

# Tracing early African American slang in the *Green's Dictionary of Slang Online*

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## Introduction:

This paper is dedicated to tracing the earliest African American slang entries in the *Green's Slang Dictionary* online (*GDoSO*). This informal language, originating in the Black communities in the US, not only influences the speech of American white communities but also resonates globally, lexically influencing international varieties of English (Smitherman 2006).

While discussions on the lexical impact of Black English or Black slang often start with items associated with musical genres like jazz, rarely do they delve into periods preceding the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the earliest lexical items of Black origin recorded in *GDoSO*. Specifically, it centers on the initial period of the four historical periods from which black verbal expressions originally derived, as outlined in Lee's 1996 paper: 1) slavery and post-slavery era: 1600s-1920s; 2) jazz era: 1920s-1940s, 3) Civil Rights era: 1950s-1960s, and 4) rap (hip-hop) era: 1980s-now.

## Methodology:

We employed advanced search capabilities provided by *GDoSO* to identify 55 words, phrases, and meanings labeled as *orig. US black* predating 1920. Entries labeled *US black* were excluded, recognizing a differentiation between the label *orig. US black* and *US black* in this dictionary; the former suggests the initial utilization in the sociolect of African Americans or its origin in African American speech, while the latter signifies more widespread and intense usage within the relevant sociolect. These entries were organized into an Excel spreadsheet, categorized based on part of speech, semantic field, and their presence/absence in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* (we followed here Shea (2019: 228), who writes: "When the print version of *GDoSO* was published, a number of reviewers compared it favorably with the *OED Online*. These comparisons were based largely on ... nature (historical) of the two works. With *GDoSO* further comparison with the *OED Online* is inevitable"). Considering criticism of Green's certain etymologies and labeling practices (Adams 2012, Nunberg 2012), we scrutinized the sources from which 1st attestations had been drawn. This procedure led to the exclusion of words/phrases erroneously labeled as *orig. US black* by *GDoSO*, but found in sources that represent colloquial English, white slang, or American dialects, rather than African American English.

## Results:

The paper presents 15 entries that underwent the elimination process described above within our designated time-span. It covers their semantics, distribution in the *Corpus of Historical American English* (whenever applicable), categorization into semantic fields, and points out that certain items recorded by *GDoSO* but unattested by *OED* - such as, for instance, *rent rag* (defined as "a party where the guests buy their refreshments to help pay the rent" (*GDoSO*. s.v. *rent rag*)) - should be incorporated by *OED* into its repository of slang terms. Overall, the paper is aimed to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the earliest impact of Black lexicon on English (slang).

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