence, or the lack of it, are often deeply interwoven with perceptions about language, or specific dialects and accents within a particular language” (2003, 155). In other words, some readers may wrongly form the impression that if slaves ‘speak with an accent,’ then they also ‘think with an accent,’⁷ because even though “[a]n accent emerges initially as a lingual trace or evidence of difference, [eventually it] persists as the registration of the receiver’s situated knowledges and convictions” (Rangan et al 2023, 24), which may or may not be racist (wittingly or unwittingly). This is the addressee’s fault, because “[t]he ear does not simply receive sound; it is a ‘coloring ear’ that shades and racially encodes the voice” (Rangan et al 2023, 26). For this racist reason, a higher percentage of black *parole* elements might contribute to make the fictional Plantation Speech used in *TUR* sound like a caricature to a XXI century reader, as in Beecher Stowe’s novel, and thus, for the above reasons, contemporary writers tend to avoid this type of representation at all costs (Fodde 2010, 97-98; Milroy and Milroy 1987, 160): linguistic authenticity would obviously provide a more accurate rendition of the slave’s identity, but the ‘coloring ear’ would inevitably taint such rendition with racism, thus transforming the slave into an ‘inferior’ (sub)human being. However, as we shall see in Section 2.2, Whitehead uses the stigma attached to black *parole* in such a way so as to enable the reader to see the slaves through the eyes of their masters and to create a contrast between what they really are—ordinary human beings just like those who oppress them—and the way their masters regard them—as inferior and ‘ignorant.’⁸ Hence, the stigma is used against its perpetrators because the contrast thus created clearly reveals where real ignorance lies: with the white master, deafened by the ‘coloring ear’ and blinded by the ‘coloring eye’ and thus incapable of recognizing a fellow human being just because their skin is of a different colour and they speak with a different accent.

The ‘translation’ technique (each character’s own language or variety translated into the language of the book) and the use of some elements from other languages or varieties is very common in translingual and/or multilingual novels (Gilmour and Steinitz 2018; Hiddleston and

⁷ In the film *A Walk in The Clouds* (Arau 1995), the Mexican-American Alberto Aragón suspects that Paul Sutton, the man who his daughter (Victoria) introduced as her husband, has not really married her (while the viewer knows from the start that Victoria and Paul are just pretending to be married). When Alberto finally confronts Paul, he tells him: “don’t think that just because I speak with an accent, I think with an accent” (Arau 1995).

⁸ For instance, “Mrs. Garner [...] didn’t agree with the popular arguments for slavery but saw it as a necessary evil given the obvious intellectual deficiencies of the African tribe” (Whitehead 2016, 49).

Ouyang 2021; Jones et al. 2021) where some characters do not speak the same language or variety of the text. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that “[t]here is an intrinsic affinity between translation and multilingual literature, in so far as multilingual literature is ruled by explicit or implicit translational processes, while translation implies the very principle of literary multilingualism” (Knauth 2011, 3). For instance, Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904), which is set in Costaguana (a fictitious South American country), is written in English, even though most characters—Costaguaneros and immigrants from Italy and other parts of the world—do not speak this language in their daily lives. Thus, most dialogues which appear in English in the text are really translations from Spanish and Italian. Only the dialogues which involve exclusively British and American speakers do not need this type of mediation. For this reason, in a dialogue between Italian characters we usually find some Italian words and expressions here and there to remind us that, even though the dialogue is written in English, the characters involved are really speaking Italian (and so what we have in front of us is a translation).⁹

According to Rhys Trimble,

[p]lurilingual writing may emerge as a consequence of shifting political borders, the effects of colonialism and the subsequent creation of bicultural or bilingual environments, or through cross-border cultural exchange. As a formal literary method or practice, plurilingualism may be used by bi- or monolingual writers to produce a purposeful otherness in a text, or to underscore a degree of untranslatability, specificity or glitch. (2021, 52)

This approach in *TUR*, as we have seen, has the extra function of creating a contrast whose purpose is to make clear that there is a significant difference between what slaves really are and the way the white master regards them.

The quantity of Plantation Speech elements varies according to the context, the characters involved and the point of view (white reflector vs black reflector). Sometimes these elements create a contrast between the idiolects of the characters who take part in a dialogue, especially when one is black and the other is white, and sometimes they do not, especially when both characters are black. However, as we shall see in Section 2.2, there are also other options.

⁹ See, for instance, the following dialogue between Giorgio and Teresa (his wife), who are both Italian: “You go in at once, Giorgio,” she directed. “One would think you do not wish to have any pity on me—with four *Signori Inglesi* staying in the house.” “*Va bene, va bene,*” Giorgio would mutter. (Conrad 2007, 22)

2.1 *Language and slave literacy*

Language and slave literacy are pivotal issues in the novel because they seem to be crucial for emancipation, and the narrator openly deals with them on more than one occasion:

- Slaves “had been stolen from villages all over Africa and spoke a multitude of tongues” (Whitehead 2016, 95). Slave traders preferred not to have many captives from the same village on their ships because “[w]ho knew what brand of mutiny [they] might cook up if they shared a common tongue” (2016, 3). Then, once in America, “[t]he words from across the ocean were beaten out of them [...] to erase their identities, to smother uprisings” (2016, 95). The few expressions the white master was not able to obliterate “[t]hey keep ’em hid like precious gold” (2016, 95).
- As we previously pointed out, Cora believes that to become truly free she needs to learn Standard English and how to read and write. Thus, as soon as she reaches South Carolina (her first stop after fleeing from the Randall plantation) she starts going to school. She also decides “that in her new position she would avoid the cadences of plantation speech the best she could” (2016, 109). Without fully realizing what is happening to her, she acquires the ‘coloring ear’ and thus decides to erase her identity, which is exactly what the white master had once done to her ancestors.
- As Royal¹⁰ says, “[a] free black walks different than a slave [...]. White people recognize it immediately, even if they don’t know it. Walks different, talks different, carries himself different” (2016, 261). That is why, according to him, “[c]onstables never detained him and kidnappers kept their distance” (2016, 261).
- Cora is a very talented, eager and curious learner and “[a]s was her habit, [she] asked for help with words” (2016, 173), even though her supposedly ‘superior’ white teachers were not always able to provide an explanation. For example, when she was hiding in North Carolina “Martin admitted he didn’t know the meanings of *gainsay* and *ravening*” (2016, 173).
- Right before Cora is forced to escape from South Carolina, when Sam gives her the bulletin which contained the necessary information to identify and capture her, “[n]ow that she knew her letters, the word *murder* hooked her heart” (2016, 129).
- The former slave Gloria Valentine (John Valentine’s wife), who was “composed as if she’d gone to a finishing school for white ladies” (2016, 248), just like the protagonist

¹⁰ “[T]he first freeborn man Cora had ever met” (Whitehead 2016, 260).

“worked hard on eliminating her plantation inflections—Cora heard her slip when conversation took a folksy turn—but she was naturally impressive, whether she spoke colored or white” (2016, 248). This is clearly, by all means, a deliberate decision.

- Black literacy was considered as a major problem by the white oppressor. For Ridgeway (the slave catcher), “[i]t was a bother to be stopped on the road in a Free State when the lost property turned out to have a silver tongue. Get them off the plantation and they learned to read, it was a disease” (2016, 79).
- The narrator also refers to the diatopic and diastratic variations, which mark the boundaries of segregation even in free states like South Carolina: “[c]rossing a single street transformed the way people talked, determined the size and condition of the homes, the dimension and character of the dreams.” (2016, 170).

We could say that tasting freedom is like tasting the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Once you have savoured it, there is no turning back (with all the positive and negative consequences that this new situation implies). However, once they have bitten the apple, slaves acquire the ‘coloring ear’ and succumb to the spell of ‘white’ hegemony—in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci 2014)—and so they become aware of their ‘nakedness,’ of their Plantation Speech, and they feel ashamed. That is why they want ‘clothes’—‘white’ speech—to cover this nakedness, and they believe people like Miss Lucy when they tell them that Standard English is essential “in keeping with their mission of colored uplift” (Whitehead 2016, 98). However, they also long for their lost innocence, even though at the same time they hate it, because it came with the chains that bound them. To be really free, they believe they have to give up their identity and become ‘white.’ Unconsciously, under the influence of the newly acquired ‘coloring ear,’ they feel they cannot be truly unfettered if they use Plantation Speech.

The following Sections will focus on the analysis of some of the dialogues in the novel so as to illustrate and explain what the ‘grammar of racism’ mentioned in the title is, how it works and the way Cora is finally able to ‘break’—reanalyse—its rules (Fodde and Pesci 2021, 90-98) and escape not only from physical enslavement, but also from mental bondage.

2.2 *The grammar of racism in TUR*

The dialogues in the novel can be divided into two macro-categories: those between black characters only, and those between black and white characters. However, within each of these macro-categories it is possible to identify different sub-categories depending on the context and

the characters involved in each communicative event, as they obviously act differently according to the circumstances:

Between black characters	Between black and white characters
1. Black <i>langue</i> /White <i>parole</i>	5. Black <i>langue</i> /Black <i>parole</i>
2. Black <i>langue</i> /Black <i>parole</i>	6. Interlanguage
3. White <i>langue</i> /White <i>parole</i>	7. White <i>langue</i> /White <i>parole</i>
4. Code-switching	8. Code-switching

Tab. 2: Different dialogue types

This creates a very complex but realistic sociolinguistic environment, which we have called the ‘grammar of racism.’ We analysed 58 dialogues, but here we have space for only a few. We will focus on the changes in Cora’s idiolect to show how her character evolves in the course of the story.

2.2.1 Dialogue 1—Only black characters—Black *langue*/White *parole*—Reflector: Cora

The following dialogue is taken from the first part of the novel. The characters involved (Cora, Caesar and Lovey) are all black and they are fleeing from the Randall plantation.

“I knew you were up to something,” she [Lovey to Cora] whispered when she caught up. “Sneaking around with him [Caesar] but not talking about it. And then you dig up **them yams** not even ripe yet!” [...]

“You get on back before you ruin us,” Caesar said.

“I’m going where **you going**,” Lovey said.

[...]

“He’s not going to take three of us,” Caesar said.

“**He know** I’m coming?” Cora asked.

He shook his head.

“Then **two surprises as good as one**,” she said. She lifted her sack. “**We got** enough food, anyway.” (Whitehead 2016, 56)

This is an example of translation from Plantation Speech, so the reader, free from the nefarious influence of the ‘coloring ear,’ can easily understand what the slaves are saying without falling into the trap of linguistic profiling. However, there are also some vernacular elements here and there (e.g., ‘them yams,’ ‘you going,’ etc.) which, without transforming the dialogue into a caricature or creating a contrast between the characters’ idiolects—because they all use them—stand as a reminder that the original dialogue was not in Standard English. As there is no

stylistic contrast between the characters' idiolects, it is an instance of Black *langue*/White *parole*, not stigmatized. It is clear that even though Cora, Caesar and Lovey may 'speak with an accent,' they definitely do not 'think with an accent.'

2.2.2 Dialogue 2—Black & white characters—Black *langue*/Black *parole*—Reflector: Cora/The slave community

The following dialogue takes place at the Randall plantation in Georgia. The characters involved are the Randall brothers (the owners of the plantation) and two slaves.

"Master James," Jockey said. [...] "Master Terrance."
 "Don't let us disturb you," Terrance said. "My brother and I were discussing business and heard the music. I told him, Now that is the most god-awful racket I'd ever heard."
 [...]
 [...] "Then I recollected James telling me about a nigger he had down here," Terrance said, "could recite the Declaration of Independence. I can't bring myself to believe him. I thought perhaps tonight he can show me, since everyone is out and about, from the sound of it."
 "We'll settle it," James said. "Where is that boy? Michael."
 No one said anything. [...] Moses was the boss unfortunate enough to stand closest to the Randall brothers. He cleared his throat. "**Michael dead, Master James.**"
 [...]
 "I should have been told," James said, his displeasure plain. Michael's recitation had been a novel diversion the two times he trotted the nigger out for guests.
 Terrance liked to tease his brother. "James," he said, "you need to keep better account of your property." (Whitehead 2016, 29-32)

The white masters do most of the talking and they use only Standard English. They are inquiring about a slave and Moses (another slave) tells them that "Michael dead, Master James." The contrast with the masters' English is staggering. We hear the slaves through the ears of their owners, as inferior and ignorant creatures almost¹¹ incapable of speaking 'well' (the way a white person does). The masters are convinced that slaves 'think with an accent' and so the black *langue* is not translated into white *parole*, but is represented by its corresponding and stigmatized black *parole*. This is the first instance of black *langue*/black *parole* in the novel. So far, slaves have been represented in a very different way (black *langue*/white *parole*) and the reader has already seen that they are perfectly capable of expressing complex ideas, just like anyone else. Thus, this comes as a real shock: those who had been normal human beings up until the previous page, have suddenly been dehumanized. Up until this point, the reader has

¹¹ Michael's former master "reasoned that if a bird could be taught limericks, a slave might be taught to remember as well. Merely glancing at the size of the skulls told you that a nigger possessed a bigger brain than a bird" (Whitehead 2016, 31).

experienced only the slaves' point of view. We could then say that this sudden change in perspective allows her/him to feel like one of them and to become fully aware of the 'coloring ear.' The white masters are abusing not only their slaves, but also the reader.

2.2.3 *Dialogue 3—Black & white characters—Interlanguage—Reflectors: Cora/Miss Lucy*

This next dialogue is between Cora (who now goes by the name of Bessie) and Miss Lucy (the proctor). It takes place in a nameless town in South Carolina (Cora's first stop after her escape).

"Bessie?"

"Good evening, Miss Lucy," Bessie [Cora] said.

[...]

"How are things?" Miss Lucy asked.

"**Think I'm gonna** spend a quiet night in the **quarter**, Miss Lucy," Bessie said.

"*Dormitory*, Bessie. Not *quarter*."

"Yes, Miss Lucy."

"*Going to*, not *gonna*."

"I am working on it."

"And making splendid progress!" Miss Lucy patted Bessie's arm. "I want to talk to you Monday morning before you head out for work."

"Anything wrong, Miss Lucy?"

"Nothing at all, Bessie. We'll talk then." (Whitehead 2016, 89)

In South Carolina, Cora strives to learn Standard English and (as we have already seen) "had decided [...] that [...] she would avoid the cadences of plantation speech the best she could" (Whitehead 2016, 109), but she still makes many mistakes, which could be regarded as negative transfer (Ellis 1997, 51-54; Saville-Troike 2017, 18-20, 212, 214) from her native variety. For this reason, we could consider it as a case of interlanguage (Ellis 1997, 31-35; Saville-Troike 2017, 17-20, 43-45; Selinker 2013). This is a conscious and deliberate decision. As we said earlier, under the spell of white hegemony, Cora thinks that if she wants to be truly free, she has to shed her former identity, which makes her feel naked. She feels compelled to wear the dress of white speech. Miss Lucy corrects her:

"*Dormitory*, [...]. Not *quarter*."

"*Going to*, not *gonna*."

Even though the main reflector is Cora, we could argue that when she says "[t]hink I'm gonna spend a quiet night in the quarter" what we are reading is a representation of what Miss Lucy

hears: she becomes the reflector. The proctor regards Plantation Speech as ‘wrong’ and so she corrects Cora, who must not have been aware of the mistake. It is also possible to suppose that Cora sees herself through the eyes of her white interlocutor, and so as ‘inferior.’

2.2.4 Dialogue 4—Black & white characters—White langue/White parole—Reflector: Cora

This is another dialogue between Cora and Miss Lucy. The protagonist is still in South Carolina, but she will be forced to flee very soon.

“Will I be able to say goodbye? To the Andersons and the children?” Cora asked.
 Miss Lucy was sure that could be arranged. The family was fond of her, she said.
 “Did I do a bad job?” Cora thought she had made a fine adjustment to the more delicate rhythms of domestic work. [...]
 “You did a splendid job, Bessie,” Miss Lucy said. “That’s why when this new placement came up, we thought of you. It was my idea and Miss Handler seconded it. The museum needs a special kind of girl,” she said, “and not many of the residents have adapted as well as you have. You should take it as a compliment.” (Whitehead 2016, 107)

Some time has passed since the interchange we analysed in Section 2.2.3, and in the meantime Cora’s proficiency has improved considerably. Now, she is able to address her interlocutors in perfect English. The dialogue above is thus an instance of *White langue/White parole* with a white person. As a matter of fact, she continues to be a very eager student up until almost the end of the novel, when she painfully finds out that white people will not regard a slave as equal just because they speak and act like them. On the contrary, they will be afraid of such slaves or former slaves and they will try to destroy them (which is what happens to the community at the Valentine farm). In other words, white speech might be a very powerful weapon to fight the white oppressor. However, it may explode in your hands when you least expect it.

What we have here is not a translation but the original. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that *white langue* only comes with colonization of the mind. When Cora was a slave, the masters owned her body against her will. Now that she is free, but still under the spell of white hegemony, she is offering them her soul of her own free will, which is the ultimate violation. She may think that she is in control, but she is not (not yet). From now on, she normally addresses white people only in Standard English, with only a few exceptions: the most remarkable one being Ridgeway, the slave catcher into whose hands she falls for the first time at the end of her stay in North Carolina.

2.2.5 *Dialogue 5—Black & white characters—Code-Switching—Reflector: Cora*

This dialogue is between Cora and Martin Wells (the Underground Railroad agent who gives her shelter in the attic of his house in North Carolina, her second stop).

“**Never seen** a white person **pick cotton**,” Cora said.

“Before I came back to North Carolina, I’d never seen a mob rip a man limb from limb,” Martin said. “See that, you stop saying what folks will do and what they won’t.”

[...]

“All the women and children, the men—where did they go?” Cora asked. [...]

“You saw,” Martin said.

[...]

[...] “The road,” Cora said, “the Freedom Trail, you called it. How far does it go?”

[...]

With the topic of white persecution, they had arrived at the reason for her term in the nook.

“You understand our predicament,” Martin said.

[...]

Once again, Martin apologized for his wife’s behavior. “You understand she’s scared to death. We’re at the mercy of fate.”

“**You feel like a slave?**” Cora asked.

Ethel hadn’t chosen this life, Martin said.

“**You were born to it? Like a slave?**” (Whitehead 2016, 164-168)

It is an example of code-switching with a white person. Cora is using both varieties—as bilingual people sometimes do—in a casual conversation with Martin. She is talking with a person she trusts and—considering her plight—she is relatively relaxed. It is worth pointing out that she switches to Plantation Speech especially when she refers to the topic of slavery.

2.2.6 *Dialogue 6—Black & white characters—Black langue/Black parole—Reflector: Cora*

When Cora is finally captured by Ridgeway in North Carolina, she goes back to Plantation Speech, which maybe she deems more appropriate to address a slave catcher. It is an instance of the stigmatized Black *langue/Black parole* as there is a clear contrast between the two characters’ idiolects. However, this time it does not signal ‘inferiority,’ but rather rebellion and defiance: this is Cora’s first linguistic stand. She could have stuck to Standard English, but she intentionally decided to use the variety white people despise.

Prompted by Cora one night, Ridgeway maintained that he’d never owned a slave in his life, save for the fourteen hours Homer was his property. Why not? she asked. “What for?” he said.

[...]

“If he’s free, why **don’t** he go?” [Cora]

“Where?” Ridgeway asked. “He’s seen enough to know a black boy has no future, free papers or no. Not in this country. Some disreputable character would snatch him and put him on the block lickety-split. With me, he can learn about the world. Find purpose.” (Whitehead 2016, 202)

2.2.7 Dialogues 7, 8, 9—Only black characters—Black *langue*/Black *parole*—Reflector: Cora

Strange as it may seem, we can find instances of the stigmatized Black *langue*/Black *parole* also in interchanges between black individuals. The three brief dialogues below take place at the Valentine farm, a refuge for former slaves owned by a black man where only black people live and where Cora finds shelter after Royal rescues her from Ridgeway. Here, people speak both Standard English and Plantation Speech. The two varieties, however, do not have equal dignity. There is a situation of diglossia and Plantation Speech is used only in informal situations mainly by former slaves who were not able to learn Standard English (like Sybil,¹² who shares the same house with Cora). The others tend to speak Standard English, formal or informal, in every context (with some exceptions).

“**Jimmy working** hard out there,” she [Sybil] said, shaking her head in hunger.
“I can’t wait,” Molly said. (Whitehead 2016, 243)

[...] She [Cora] wanted to set [the quilt] aside but Sybil forbid her. “You start something else when **this one finished**,” Sybil said. “But this **ain’t** finished yet.” (Whitehead 2016, 243)

[...] Her master had been a terror, Sybil told Cora [...]. “**He work** us hard,” she’d say, her thoughts lighting out to old miseries.

[...]

[...] Sybil faced a public sale. She left that night—the full moon gave its blessing and guidance through the forest. “Molly **didn’t make no** sound,” Sybil said. “She knew what we were up to.” (Whitehead 2016, 243-244)

The linguistic situation at Valentine farm is thus in many ways very similar to the plantations in the South. When they are free, slaves embrace the ways of the white man, including the language and, paradoxically, the ‘coloring ear.’ It is the only model of progress that they seem to be able to imagine. They give up their identity and feel ashamed of their former Plantation

¹² Sybil is twelve years older than Cora (so, more or less 30 years old) and is a former slave (she was not born free, like many of the denizens of the Valentine farm). She “had absconded with Molly when her daughter was only two, toting her child all the way” (Whitehead 2016, 244). We learn that Molly is ten years old, thus, Sybil must have escaped eight years before the present of the novel. The young mother always uses Plantation Speech: maybe she is one of those who were never able to use Standard English actively, even though she understood it.

Speech, whose cadences they try to hide or use only in informal situations if they speak in public. For this reason, in this context Plantation Speech is represented with a higher percentage of vernacular structures (the stigmatized Black *lingue*/Black *parole*), to create a visible contrast between the two varieties, just like when a white character speaks to a black character.

2.2.8 Dialogue 10—Only black characters—White *lingue*/White *parole*—Reflector: Cora

At Valentine farm, in formal situations people use only Standard English (the prestige variety, white *lingue*/white *parole*) even if all the interlocutors are black. This is what Valentine (the black owner) says when he addresses the black community that lives at his farm:

Valentine gripped the lectern for support. “I didn’t grow up the way you did,” he said. “My mother never feared for my safety. No trader was going to snatch me in the night and sell me south. The whites saw the color of my skin, and that sufficed to let me be. I told myself I was doing nothing wrong, but I conducted myself in ignorance all my days. Until you came here and made a life with us.”

[...] “A woman came to us out of the bitter winter—sick and desperate. We could not save her.” Valentine’s voice rasped. “I neglected my duty. As long as one of our family endured the torments of bondage, I was a freeman in name only. I want to express my gratitude to everyone here for helping me to put things right. Whether you have been among us for years or just a few hours, you have saved my life.” (Whitehead 2016, 282)

This address was delivered at a public meeting, just before a posse of white men attacked the farm, burning it to the ground and killing many of its denizens. What we have just read is not a translation; it is rather an instance of white *lingue*/white *parole*, and a further example of how black people give up their identity and feel ashamed of their former—or their ancestors’ former¹³—Plantation Speech.

2.2.9 Dialogue 11—Only black characters—White *lingue*/White *parole*—Reflector: Cora

Standard English (white *lingue*/white *parole*) is common also in less formal situations at the Valentine farm, like in this dialogue between Cora and Royal. At this stage, Cora can speak Standard English very well and she sometimes uses it even when she talks with Royal, one of her closest friends.

“Why did you bring me here [to the ghost tunnel]?” Cora said.

¹³ As John Valentine was born a free man.

“We’re not supposed to talk about what we do down here,” Royal said. “And our passengers aren’t supposed to talk about how the railroad operates—it’d put a lot of good people in danger. They could talk if they wanted to, but they don’t.”

[...]

“I showed you because you’ve seen more of the railroad than most,” Royal continued. “I wanted you to see this—how it fits together. Or doesn’t.”

“I’m just a passenger.”

“That’s why,” he said. [...] “The underground railroad is bigger than its operators—it’s all of you, too. The small spurs, the big trunk lines. We have the newest locomotives and the obsolete engines, and we have handcars like that one. It goes everywhere, to places we know and those we don’t. We **got** this tunnel right here, running beneath us, and no one knows where it leads. If we keep the railroad running, and none of us can figure it out, maybe you can.” (Whitehead 2016, 266-267)

2.2.10 Dialogue 12—Only black characters—Code-Switching—Reflector: Cora

In *TUR* it is also possible to find instances of code-switching between black speakers. The informal conversation below, between Valentine and Cora, is almost entirely in Standard English, which John Valentine speaks very well, as we have seen in Section 2.2.8. However, there are some parts in the vernacular:

He [Valentine] regarded the cover of her book, [...] “I never did read that,” Valentine said. “I heard you like to spend time here. **You’re the one from Georgia?**”

She nodded.

“**Never been** there—the stories are so dismal, I’m liable to lose my temper and make my wife a widow.”

Cora [...] asked after the preparations for the gathering.

“Yes, that,” Valentine said. “Do you think it will happen?”

“It has to,” Cora said.

[...]

“Mingo promises it will be a memorable occasion,” Valentine said. “A spectacle of rhetoric. These days, I hope they get the spectacle done early so I can retire at a decent hour.”

[...]

“What if they decide that we should leave?”

[...]

Valentine said, “We have a legal right as American citizens to be here.” [...] “Indiana was a slave state,” [he] continued. “That evil soaks into the soil. Some say it steeps and gets stronger. Maybe this isn’t the place. Maybe Gloria and I should have kept going after Virginia.”

[...]

“If we stay,” Cora said, “Mingo wouldn’t allow people like me. The runaways. Those with nowhere to go.”

[...]

“Why do all this,” she asked. “For all of us?”

“I thought you were one of the smart ones,” Valentine said. “Don’t you know? **White man ain’t going to do it.** We have to do it ourselves.” (Whitehead 2016, 274-278)

It is worth pointing out that Valentine switches to Plantation Speech in the last line (“White man ain’t going to do it. We have to do it ourselves”) to say that only African Americans—“we”—can build a future for themselves. They cannot rely on the white man’s help. Plantation Speech resurfaces to represent the former slaves’ identity which, whether they like it or not, bonds all the people at Valentine farm, not only those who normally still use only the vernacular, the illiterate or ‘ignorant’ ones: those who, unlike Cora, never visit the library which contains only books written in Standard English. And they need to be united if they want to succeed when they make their final stand.

2.2.11 Dialogue 13 (see first dialogue in section 2)—Only black characters—Black langue/White parole—Reflector: Cora

At the end of the novel, a white posse burns the Valentine farm to the ground and Cora is captured by Ridgeway for the second time, but she manages to escape. She enters the ghost tunnel and, even though there seems to be no hope of deliverance from the darkness, she decides that “[s]he’d find the terminus or die on the tracks” (Whitehead 2016, 304). However, she does not die on the tracks. In the final stage of her journey, the protagonist finally understands that she was wrong about Standard English. She realizes she has been tricked by the ‘coloring ear’ and she makes her final linguistic stand: she repudiates white speech (White *langue*/White *parole*) and she goes back to her original Plantation Speech (in its Black *langue*/White *parole* not stigmatized version). By doing this, she breaks the spell of white hegemony. Thus, as we saw in Section 1, acceptance (neutral shading) first becomes doubt (negative shading) and then volition (positive shading). Now, she can shape and fashion her own identity the way she wants, and not the way the white master would like her to do because, as Valentine once told her, “[w]hite man ain’t going to do it. We have to do it ourselves” (Whitehead, 2016, 278). Besides, something can qualify as a miracle only if it is “made with your sweat and blood. The secret triumph you keep in your heart” (2016, 303). Thus, Cora “trusted the slave’s choice to guide her—[anything, anything but white hegemony]” (2016, 304). She would find her own true identity “or die on the tracks” (2016, 304).

3. Conclusion

The various combinations of black *langue*/white *parole*, black *langue*/black *parole*, etc., which make up the complex sociolinguistic structure of our novel are to be considered nothing but the rules of the grammar of racism we mentioned in our title. Conversely, Cora’s modal journey represents, depending on the occurrences, the unconditional surrender to such grammar

(neutral shading), acknowledging it as the standard whence you cannot deviate, which is what happens when she acquires the ‘coloring ear’ and consequently decides “she would avoid the cadences of plantation speech the best she could” (Whitehead 2016, 109) and to learn Standard English (the variety of the white master); the doubts (negative shading) when the contradictions of freedom become manifest; the will to change it (positive shading), when she discovers that the ‘standard’ they aim to speak has not been imposed by divine authority, but by human convenience, whose only aim is to enforce a ‘white’ hegemony (in the Gramscian sense [Gramsci 2014]), which can be more effectively sustained “through cultural leadership” (Dale Parker 2011, 218) and linguistic supremacy. What we have tried to show is hopefully how the modal journey built upon Cora’s changes in her points of view corresponds to the novel’s grammar of racism and her idiolect evolvment. The grammar of racism, like every other grammar, has its own rules. In order to change them, first they must be broken—reanalysed—(Fodde and Pesci 2021, 90-98). However, to effectively achieve this goal, one needs not only to learn those rules but to master them perfectly, which is what Cora does the hard way before she is finally proficient enough to make her final stand.

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