

Thematic Implications of Using Compound Words in Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson": A Sociolinguistic Perspective

Afaf Sami Salih Al Mihimdi

Department of English/ College of Education for Women /University of Anbar/Iraq

Edw.sami.afaf@uoanbar.edu.iq

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Abstract

The study is concerned with exploring the impact of using compound words in Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" (1972). It is an attempt to examine the way in which they contribute to referring to some important issues like social disparity and economic inequality. Based on theories from Morphology and Sociolinguistics (Labov,1972; Halliday, 1978; Bauer,2003), the study reveals that Bambara's utilization of compounds suggests the real ingenuity of the African American Vernacular English and the social awareness of its native speakers. The findings indicate that compound words in "The Lesson" are not only used as one of the author's stylistic devices but also as sociolinguistic markers, implying class variation, identity negotiation, and the narrator's increasing recognition of social and economic inequality.

Keywords: compound words, Sociolinguistics, AAVE, social disparity, economic inequality.

الإثار الموضوعية لاستخدام الكلمات المركبة في قصة توني كيد بامبارا "الدرس" من منظور علم اللغة الاجتماعي

عفاف سامي صالح المحمدي

قسم اللغة الإنكليزية /كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة الانبار/العراق

المستخلص

تهتم الدراسة بتقصي أثر استخدام الكلمات المركبة في قصة توني كيد بامبارا "الدرس" (1972)، متناولة الطريقة التي تساهم بها للإشارة لبعض القضايا المهمة مثل التباين الاجتماعي وانعدام المساواة الاقتصادية. واعتمادا على نظريات مشتقة من علوم الصرف وعلم اللغة الاجتماعي (لابوف، 1972: هاليداي 1978: باور، 2003)، أظهرت الدراسة بان استخدام بامبارا للكلمات المركبة يعكس البراعة الحقيقية للهجة الإنكليزية العامية الأمريكية الأفريقية والوعي الاجتماعي للمتحدثين الأصليين بها. أظهرت النتائج ان الكلمات المركبة لم تستخدم فقط كوسائل تعكس أسلوب المؤلف بل كونها تمثل إشارات اجتماعية تعكس التباين الاجتماعي، التفاوض على الهوية والإدراك المتزايد للراوي بانعدام وجود المساواة الاقتصادية والاجتماعية.

الكلمات الدالة: الكلمات المركبة، علم اللغة الاجتماعي، اللهجة الإنكليزية العامية الأمريكية الأفريقية، التباين الاجتماعي، انعدام المساواة الاقتصادية

1.Introduction

Language is a tool for human communication, that can be used in a variety of ways. The ability of human beings to employ language with boundless expressive power depends on their ability to use words. As a result, words are involved in nearly every aspect of language research and analysis. It is worth noting that every word in a mother tongue dictionary has phonetic, syntactic, semantic, and, most importantly, morphological information. Native speakers understand how to construct their words according to the language's morphological norms, as well as how to organize the word sequence correctly according to grammatical rules to make expressions or sentences. The most fundamental units of language organization are words. Undeniably, they have a crucial role in the speakers' capacity to express themselves creatively through language. A human vocabulary is a dynamic system, not a static repository of remembered information, and they broaden the scope of their application.

Alongside this, Haspelmath depicts compounding as a morphological process in which two or more words are combined to create a new other word. He defines compounds as complex lexemes that can be composed of two or more base lexemes[1]. Simply, a compound word consists of two or more lexemes which are combined together. Each word is labeled a compound member in the sense that the grammatical class of each member is mentioned when deconstructing the compound word. However, in any compound, one word modifies the meaning of the other word, which is called the headword[2],[3]. For instance, 'bulky book' is a compound which incorporates two words; 'bulky' as an adjective, while 'book' is a common noun. However, syntactically, the adjective 'bulky' modifies the noun headword 'book'. Hence, this structure is binary which explicitly entails that it contains an adjective and noun.

Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson"[4] portrays a group of African American children from a working-class neighborhood who, under the guidance of Miss Moore, encounter the harsh reality of social and economic disparity. The story's first-person narrator, Sylvia, delivers her perspective in vivid vernacular speech that reflects her community's linguistic identity. Among the various stylistic features of Sylvia's narration, compound words stand out for their density of meaning and cultural resonance. This paper argues that Bambara uses compound words not only to create a realistic depiction of urban speech but also to foreground social variation - the coexistence of linguistic forms that signify differences in education, class, and worldview.

"The Lesson" has to do with the impact Miss Moore, the teacher with her *"nappy hair and proper speech with no makeup"*, has on the children who reside in her neighborhood. The narrative takes place one day when Miss. Moore takes the children with her to the F.A.O Schwartz toy store in Manhattan. The focal point of *The Lesson's* story is to make a comparison between the kids' poverty and the richness of people who shop at F.A.O. For example, Sylvia says that the *'junk man'* behaves as if he is a *"big- time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary"* and after ensuring that Miss Moore appears nearly dressed, Sylvia juxtaposes her animosity toward Miss Moore with her emotion for *"the winos who cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play hide-and- seek without a goddamn gas mask."* Nevertheless, despite apparently contrasting images, the narrator, suggests that

dualistic oppositions more like than they seemingly appear. She notes that Miss Moore "was black as hell cept for her feet, which were fish-white" and that she seems dressed-well as if going to church although she seldom goes there.

The reason for choosing " The Lesson" for conducting the analysis is that it contains a considerable number of compound words that are assumed to be representative and adequate to be used as the database in the analysis of the present study. The scope of the current research is limited to identify the types of the compound words that Toni Cade Bambara manipulated in " The Lesson", and explore the meaning of the compound word. Therefore, the paper addresses the following research questions:(1)What are the syntactic patterns Bambara adopts in forming compound words?(2) What are the meanings conveyed in the compound words?(3) To what extent does the use of compound words in "The Lesson" contribute to highlighting linguistic inequality as a reflection of broader social inequality and economic disparity? Answering these questions enables to identify the way in which language is used as social practice in the story, showing the close correlation between linguistic form, identity, and inequality within the "The Lesson", and to realize the thematic contributions compound words may have in narrative, specifically, the theme of social variation and economic inequality.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Language and Social Voice in Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson"

Exploring Bambara's linguistic choices in "The Lesson" reflects her skill in using language as a tool that represents the innovative truth of Black voices. The conflict between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard English (SE) is as outstanding as the economic inequalities between Whites and Blacks in the short story. Linguistically, the textual frame of the story is American Standard English, in which there is a black textual frame.

One of the important notes that should be sounded in relation to the use of AAVE in Black texts in general and Bambara's work in specific is that the use of dialect serves not only as an end in itself but also functions as a means for social and political improvement. For this, the present study is intended to highlight AAVE dominant linguistic characteristics. Among these features is the frequent use of compound words, which might contribute to reproducing Black culture and Black social and individual identity. It is not an overstatement to suggest that the pervasive use of AAVE in Bambara's writings reflects her creative manipulation of the dialect as a device for recounting the Black people's history. According to Heller, the use of AAVE in "The Lesson" adds "realism and humor" to the story of the narrator[5].

2.2 Distinctive Characteristics of Black Dialect in Bambara's "The Lesson"

A short linguistic survey of the story reveals different layers of Black culture intended by the author. Toni Cade Bambara fills the text with taboo words, AAVE vocabulary, syntax and sentence fragments, which are common in AAVE. In this regard, it is claimed that reduction of word-final clusters is frequent in AAVE, and consequently words like 'build' and 'bill' or 'cold' and 'coal' tend to become homophones[6]. Moreover, the narrator's frequent use of AAVE phonological rules in "The Lesson" is primarily related to her ethnicity[5]. Definitely, dropping a consonant or inserting a vowel in words like

“*puredee*” for pretty or “*ole*” for old is a strategy used by the narrator, Sylvia, in order to split the consonant clusters. Some common shortenings for Bambara’s characters are: “*fore*” for before, “*shamed*” for ashamed, and “*cause*” for because. In fact, such examples of shortenings are frequently used by the African American speakers[7]. In “The Lesson”, the narrator, Sylvia, substitutes the velar nasal, [ŋ] by the alveolar nasal, [n], reflecting the author’s concern for the dialect. Therefore, “*knockin*”, “*punchin*”, “*hangin*”, “*screamin*”, “*somthinorother*”, “*plannin*”, “*lyin*”, “*watchin*” and “*goin*” are examples of verbs used following this rule in the story.

More importantly, Sylvia's syntax indicates her AAVE background. She does not make a distinction between adjectives and adverbs in different situations; she explains that her family members “*moved North the same time and to the same apartment then spread out gradual to breathe*”, and, later on, she asserts the kid’s attitude toward the taxi driver saying, “*so we talked about his mama something feroscious*”. These two examples are among several other cases of using an adjective in an adverbial position. The narrator of the story, like speakers of AAVE, uses the article ‘a’ before a vowel sound as in “*then the whole thing put into a oven*”. Further, she utilizes the objective pronoun in a subjective position, which is also common to AAVE, as in “*So right away me and Sugar curtsy to each other and then...*”.

2.3 Compounding

Compounding, according to Yule[8], is the combining of two separate words into a single form. According to Roach[9], compound words are made up of two or more words that can exist independently as English words and are written in a variety of ways. For example, they can be written as one word like ‘armchair’, or as a word separated by a hyphen (-), such as ‘gear-change’, and sometimes as two words separated by a space, for example, ‘desk lamp’. Therefore, compound words can be closed, hyphenated or open.

Compound words, Bauer[10] adds, are composed of two or more words to express a single idea. The meanings conveyed by these compounds often extend beyond the literal sum of their components, implying cultural and contextual associations. From a sociolinguistic view point, discrepancy in compounding patterns may indicate a range of social identity and group affiliations[11]. Halliday[12] asserts that compounds are primarily manipulated in literary language to serve as stylistic markers that indicate the speaker’s background and attitude. Thus, Bambara’s use of compounds in “The Lesson” serves not only as a morphological role but also as a social semiotic one - representing the relationship between language, social structure, and ideology.

2.3.1 The Elements of Compounds in English

Based on what Lado [13] states, compounding can be described as language units that consist of parts working independently in different situations. The question of how many elements make up a composite arises as a result. Compound words might have two or more free roots, according to Fromkin and Rodman[14] hence, certain compound words comprise multiple roots and bound morphemes, for instance, wastepaper basket; waste + paper + basket and truck pusher; truck + „push + er. Consequently, two or more terms of different types can be combined to constitute compound words in English. Despite the fact that two-word compounds are the most prevalent in English, defining an upper limit,

such as 'three-time loser,' would be problematic. The following Table (1) mentions some more examples of compound words.

Table (1) Examples of Compound Words with Their Types and Patterns

| Compound type | Pattern | Examples |
|-----------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Two-word compound | N + N | Skyscraper |
| Multi-layer compound | N+ prep+ N | Brother-in-law |
| | Num+ Adj +N+N | four-dimensional-space-time |

This, indeed, underscores the fact that compound words can be made of two, three, four elements as in four dimensional– space-time, or even more as in “She is a high voltage electrical grid systems supervisor” [15].

2.3.2 Regular Compounds

Regular Compounds are not the same as any of its constituent parts' referents, implying that one element (typically the left) determines more narrowly the meaning of the other element (usually the right), which is the compound's semantic head. They only have one head and these are the most common English compounds. Examples of these regular compounds are like:

Teapot → is a kind of pot

Bedroom → a kind of room

In this regard, the head is the most important part of the whole compound word in terms of syntax, and a regular compound represents a subgrouping inside the class of the entity that the head denotes in terms of semantics. In each example, the initial word serves as a head modifier, defining the meaning of the head more accurately.

2.3.3 Irregular Compounds

In English, compound words are produced when language users do not follow the standard rules of word formation, specifically those related to pluralization, semantic transparency and stress patterns. For instance, both *teeth marks* and *tootsie-wootsie* are irregular compound because the former's two elements are pluralized the latter's second element is not a free morpheme. Further, *Mother-in-law* is irregular as it cannot be pluralized as *mother-in-laws*).

Suspended Compounds

Notably, when a series of similar compound expressions share the same final element, that repeated part can be omitted until the end of the list. In such cases, a hyphen is used to indicate the missing part, effectively serving as a placeholder [16]. For example:

1. *The third- and fourth-grade teachers met with the parents.*
2. *Both full- and part-time employees will get raises this year.*
3. *We don't see many 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children around here.*

3. Spelling of Compounds

In English, compound words can be spelled in three primary ways: open, hyphenated, and closed. The choice between these forms often depends on the compound's usage, frequency, and the potential for ambiguity. In this regard, Biber et. al. [17] confirm that compound words can be classified into the following types:

1. The closed form, which is formed by combining two words together to constitute a compound, for instance, football, armchair, and toothpaste.
2. The hyphenated form, which is produced by combining two or more words separated by a hyphen, as in long-term, face-to-face, day-to-day, etc.
3. Open form in which independent words are combined together without a space or a hyphen separating them, as in post office, real estate, middle class, full moon, half-sister, attorney general. Thus, independently existing bases might be combined so as to form new words. There is a wide range of compound types in English, including:
 - a. noun+ noun: girlfriend, shopkeeper
 - b. adjective + noun: nobleman, bluebird
 - c. verb + noun: washing-machine, guesswork
 - d. noun + adjective: care-free, sky-blue

Remarkably, Noun–Noun compounds are a highly captivating set of linguistic phenomena as they represent the largest group of compounds in English [18]. In line with this, it is maintained that individuals start to produce this type of compound earlier when they are two-years old [19]. In fact, an English phrase is a group of words that functions as a grammatical unit but does not form a single lexical item. The meaning is usually compositional-derived from the meanings of the individual words. *Randolph et al. suggests that a phrase as a collection of words that work together as a single unit in the syntax of a sentence [20].* However, a compound word, according to Laurie, is described as a linguistic unit made up of two (or more) stems that serve as a single word [21]. Compound words tend to be pronounced with unity stress, i.e., unity is placed on the first element. The meaning of English compound words can be frequently different.

Moreover, compound words frequently have a meaning that is distinct from the sum of their constituent components. For instance, the compound '*greenhouse*' (with primary stress on green) and the phrase '*a green 'house*' (with primary stress on house) are not similar. The former refers to a particular kind of structure, made of glass or plastic, used to grow plants; the latter describes the house that is painted green.

The most widely used and conventional semantic classification of compounds in English is proposed by Bloomfield, who suggests that they can be either endocentric or exocentric (headless constructions) [22]. The compound in the first type stands as the hyponym of the head element: "*table lamp*" is a kind of lamp; "*bedroom*" is a kind of room [23]. However, the second type of compound refers to a certain type of metaphor or metonymy. For instance, a compound word like "*bookworm*" is often used to refer to a someone who is interested in reading or studying books more than referring to a specific type of worm.

Syntactically, comparing compound words with phrases exhibits fewer options of substitution. For instance, in a phrase like as a *green house* the two elements can be replaced by other different words to produce further phrases like a *purple house* or a *green car*, etc. However, in compound words, such substitution rarely happens without restrictions. Differences between the compounds and phrases in English are explained with examples in Table (2):

Table (2) Prominent Distinctions between Compounds and Phrases in English

| Compound (Limited /restricted) | Meaning | Phrase (free combinations) | Meaning |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| 'Blackbirds | A specific bird species | Black 'birds | Any bird that is black in color |
| 'Bluebirds | A specific bird species | Blue 'birds | Any type of birds that is blue in color |
| *'Tinybird | | Tiny 'bird | A little bird |
| *'Colorfulbird | | Colorful 'bird | A colored bird |
| 'Walflower | A specific type of flowers | Wall 'flower | A flower that is growing near the wall |
| 'Sunflower | A specific type of flowers | Sun 'flower | A flower that is basking in the sunlight |
| *'Redflower | | Red 'flower | A flower that is red |
| *'Rareflower | | Rare 'flower | A flower that is rare(uncommon) |

Overall, compounds and phrases, in English, differ in several key linguistic features. Compounds function as a single lexical unit, whereas phrases consist of two separate words combined syntactically. In terms of stress, compounds place emphasis on the first element (as in 'SUNflower), while phrases shift the stress to the second element (as in red 'flower). Compounds typically convey a specialized or idiomatic meaning that may not be directly inferred from the individual words, unlike phrases, whose meanings are literal and compositional. Additionally, word formation in compounds is restricted and governed by convention and established usage, while phrases allow for more productive and flexible combinations, where adjectives can freely modify nouns. It's also worth noting that when compounds can be substituted, the meaning can shift significantly more than individual words suggest. Thus, *blackbirds* and *bluebirds* denote distinct species of birds, rather than only referring to color variations.

A little reference list of compound words with their types and characteristics, cited from Quirk & et al [24], is provided in the table below. Its primary purpose is to suggest the specific words that language users should know, or at the very least recognize, to use effectively.

Table (3) A Little Reference of Compound Words with Their Types and Characteristics (cited from [24])

| Type | Examples | Characteristics / Notes |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Noun compounds | database, blood pressure, salesperson, light year | Two nouns combined; stress typically on the first element ('DATABASE, 'BLOOD pressure) |
| Adjective–noun compounds | blue-green dress, high-level officials | Adjective modifies noun but forms a single lexical unit; stress usually on first element ('BLUE-green dress) |
| Hyphenated compounds | 2-year education, one-week vacation, half-sister, jack-in-the-box, | Hyphen signals the lexical unity of the modifier; first element usually stressed |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| | A-frame | |
| Proper noun compounds / multi-word names | African American, Italian American club, AirForce | Often capitalized; fixed expressions representing ethnic, national, or organizational identity; stress depends on constituent (AFrican AMERICAN, AIRForce) |
| Title or role compounds | attorney general, secretary-treasurer, mayor-elect | Often follow postpositive adjective or compound rules; stress may vary; meaning often idiomatic or specific to context |
| Adverbs / adjectives from phrases | lifelike, bull's-eye, jack-in-the-box | Some are derived or idiomatic compounds; meaning may not be fully compositional (jack-in-the-box ≠ "jack" + "box") |
| Scientific / technical compounds | I-beam, light year | Used in technical contexts; often lexicalized; stress on first element |

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Drawing on theories from Morphology and Sociolinguistics (Labov, 1972; Halliday, 1978; Bauer, 2003), the present study uses a qualitative-quantitative method to examine the impact of using compound words in Bambara's "The Lesson" in reflecting certain social issues like economic disparity and social inequality. To do this, the research method is designed to comprise several parts explained in the following sections.

3.2 Data Collection

The documentation method is used to analyze the data. The data is gathered from the entire text of Toni Cade Bambara's short story entitled "The Lesson" (1972). Sorting and classifying the notes taken from the text into various types and categories of compound words was the method of analysis. This, in fact, requires certain steps, including:

1. Reading the entire text thoroughly in order to identify the compound words utilized in the story.
2. Highlighting those identified words and documenting them.

3.3 Data Analysis

The present study conducts both a qualitative and quantitative method to analyze the data through the use of deep explanation and description involving measurement and statistics. For this, some steps should be taken. First, identifying the form and construction of the highlighted words. The next step is to figure out the compound word's head and modifier. This set of compounds, then, is categorized according to theories from morphology and sociolinguistics.

3.4 A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Bambara's "The Lesson"

In Toni Cade Bambara's short story "The Lesson", 55 representative compound words appear throughout the narrative which comprises about 3349 words. Therefore, these compound words account, approximately, 1.64%. They make up a small but significant portion of the text as they significantly contribute to the story's vivid depiction of the characters' experiences and the socio-economic themes explored in the narrative. The compound words in "The Lesson" serve multiple purposes: they anchor the story in urban childhood life, contrast wealth and poverty, and support the central themes of education,

inequality, and awakening social consciousness. Words like "toy store" in " So she leads us around the windows of the toy store and me and Sugar screamin....", "birthday" in "I could see me askin my mother for a \$35 birthday clown" , and "nose-flute" in "Sugar played the nose flute and messed around in the holy water." juxtapose luxury versus childhood reality, while 'handball' in ".....pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play hide-and-peek without a goddamn gas mask." and 'grand-daddy' in " Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Grand-daddy Nelson in the country " root the story in community and familial ties.

Compound words from “The Lesson” can be classified according to structure (how they are formed) and type (semantic relationship between the components).

1. Classification by structure

1. Closed compounds which are formed by writing the words together without spaces or hyphens like: *handball, birthday, household, sailboat, handkerchiefs, fiberglass, gingerbread, mailbox, subway*, etc.
2. Hyphenated compounds which are formed by joining components by a hyphen; mainly for clarity or particular usage. Some of these are: *ice-cream, nose-flute, grand-daddy, big-time, toy-store*, etc.
3. Open compounds written as separate words but function as a single lexical unit. In “The Lesson”, '*toy store*', '*West End*', '*ice cream*' may best exemplify this type of compound structure.

2. Classification by Type / Semantic Relationship

1. Noun + Noun:

Commonly, English words for objects or place naming are formed with one noun modifies or specifies the other. Some of these nouns are used in “The Lesson” like: *handball, nose-flute, toy store, sailboat, schoolhouse, grand-daddy, big-time, ice-cream. etc.*

2. Noun + Proper noun

Examples of this type are often used as names of geographical locations to highlight setting and social context like 'West End',

3. Noun+ Temporal modifier

These nouns are used to add temporal/event association like 'birthday' in 'birthday money and birthday clown.

4. Noun+ Plural noun

Nouns which are used to show quantity but retain compound sense in context, for example, *handkerchiefs*.

Table (3) Examples of Compound Words Classified According to Their Structure Type, Semantic Type and Thematic Roles

| Compound Word | Structure Type | Semantic Type / Function | Explanation / Thematic Role | Context |
|-----------------|----------------|--------------------------|---|---|
| Handball | Closed | Noun-Noun | Name of a sport; emphasizes the urban environment and childhood play. | "And we kinda hated her too, hated the way we did the winos who |

| | | | | |
|-------------------|------------|----------------------|--|--|
| | | | | cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddamn gas mask." |
| Ice cream | Open | Noun-Noun | Refers to dessert; symbolizes small pleasures in children's world. | "We could go to Hascombs and get half a chocolate layer and then go to the Sunset and still have plenty money for potato chips and ice cream sodas." |
| Birthday | Closed | Noun-Noun (temporal) | Used in <i>birthday money</i> , <i>birthday clown</i> ; marks childhood and celebration. | I could see me askin my mother for a \$35 birthday clown. "You wanna who that costs what?" she'd say, cocking her head to the |
| Nose-flute | Hyphenated | Noun-Noun | A toy instrument; highlights imagination and playful creativity. | "Which was for me to run up to the altar and do a tap dance while Sugar played the nose flute and messed around in the holy water." |
| Toy store | Open | Noun-Noun | A location for toys; represents luxury, consumerism, and social inequality. | 'Not that I'm scared, what's there to be afraid of, just a toy store. But I feel funny, shame." |
| West End | Open | Proper noun / | Geographical reference; | "We start down |

| | | | | |
|----------------------|------------|---|--|---|
| | | Location | highlights socioeconomic contrast. | the block and she gets ahead which is O.K. by me cause I'm going to the West End and then over to the Drive to think this day through." |
| Nappy hair | Open | Adjective-Noun | Away of describing natural hair texture associated with Black Folks who use the term with pride. | "....this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup." |
| Household | Hyphenated | Noun-Noun | Familial term; emphasizes home life and generational ties. | Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Grand-daddy Nelson in the country. |
| Grand- daddy | Hyphenated | Noun-Noun | Family relationship; contrasts biological family vs chosen responsibility (Miss Moore). | "Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Grand-daddy Nelson in the country." |
| Letter-opener | Hyphenated | Noun-Noun | It portrays the gap between Miss Moore's middle-class norms and the working-class environment the children actually live in. | At home, then," she say. "Don't you have a calendar and a pencil case and a blotter and a letter-opener on your desk at home where you do your homework?" |
| Handkerchiefs | Closed | Noun-Noun (compound with plural suffix) | Demonstrates the child's awareness exploring her ability to internalize standards of respectability shaped by class. The writer asserts that inequality is not only notable in high-priced items like the \$1,000 sailboat but also in the basic things the children go without. | " But once we got in there and everything so hushed and holy and the candles and the bowin and the handkerchiefs on all the |

| | | | | |
|-------------------|--------|------------------|---|--|
| | | | | drooping heads, I just couldn't go through with the plan." |
| Sailboat | Closed | Noun-Noun | Toy symbol of luxury; central to theme of economic disparity. | "Will you look at this sailboat, please," say Flyboy, cuttin her off and pointin to the thing like it was his. |
| White Folk | Open | Adjective - Noun | Represents racialized class differences and social inequality | "Rosie Giraffe mumbles, "White folks crazy."" |
| Jigsaw | Closed | Noun-Noun | Manipulates the image of jigsaw puzzle to represent the connectedness of the group. | Then the rest of us tumble in like a glued-together jigsaw done all wrong. And people lookin at us. |

Analyzing the texts reveals that there is a considerable number of words that can be identified as being compounds. These are distributed across three structural types: closed, open, and hyphenated compounds. Obviously, the hyphenated structure type stands as the largest category, accounting for 37.05% of the entire number of compounds in the text. Given that hyphens mostly contribute to reducing ambiguity by making the relationship between the compound elements clearer and simpler to understand, the frequent utilization of compound words indicates the writer's inclination toward adding transparency and intelligibility. At the same time, the closed structure type of compounds utilized makes up a relatively high proportion, with 35.18%. This suggests that numerous compound words have already been lexicalized and have generally been accepted as linguistically single units. Thus, certain levels of morphological consistency and standard usage can be reflected in the story. The open structure has the lower proportion compared with the two categories mentioned earlier. It makes up 27.77% of the total number of compounds. However, it represents an important portion of the data.

In general, the three types have significant presence; hyphenated compounds take the lead in the distribution, next followed by closed compounds, while open compounds appear less frequently. The balanced representation of these compounds implies an active utilization of compound formation mechanisms, indicating both prominent lexical items and more adaptable or transitory forms within the language. Figure (1) below, shows the distribution of compound words structures in the "The Lesson".

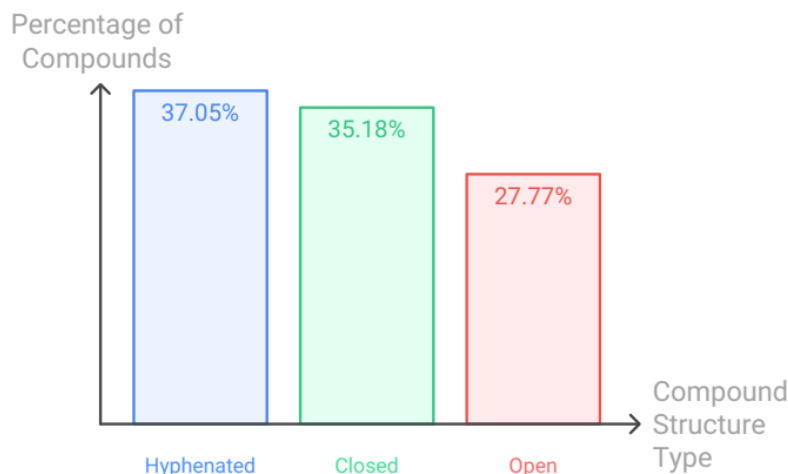


Figure (1) Distribution of Compound Words Structures in the “The Lesson”

3.4.1 Contribution of Compound words in “The Lesson”

Compound words in “The Lesson” are mostly noun-noun compounds, with some hyphenated forms and a few open forms. Structurally and semantically, they anchor the story in childhood experience, urban space, family, and social class, reinforcing the story’s main themes of childhood innocence, inequality, and awakening awareness of wealth and society.

1. Contribution to Characterization

By using these compounds, Bambara instantly conveys who the characters are and their position in society without long explanations. Many compound words describe the characters’ lifestyles, social status, and attitudes. For example: ' *Nappy hair*' in "*And the starch in my pinafore scratching the shit outta me and I'm really hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree.*" highlights racial identity and everyday realities of African-American children and '*dressed up*' in "*Then we check out that we on Fifth Avenue and everybody dressed up in stockings.*", '*the young ones*' educated' in "*She'd been to college and said it was only right that she should take responsibility for the young ones' education, and she not even related by marriage or blood.*" describe people from a wealthier class, helping the reader contrast social classes.

2. Contribution to Setting

Some compound words help establish the environment. They make the story feel grounded in a real, tangible world, emphasizing contrasts between the children’s neighborhood and the expensive store downtown. Here are some examples used by Barbara in “The Lesson”. Words like '*Backyard*', '*playground*', '*sidewalk*' successfully situate the story in an urban, everyday setting where children play and interact. While words like '*toy store*' in "*So once again we tumble all over each other to gaze at this magnificent thing in the toy store which is just big enough to maybe sail two kittens across the pond if you strap them to the posts tight*", and '*class*' in "*We don't keep paper on top of the desk in my class,*" locate the characters’ experiences both in education and consumer culture.

3. Contribution to Tone and Voice

Many compounds contribute to the conversational voice. The compounds give the story rhythm and voice, capturing how children think and speak naturally. Words like, 'dress-up' in "Then we check out that we on Fifth Avenue and everybody dressed up in stockings.", reflect how the narrator perceives things-casual, witty, and observant. While 'out-grown' in "Too long I say. "Yeh," adds Sugar, "outgrown it by that time.". add local color and authentic dialogue, keeping the story grounded in a specific community. The compound words in "The Lesson" help Bambara portray and define social and economic differences, paint a vivid urban environment, reinforce themes of inequality and consumerism, add to the child narrator's authentic voice.

4. Contribution to the Themes of "The Lesson"

Compound words related to money and value highlight the economic lesson Miss Moore is teaching that the world is unequal and not everyone has the same opportunities. Bambara's story explores social inequality, consumerism, and the awareness of economic disparity. Compound words like 'big-time' in "----he was some big-time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary", and 'price tag' in "So we all jam into the window smudgin it up and the price tag say \$300", indicate overpriced things expressing the shock the children feel when confronting the cost of luxury items. In this way, these words refer to the contrast between modern wealth and the children's modest surroundings. The structural combination of compound words enhances meaning and enriches expressions. Therefore, compounds play a prominent role in conveying complex ideas emphasizing their semantic unity and contextual significance. By analyzing various examples, the section illustrates how compound words contribute to thematic coherence and stylistic depth within a text. For example, closed noun-noun compounds like 'sailboat' in "Hand-crafted sailboat of fiberglass at one thousand one hundred ninety-five dollars.", and 'handball' in "And we kinda hated her too, hated the way we did the winos who cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddamn gas mask.". Also, hyphenated compounds like 'nose-flute', 'ice-cream', 'grand-daddy' are used mainly to emphasize uniqueness or cultural specificity. On the other hand, open compounds like 'toy store', 'West End' focus on context and social contrast wherein setting appears as a narrative tool. And, in order to highlight particular stages of life, relationships, and social roles, Bambara manipulates temporal and kinship compounds like: 'birthday'. The following table shows how each compound word strengthens setting, characterization, voice, or theme in "The Lesson".

Table (4) Compound Words in "The Lesson" and Their Contribution in the Story

| Compound Word | Contribution / Function in the Story | Context |
|-----------------|---|--|
| Big-time | Emphasizes luxury or importance; highlights contrasts in wealth and implies serious work. | "And quite naturally we laughed at her, laughed the way we did at the junk man who went about his business like he was some big-time president and his |

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| | | sorry-ass horse his secretary." |
| Dress-up | Reflects children's playful behavior; contrasts with wealthy appearances. | "Then we check out that we on Fifth Avenue and everybody dressed up in stockings." |
| | displays her defiant, cynical, and streetwise demeanor. Her hasty rejection of "foolishness" is indicative of her defensiveness; she makes fun of things she doesn't fully comprehend. | |
| Junk man | Illustrates community and informal economy; sets local color. | "And quite naturally we laughed at her, laughed the way we did at the junk man who went about his business like he was some big-time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary." |
| Makeup | Represents wealth, sophistication, or adult social norms. | ".....this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup." |
| Nappy hair | Highlights racial identity; authenticates African-American children's experience. | ".....this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup." |
| Real money | Emphasizes wealth differences assuming that the term itself opposes "poker chips or monopoly paper" | "I mean real money, she say, like it's only poker chips or monopoly papers we lay on the grocer." |
| White folks | It highlights the children's awareness of social and class divisions. | "And I don't even have a home," say Flyboy like he do at school to keep the white folks off his back and sorry for him." |
| Price tag | Highlights economic inequality; shock value for children. | "We all start reciting the price tag like we in assembly." |
| Paperweight | Reflects Junebug's awareness of economic inequality between the Black folks and White folks. | ." |
| Toy store | Central location for lesson on economic disparity. | "So once again we tumble all over each other to gaze at this magnificent thing in the toy store which is just big enough to maybe sail two kittens across the pond if you strap them to the posts tight." |
| semi-precious | Demonstrates the type of luxury item that has no practical purpose in the daily affairs of poor children | "That's a paperweight made of semi-precious |

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| | from Harlem. This emphasizes the idea that value is socially constructed, often in irrational ways that promote class divides. | stones fused together under tremendous pressure," she explains slowly, with her hands doing the mining and all the factory work. "So what's a paperweight?" asks Rosie Giraffe |
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3.4.2. Compound Words and Social Variation in Bambara's "The Lesson"

Bambara's narration integrates several compound expressions that vividly capture the social and physical environment of Harlem. Examples include 'toy-store window' in "So she leads us around the windows of the toy store and me and Sugar screamin", and 'white folks' in "One lady in a fur coat, hot as it is. White folks crazy."

Similarly, "toy-store window" captures the economic distance between the children's reality and the wealth of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. These compounds serve as linguistic microcosms of the story's themes: the collision of two worlds, the linguistic ingenuity of the narrator, and the tension between poverty and aspiration. It is worth considering that in the analysis of literary works, finding a theme is crucial. It is suggested that "theme is a central feature of literature that makes it worth reading and studying"[25] because it represents an idea about the world that the narrative intends people to know about for its significance in their real life.

The theme of economic inequality in "The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara is shown through the setting of Harlem versus the toy store, the children's reactions, and Miss Moore's role. This theme is important because it shows a bigger problem in society. The story is not just about the experiences of the characters but also talks about unfair systems in society. The story kicks off by showing the characters' poor living conditions in Harlem. The children, including Sylvia, are used to their surroundings. However, when Miss Moore takes them to the fancy F.A.O. Schwarz toy store in Manhattan, they see a world that is very different from their own. Here, compound words have great roles in exploring the main theme of economic inequality. This can be shown via the following table:

Table (5) The Contribution of Compound Words to the Theme of Economic Inequality

| Compound Word | Contribution to Theme of Economic Inequality |
|-------------------|---|
| Big-time | Shows the luxury and importance of items far beyond the children's means. |
| Makeup | Represents wealth and sophistication inaccessible to the children. |
| Price tag | Reinforces the lesson about economic disparity. Directly shocks the children with the reality of expensive goods. |
| Toy store | Central location for the "lesson" in money, privilege, and access. |
| Dressed-up | Symbolizes affluence and social status contrast. |

These words directly expose the children to the economic divide. Bambara uses them to make the children—and the reader—aware of how money affects life choices, access, and social standing. They are the linguistic tools of Miss Moore's lesson.

The intricate role of compound words in “The Lesson” is effective in revealing social and economic divides. Words like *"big-time"*, *"price tag"*, *"toy store"*, *"up-to-date"*, and *"dressed up"* straightforwardly portray how the children experience wealth and how it contrasts with their own impoverished childhood. Instead of thinking about these words as being only descriptive, one would consider them as representing linguistic devices that help the readers and the characters as well, understand the lesson about economic disparity. For instance, the author's portrayal of the *"high-price"* things inside the toy store makes the youngsters astonished, spotlighting the economic disparity between their daily routines and the world of wealth. In the same vein, the children's experience with poor lives and limited funds is depicted through the use of forms like *"hand -me-down"* which stand in opposition to the luxury they encounter during their trip with Miss Moore. In order to reflect this state, forms like *"dressed-up"* and *"young one's education"* are used to accentuate the wealth and opportunity, highlighting ways in which wealth and education enhance social class divisions.

The narrative also integrates everyday language through compound words, grounding the story in the children’s urban environment while subtly contrasting it with the upscale toy store. Bambara’s story “addresses the unfair distribution of resources and opportunities among different groups and races,” and these carefully chosen words make the economic lesson concrete for readers.

Purposely, particular forms are used in “The Lesson” to reflect African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the working-class, urban identity of Sylvia and her friends. For example, 'nappy head' in "----this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup." Is an adjective which appears as a self-referential, prejudiced term for black hair. Depending on the situation, it can be used with pride or insult. Hence, it reflects discourse within the community and opposition to standards of white beauty. A considerable number of compound adjectives, nouns, and idioms are used to indicate social differences demonstrated through the use of language. They show speech patterns distinct from “standard” middle-class English, highlighting cultural identity and resistance. In addition, in "She been screwed into the go-along for so long, it’s a blood-deep natural thing with her", 'go-along' is a hyphenated compound noun used as a component of the system that reflects criticism of Black impoverished people's social hierarchical compliance. Further examples can be inspected in Table No.6 below.

Table (6) Compounds Showing Speech Patterns of (AAVE) Which Demonstrate Cultural Identity.

| Context | Type | Social Meaning / Function |
|--|----------------------|--|
| "----this lady moved on our block with <u>nappy hair</u> and proper speech and no makeup." | Opened adjective | A racialized, self-referential slang for Black hair. Used with pride or insult depending on context. Reflects intra-community talk and resistance to white beauty norms. |
| "Who wants to know about your <u>smelly-ass stationery</u> ," | hyphenated adjective | Common in Black vernacular speech to intensify emotion or insult; show raw, oral street talk typical of Sylvia’s voice. |
| " So, this <u>one-day</u> Miss Moore rounds us all up at the mailbox and it’s <u>puredee</u> hot and she’s knockin | closed adjective | Southern/African American slang meaning “real” or “genuine.” Marks informal, oral heritage and regional dialect. |

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| herself out about arithmetic." | | |
| "Don't nobody want to go for my plan, which is to jump out at the next light and run off to the first <u>bar-b-que</u> we can find." | hyphenated noun | Evokes working-class leisure and community culture — contrast with FAO Schwarz luxury. |
| "But we don't laugh and go into our <u>fat-lady bump-stomach routine</u>." | hyphenated idiom | Childish, playful slang that reveals group identity and creativity in language use. |
| "She been screwed into the <u>go-along</u> for so long, it's a blood-deep natural thing with her." | hyphenated noun | Dialectal — "part of the system." Reflects critique of conformity among poor Black people in social hierarchy. |

These compounds denote Black working-class vernacular, oral ingenuity, and cultural cohesion-distinguishing the children's language from Miss Moore's educated speech and the formal lives of white, upper-class consumerism. What some other compounds are used for is to explicitly demonstrate the difference between the lives of the poor black children and the Whites' prosperity. The words portray distinctive ideological and material discrepancies. Examples of such forms include some hyphenated number compounds manifesting the economic gap; these exact forms resound capitalist language, and seem strange to the children's speech. Among these compounds are: *"five-dollar, thirty-five-dollar, one-thousand-one-hundred-ninety-five-dollar"*. Miss Moore's formal speech - middle-class, educated vocabulary - like *'work area'* and *'college degree'* in *"It's important to have a work area all your own so that ..."* and *"And the starch in my pinafore scratching the shit outta me and I'm really hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree."*, contradicts clearly with Sylvia's slang language. Such words represent the language of opportunity and education. It is also important to note, however, that some other words like *"sailboat, paperweight, letter-opener, fiberglass"* echo uncommon material world of prosperity. In the story, *"So we all jam into the window smudgin it up and the price tag say \$300."*, shows that children fix their eyes on the 'price tag' echoing their awareness to class disparity.

The general point to be made, then, is that there is no correspondence between the lives of the middle class and the poor black people. These compounds reveal the linguistic difference between classes -formal, lexicalized compounds belong to the world of Miss Moore and the rich, while the kids' compounds are earthy, emotional, and oral. The contrast mirrors their socioeconomic gap.

Overall, compound words in *"The Lesson"* contribute to characterization, setting, and, most importantly, the theme of economic inequality. They allow readers to see, hear, and feel the disparities that Miss Moore aims to teach, making the story both educational and socially critical.

4. Discussion

The story starts with revealing the heated relationship between the Black dialect and Standard English through Sylvia's description of Miss Moore, who *"has nappy hair and proper speech"* and has *"been to college"*, which might be enough for the Black children to *"laughed at"* and even *"hated her"*. Miss Moore is the main character in the story. The children associate her with the white affluent class due to her college education and her proper use of language. This emphasizes the distance between her, on the one hand, and

the children and the narrator on the other hand. This might be an expected consequence of their awareness of being excluded by the dominant culture. Surprisingly, the narrator goes on criticizing Miss Moore saying that "*she was black as hell*". This demonstrates Sylvia's awareness of all stereotypes associated with Black people as being dark, criminal, bad, and dishonest.

Yet, this attitude toward Miss Moore and her "boring ass" lesson is largely broken down because the narrator and the other kid's short but profound trip that "seems to be about arithmetic turns to be quite revolutionary"[8]. Actually, Miss Moore encourages them to think deeply about whether the social and economic class distinctions in a country, which appears to be the representative of Democracy, are really equitable and fair. At this point, the children trust Miss Moore because she helps them understand that "*poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie*". However, the children, including the narrator, express their reactions linguistically via using certain forms and structures including compound words. Significantly, the use of compound words in "The Lesson" mirrors the social variation between the children's working-class speech and Miss Moore's standard English. This variation operates on several thematic levels:

1. Categorizing Ethnic and Community Affiliations

Words such as "*ain't*" and "*cause*", and "*y'all*" and compound words like "*nappy hair*", "*smelly-ass*", etc., anchor the text in the urban Black community, referring to common experiences of persistency and shared esprit de corps. In additions, it would be clear the use of particular compound names, such as "*Flyboy*", "*Big But*", and "*Rosie Giraffe*", indicates closeness, solidarity and hierarchy inside the group. Using these forms, Bambara detects the authenticity of the vernacular while focusing on the value of a socially excluded culture.

2. Demonstrating Economic Inequality

To describe the \$35 paperweight she encountered, Sylvia merges the spontaneous compound word "*paperweight-that-costs-so-much*," to reflect emotional resistance. Such constructions are used mainly to demonstrate how language itself struggles to fit in social disparity.

3. Manifesting Conceptual Growth

Using certain complex linguistic forms, such as compounds, reflects Sylvia's developing consciousness when she starts to understand the lesson Miss Moore attempts to convey. The combining of words represents the mingling of viewpoints: the world she is familiar with and the world she is starting to perceive[1].

Evidently, Bambara's choice of these constructions reveals the great role that language plays in unfolding social variation. Using compound forms enunciates what the narrator perceives and how she interprets it as well. Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia stresses that literature displays the coincidence of manifold social voices[26]. Hence, "The Lesson" reflects this statement through the mixing strategy between two different voices- Sylvia's vernacular narration and Miss Moore formal language.

Accordingly, these compounds act as a linguistic means expressing resistance-confronting prevailing linguistic norms while asserting the vitality of working-class speech. These linguistic choices emphasize what Halliday describes as the social semiotic nature of language: linguistic forms are not unbiased, rather, it is shaped by social

context[1]. Apparently, compound words in “The Lesson” translate the interchange of language, identity, and power, making them indispensable to the story’s thematic exploration of social variation.

5. Conclusion

In literature, the narrative voice seeks to reflect the real world it describes. African American writers distinctively meet this requirement when evaluating the impact of using the standard American English against the African American English. In “The Lesson”, Toni Cade Bambara deliberately uses the language of her culture and identity. She turns it to be a great critical tool wherein the African American dialect has become a tool for discovering the voices of the marginalized communities. It is through the use of the language of those marginalized people that Bambara participates in the struggle for retaining the cultural identity of African Americans. The reintroduction of the non-standard African American linguistic aspects in “The Lesson” serves influentially in depicting the power of language in expressing the diverse realities of those who are living in different social contexts. In addition, it functions as a powerful reaction against marginalization.

In “The Lesson”, compound words have an important thematic and grammatical impact. They primarily represent the fusion of community and difference, identification and consciousness, and experience and observation. They serve as stylistic markers indicating the speaker’s background and attitude. Compound words are not only used as one of Bambara's stylistic devices but also as sociolinguistic markers, implying class variation, identity negotiation, and the narrator's increasing recognition of social and economic inequality. Bambara's compounds in “The Lesson” play not only a morphological role but also a social semiotic one-representing the relationship between language, social structure, and ideology. In addition to capturing the rhythm of AAVE, Bambara uses them to reveal how language innovation may convey consciousness and opposition in a hierarchical system. The author intends to tell the readers that social variety is reflected in language and that even the smallest linguistic forms may reveal significant cultural and ideological realities.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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