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Pyatigorsk, Russia

Pyatigorsk State Linguistic University

tatianavkk@mail.ru

## “NIGGER” as a socio-linguistic phenomenon of the USA

Language reflects everything that takes place within a society. Social phenomena are no exception to the rule. They become objects of nomination which results in bringing new lexical units into the language. While used and sometimes merely existing in a language this lexis strongly influences the collective mind of a society changing not only the culture but the very foundations of a given society as well. Thus the picture of the world of a society is realized through its language, which in its turn forms a whole system of values of the representatives of this society united by a common culture implemented through language.

The word *nigger* played a very important role in the formation of the racist mentality in the United States of America. This word came into the XVI<sup>th</sup>-century English from Romanic languages, cf. *nègre* (French), *negro*, *neg-er*, *negar* (Spanish, Portuguese), *niger* (Latin) [1].

In the Colonial America of 1619, John Rolfe used *negars* in describing the African slaves shipped to the Virginia colony. Later American English spellings, *neger* and *neggar*, prevailed in a northern colony, New York under the Dutch, and in metropolitan Philadelphia's Moravian and Pennsylvania Dutch communities. To wit, the African Burial Ground in New York City originally was known by the Dutch name “Begraafplaats van de Neger” (Cemetery of the Negro) [11].

Earlier dictionaries register the word as a synonym to *negro*. There is an opinion that *nigger* is a phonetic representation of *negro* in the Southern dialect of the whites, but anyway, regardless its etymology at the beginning of the 1800s this word had assumed a very strong pejorative connotation. Two centuries passed and although modern dictionaries mark *nigger* as *taboo*, *derogatory*, *slang*, *caution* it is still the major symbol of white racism [1].

Initially *nigger* denoted any person of African origin but in time it began to represent a black-skinned man as an ultimate embodiment of a number of negative features. *Nigger* is lazy, uneducated, dumb, self-confident, insolent, aggressive, strong as an animal, and has a marked propensity to violence and bad habits. This stereotyped racist idea of the whites denies Afro-Americans any individuality, automatically endowing each black-skinned person with the intellectual, moral, social and physical qualities mentioned above.

There is a history of such a stereotyped approach in the American tradition of caricature. Afro-Americans used to be portrayed through a number of personages each of them reflecting the whites' perception of the black-skinned population. For example, *the Coon caricature* represents a black man as an obtuse and idle ignoramus (*coon* is a synonym of *nigger*, dictionaries mark it as *AmE derog slang*), *the Brute caricature* is animalistic and brings to the fore the brutal physique and a total lack of intellect. *The Tom and Mammy caricatures* are somewhat kinder to their characters but in spite of being shown as nice and loyal friends of the whites they still fail to live up to the “white” standard: they are somewhat ugly, childish naïve and uneducated. Thus the word *nigger*

implies a most general idea of the caricature perception and representation of Afro-Americans and carries the whole complex of its connotations [2].

Linguists refer such words as *nigger*, *kike* (Jew), *spic* (Latin American, esp. Mexican), *mick* (Spaniard), *dago* (Italian, Spaniard, Portugal), *wetback* (illegal Mexican immigrant who crossed the Rio Grande to get into the USA), *ginzo/guinea/spaghetti/wop* (Italian), *chink* (Chinese), etc. to the category of ethnofoulsisms.

Such lexical units form a sub-language of national prejudice, reflecting the whole system of a people's attitudes to representatives of other ethnic groups. Howard J. Ehrlich suggests dividing ethnofoulsisms into three types:

- pejorative nick-names of people (*chink*, *dago*, *nigger*, etc.);
- their derivatives (E.g.: “*I jewed him down*” – I made a good bargain, I brought down the price, I behaved like a real *Jew*, who knows the price of money.);
- less pejorative lexical units which do not denote people, but have an ethnic name as a part (for instance, the cuckoo got the name of *jewbird* for its big beak, an *Irish confetti* is a shower of bricks used in a street fight) [3].

Almost all ethnic groups of the USA became victims of racist insinuations, but none of them got so many pejorative names as Afro-Americans. Cf. *coon*, *tom*, *savage*, *piccanniny*, *mammy*, *buck*, *sambo*, *jigaboo*, *buckwheat*, etc. [4]

*Nigger* and all other words from the list above carry a strong charge of hatred, repulsion, disgust and disregard for Africans and Afro-Americans. Historically *nigger* defined, limited and scorned the blacks. It turned them into pariahs within a racist society and served as a linguistic basis for their discrimination.

The word itself, as well as all its derivatives, sustained and promoted the image of an idle, lazy, dirty and silly creature. No other American ethnofoulsism triggers so much evil and hatred. Cf.

- *Nigger*, *v.* – to wear out, spoil, ruin.
- *Niggerish*, *adj.* – irresponsible.
- *Niggerlipping*, *v.* – to wet the tip of a cigar with one's saliva while smoking.
- *Niggerlover*, *n.* – pejorative – a white insufficiently hating the black.
- *Nigger luck*, *n.* – luck, esp. undeserved.
- *Nigger-flicker*, *n.* – a small knife or a razor-blade with one obtuse side to protect fingers.
- *Nigger heaven*, *n.* – balcony in a theatre, cinema, church where blacks were supposed to seat.
- *Nigger knocker*, *n.* – axe handle, club.
- *Nigger rich*, *adj.* – showing off while in debt.
- *Nigger shooter*, *n.* – slang.
- *Nigger steak*, *n.* – a piece of liver or of some cheap low-quality meat.
- *Nigger stick*, *n.* – truncheon, club.
- *Nigger tip*, *n.* – small tips or no tips at all.
- *Nigger in the woodpile*, *n.* – a hidden snag or hindrance.

- *Nigger work*, *n.* – humiliating, degrading job, servility [4].

The word *nigger* was used to describe dark shades of colour (*nigger-brown*, *nigger-black*), status of the white who dealt with blacks (*nigger-breaker*, *-dealer*, *-driver*, *-killer*, *-stealer*, *-worshipper*), and anything else having something to do with Afro-Americans (*nigger-baby*, *-boy*, *-girl*, *-mouth*, *-feet*, *-preacher*, *-job*, *-love*, *-culture*, *-college*, *-music*, etc) (5).

*Nigger* is the highest degree of insult among American racists, that is why this word was actively combined with others to create degrading nick-names of various ethnic groups, Cf. Jews – *white-niggers*, Arabs – *sand-niggers*, the Japanese – *yellow-niggers* [5].

Americans created a hierarchical pyramid of races with white Americans on its top and blacks at the very bottom. This system was supported by a whole ideology, which justified the usage of deceit, manipulation, coercion, violence and whatever technique just to let the blacks know their place and prevent them from claiming their rights. Every social institution served to keep the racial hierarchy intact. Priests preached that God created blacks to serve whites. Scientists measured the anthropological and physiological features of the black with the only purpose to prove their genetic inferiority to the white race. White teachers while teaching their white students repeated over and over again that due to a number of physiological and psychological reasons blacks were incapable of learning. The judicial system silently approved of the double standards and even secretly encouraged collective violence against blacks.

American racism was supported by a whole system of the Jim Crow laws, which were state and local laws enacted in the Southern and border states of the United States and enforced between 1876 and 1965. They mandated “separate but equal” status for black Americans. In reality, this led to a treatment and accommodations that were almost always inferior to those provided for white Americans. The most important laws required that public schools, public places and public transportation have separate buildings, toilets, and restaurants for whites and blacks. Here are several examples:

*Georgia* – “All persons licensed to conduct a restaurant, shall serve either white people exclusively or colored people exclusively and shall not sell to the two races within the same room or serve the two races anywhere under the same license.”

“It shall be unlawful for any amateur white baseball team to play baseball on any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of a playground devoted to the Negro race.”

*Florida* – “All marriages between a white person and a Negro, or between a white person and a person of Negro descent to the fourth generation inclusive, are hereby forever prohibited.”

*Mississippi* – “Any person...who shall be guilty of printing, publishing or circulating printed, typewritten or written matter urging or presenting for general information, arguments or suggestions in favor of social equality or of intermarriage between whites and Negroes, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to fine not exceeding five hundred dollars or imprisonment not exceeding six months or both” [10].

*Jump Jim Crow* is a song and dance from 1828 that was done in blackface by a white comedian. The

number was supposedly inspired by the song and dance of a crippled African in Cincinnati called *Jim Cuff* or *Jim Crow*. The song became a great 19th century hit and was a key initial step in a US tradition of popular music that was based on the mockery of African-Americans. With time *Jim Crow* became a term often used to refer to African-Americans, and from this the laws of racial segregation became known as *Jim Crow laws*.

Slavery and the ensuing caste system of the Jim Crow laws formed the “anti-black” tradition in practically every sphere of life: toys, post cards, books for children, household items, etc. Afro-Americans were portrayed coal-black, naked or scantily dressed, with bulging eyes and huge scarlet lips. The word *nigger* was being actively used. Thus, in 1874, a New-York McLoughlin Brothers produced a puzzle which was called “Chopped Up Niggers”. In 1878, the B. Leidersdory Company from Wisconsin started to produce tobacco brand “Nigger Hair Smoking Tobacco”. In 1916, Morris & Bendien released a commercial in which a black-skinned kid drank ink, it was called «Nigger Milk.» In the 1930s, a British company J. Millhoff released specially for America a series of post cards. In one of them one could see ten black puppies and the caption ran as follows: «Ten Little Nigger Boys Went Out To Dine» [2]. This is the first line from the popular poem for children «The Ten Little Niggers», which was used so successfully by Agatha Christie in a detective story under the same title. Here it is:

*Ten Little Nigger Boys went out to dine;  
One choked his little self, and then there were Nine.  
Nine Little Nigger Boys sat up very late;  
One overslept himself, and then there were Eight.  
Eight Little Nigger Boys traveling in Devon;  
One said he'd stay there, and then there were Seven.  
Seven Little Nigger Boys chopping up sticks;  
One chopped himself in halves, and then there were Six.  
Six Little Nigger Boys playing with a hive;  
A Bumble-Bee stung one, and then there were Five.  
Five Little Nigger Boys going in for Law;  
One got in Chancery, and then there were Four.  
Four Little Nigger Boys going out to Sea;  
A Red Herring swallowed one, and then there were Three.  
Three Little Nigger Boys walking in the Zoo;  
The big Bear hugged one, and then there were Two;  
Two Little Nigger Boys sitting in the Sun;  
One got frizzled up, and then there was One.  
One Little Nigger Boy living all alone;  
He got married, and then there were none [7].*

The novel “*Ten Little Niggers*” came out in 1939. Some later editions were renamed to “*Ten Little Indians*” and to “*And Then There Were None*”.

The word *nigger* could be found even in the names of small American towns, e.g. Nigger Run Fork, Virginia. *Nigger* was a popular name for dogs, cats and horses with dark hair.

The racial hierarchy, which had been established in the times of slavery, and was later embodied in the Jim Crow laws, was severely criticized by the movement for civil rights and decisions of the Supreme Court. Americans voted for democratization and equal rights for people with different skin colour. The Black Civil Rights Movement (1955–68), had legitimized the racial identity word *Black* as mainstream American English usage to denote black-

skinned Americans. In the event, the “political militant” connotations of *Black* displaced it in favor of the compound blanket term *African American* — especially in politically correct usage and context — a linguistically compromised usage, because it either inaccurately denotes or excludes non-black African people, (cf. negroid). Nevertheless, *Black* is the contemporary racial denomination in the US, and usually is not considered offensive usage.

One of the most interesting and paradoxical phenomena of today’s American discourse is the usage of the word *nigger* by Afro-Americans themselves. Addressing the use of *nigger* by Black people, the US intellectual Cornel West said, “There’s a certain rhythmic seduction to the word. If you speak in a sentence, and you have to say *cat*, *companion*, or *friend*, as opposed to *nigger*, then the rhythmic presentation is off. That rhythmic language is a form of historical memory for black people.” [11]

Pronounced by an Afro-American this word may mean the following:

- all blacks, cf. “A *nigger* can’t even get a break”;
- black-skinned men, cf. “Sisters want *niggers* to work all day long”;
- blacks who behave like typical blacks, in other words meet the stereotype of an Afro-American, cf. «He’s a lazy, good-for-nothing *nigger*”;
- objects, cf. “This piece-of-shit car is such a *nigger*”;
- enemies, cf. “I’m sick and tired of those *niggers* bothering me!”;
- friends, cf. “Me and my *niggers* are tight” – and finally, “Sup Niggah” has become one of the most popular forms of greeting among urban black youths [2].

According to Afro-Americans themselves, the meaning of every instance of using the word *nigger* solely depends on the context linguistic situation. Moreover, they distance from the “white” usage of *nigger* changing the word phonetically. Afro-Americans pronounce it like *niggah* (*niggaz*). They also change *brother* to *brotha* and *sister* to *sistha* or *sista*. However, if *brotha* and *sista* are considered as forms of friendly address, *nigger* still remains part of a very important dichotomy, where *Afro-Americans* – are respectable middle class citizens, while *niggers* – represent the very bottom of American society. Even today *nigger* is a manifestation of white racism, the most odious word in the American culture.

In explaining his refusal to be drafted to fight the Vietnam War (1945–75), professional boxer Muhammed Ali said, “No Vietcong ever called me *nigger*”; later, his modified answer was the title *No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger* (1968) of a documentary about the front-line lot of the US Army Black soldier in Vietnam combat. An Ali biographer reports that, when interviewed, the boxer actually said, “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet Cong” [11].

At the end of the XX<sup>th</sup> century the word *nigger* received a second birth. It infiltrated the lyrics of songs and dialogues in movies (E.g. *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Jackie Brown* (1997), *Training Day* (2001), etc.). It was given a new flavour of tough energy and gangster chic.

*Nigger* is often employed in modern Afro-American poetry. Thus Imamu Amiri Baraka, a young gifted poet uses *nigger* in one of his most angry poems “I Don’t Love You”:

...and what was the world to the words of slick *nigger fathers too depressed to explain why they could not appear to be men* [7].

What meaning was implied by Baraka in the phrase *nigger fathers*? It is hardly flattering. But never-

theless it seems to be quite mild and harmless compared to the *nigger* used by Ted Jones in “The Nice Colored Man”. Jones tells what inspired him to write this rather unusual poem. Once Jones was invited to London to read a series of lectures as he was such a “*nice colored man*”. Filled with indignation and shattered by such labels as “*nice*” and “*colored*”, Jones wrote the following lines:

...*Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Smart Black Nigger Knife Carrying Nigger Gun Toting Nigger Military Nigger Clock Watching Nigger Poisoning Nigger Disgusting Nigger Black Ass Nigger* [8].

This poem consists of a dozen expressive adjectives and each of them combines with the word *nigger*. The most disturbing fact is all these harsh expressions are still being actively used in today’s American society.

*Nigger* is one of the most widely used words in the lyrics of the black rappers. In their text they use no other form of addressing each other but “*my niggah*”. Snoop Doggy Dogg in his single “You Thought” sings:

“*Wanna grab a skinny nigga like Snoop Dogg/ Cause you like it tall/and work it baby doll.*”

Tupac Shakur, one of the most famous and talented rappers composed a “*Crooked Ass Nigga*”, with such lines in it:

“*Now I could be a crooked nigga too/When I’m rollin’ with my crew/Watch what crooked niggers do/I got a nine millimeter Glock pistol/I’m ready to get with you at the tip of a whistle/So make your move and act like you wanna flip/I fired thirteen shots and popped another clip*” [9].

Thus it could be observed that lyrics of these rap songs, degrading women and glorifying violence, carry on the historical traditions of the Brute Caricature, according to which any black-skinned person is a dull primitive animal.

There is an opinion that the active usage of the word *nigger* by Afro-Americans themselves decreases its pejorative meaning and the charge of hatred present in it lessens. However, three centuries of racist contempt and anti-black feelings are still part and parcel of the word. *Nigger* is still the embodiment of America’s racist past and its usage contravenes the very idea of political correctness.

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