Quantifying the Lemma Massa as a Proper-Name in the John and Massa Tales: Using Quantitative and Qualitative Pragmatic Methods to Analyze Common Nouns Used as Proper Names

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ABSTRACT

English nouns have been described as having the ability to “switch easily between common-noun and proper-name uses.” Such changes or transformations are sometimes misanalysed by researchers and are often hard for ELL and L2 ESL researchers to detect. In this article, the author will analyze and tag the use of the Lemma MASTER (Massa/Maussa/Marsta/Marster/Master) as both a proper-name and as a common noun in the John and Massa tales from three corpora as well as provide a procedure for doing mixed method research to adjudicate differences in analysis offered by various scholars. The author will also discuss the need to add a fourth condition to Kripke’s definition for proper names and why undertaking pragmatic and contextual analysis is warranted.

KEYWORDS

C. Joyner, Gricean Maxims, High John Tales, Marster, Massa, Massa Tales, Master, Mixed Research Methods, Ole Massa, Proper Name Definition, R. Dorson, Salikoko Mufwene, Trickster, Z. Hurston

INTRODUCTION

Salikoko S. Mufwene states the following about noun usage in English (AAVE):

Nouns may switch easily between common-noun and proper-name uses. ‘Toasts’ and other popular oral literature narratives contain several examples of common nouns or nominals used as proper names, e.g., Mr. Lion, Mr. Devil, Brother Fox, Old Marsta, Ole Massa, Massa/Master, and Miz Bimbo Bottom. It is also noteworthy that in long narratives, several common nouns which have definite reference and have previously been used in a discourse are often repeated without an article, on the pattern of proper names, e.g., Preacher, Deacon, Dude, Brother, Sister, and Police. (Mufwene et al., 1998, pp. 72-73)

English nouns have been described as having the ability to “switch easily between common-noun and proper-name usage (Mufwene, Rickford, Bailey, & Baugh, 1998). Such changes or transformations are sometimes misanalysed by researchers such as Dorson (Dorson, 1967) and are often hard for ELL and L2 ESL researchers to detect and analyze especially when working with unedited texts (e.g. texts on social media platforms or texts from machine translations of audio files). (See my discussion of Dorson’s misidentification and analysis in sections 4.3.3 and 4.3.4.) As a result, this author has

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sought to provide a principle set of provisional conditions for describing proper names and a mixed quantitative and qualitative procedure to assist ELL and ESL researchers in analyzing such occurrences and other types of discourse indexing phenomena that require pragmatic analysis. These provisional conditions were chosen based on my analysis of the lemma *master* (Massa, Maussa, Marsta, Marster, Master) as a proper-name in the *John and Massa* tales from three corpora (Hurston 2008; Dorson 1967; Joyner 1984). My creation of a database to examine such usages and my analysis confirms why the current definition of proper names and proper nouns must include pragmatic descriptions or descriptors based on the previous work done by Alexiadou et al. (2007); Mufwene et al. (1998); and Yule (1998). Despite the familiar intralinguistic and extralinguistic, and contextual underdeterminacy challenges, I offer these provisional conditions and operational model for scholars to use on various corpora, genres, and lemmas to assess the adequacy of the same and to provide necessary revisions.

2. BACKGROUND AND METHOD

2.1. Selection of Corpora

I chose three corpora in order to employ the data set from which to make comparative, qualitative and quantitative analyses of the transformation of common noun lemmas into proper nouns. Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (2008) was chosen because of its historical significance. First published in 1935, *Mules and Men* was one of the first works that introduced the *John and Massa* tales to a wider audience. Although “a number of these tales were collected in the years following emancipation” (Levine, 1977, p. 125), Hurston (1891-1960) was the first person—and first academically trained social scientist—to have them published (Joyner, 1984, p. 316).

The collection of tales by Charles W. Joyner (1934-) and Richard M. Dorson (1916-1981) were chosen for different reasons. I selected (Joyner, 1984) because the data used was culled from the ex-slave narratives collected by the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration (Rawick 1941; Writers’ Program (U.S.) 1941). Dorson (1967) was selected because it provided a diachronic and a geographic contrast to the corpora of Hurston and Joyner. Dorson corpus is a Mid-South (Arkansas) and Midwest (Michigan) collection done in the 1950s. Hurston’s corpus was collected in the Deep South (Northern Florida) in the 1920s while Joyner’s tales were collected in a different geographic region of the Deep South (South Carolina) in the 1930s.

2.2. Selection of Lemmas to Examine

The *master* lemma was chosen over the other examples given in (Mufwene et al., 1998) because they are less known and have not been standardized as proper names in the SE lexicon. The Uncle Remus’ characters were judged to be more familiar and placed in the SE lexicon than the *master* lemma of the *John and Massa* tales. The former was first published and made famous by Joel Chandler Harris in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (Harris, 1881). The *Brer Rabbit*, *Brer Fox*, *Brer Bear* and *Tar Baby* characters and tales have been published in general folklore editions like *An Anthology of Famous American Stories* (Burrell & Cerf, 1953), in general African American Folklore editions like *African American Folktales* (Abrahams, 1985), in children books like *All Stuck Up* (Hayward & Chartier, 2003) and *The Days When the Animals Talked* (Faulkner, 1977). A Google search revealed that the *Brer Rabbit* character alone generated almost 3 times the search results that *John and Massa* did. See Table 1.

I have also chosen not to use the other common noun titles (*Brother*, *Sister*, *Deacon*, and *Preacher*) for similar reasons. There is greater convergence among AAVE and SE speakers in their use of such titles as *Brother*, *Sister*, *Deacon*, and *Preacher* than for the chosen *Master* lemma. SE speakers, especially those from the South, would be very familiar with the referenced common noun titles when used individually as a diminutive, hypocorism or “pet name” among family members (e.g., Brother, Baby Brother, Sister, Little Sis, etc.). They would also be familiar with their usage as
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