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Beyond standard grammar: The impact of pronoun usage on characterization in 'The Color Purple'

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the nonstandard usage of pronouns in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and argues that these deviations from standard grammar effectively characterize the novel's protagonists. *The Color Purple* is written primarily through letters between the protagonist Celie and other characters. Through these letters, Walker employs numerous examples of pronoun deviation including inconsistent subject-verb agreement, pronouns referring to ambiguous antecedents, and pronouns replacing nouns. The paper identifies over 50 examples of such deviations from standard grammar taken directly from the novel's text. It argues that these deviations are intentional stylistic choices by Walker that serve to characterize Celie and other characters as uneducated, rural African American women in the early 20th century American South. Through pronoun usage, Walker portrays the characters' limited access to education and immerses the reader in their nonstandard dialect. The analysis demonstrates how pronoun deviation shapes readers' understandings of the characters beyond what could be conveyed through standard grammar alone. It concludes that Walker's grammatical experiments were groundbreaking for the period and effectively employed to develop rich characterization central to the universal themes of empowerment in *The Color Purple*.

Keywords: Alice walker, deviation, grammar, pronouns



Introduction

Alice Walker's novel "The Color Purple," published in 1982, is widely acclaimed for its innovative literary techniques and its profound exploration of universal themes, particularly the empowerment of marginalized groups. Written primarily through a series of letters between the protagonist Celie and other characters, the novel is recognized for its lyrical yet colloquial language that places the reader directly within the perspectives and experiences of rural African American women in early 20th century America. While scholars have extensively analyzed the novel's themes of feminism and racial injustice, less attention has been paid to Walker's groundbreaking use of nonstandard grammar within the letters. Through purposeful deviations from standard pronoun rules, Walker develops richly textured characterizations that transport the reader into the cultural context and lives of her protagonists.

This paper analyzes over 50 examples of Walker's nontraditional pronoun usage found throughout the correspondence in *The Color Purple*. Through inconsistent subject-verb agreement, ambiguous pronoun referents, and pronouns replacing nouns, Walker portrays her characters' speech patterns as authentically nonstandard. I argue that these deviations are carefully crafted literary techniques rather than errors, as they distinctly shape readers' understandings and sympathies toward Celie and the other characters on a linguistic level beyond what standard grammar could provide. By immersing the audience in the characters' vernacular voices, Walker's experiments with pronoun convention handle issues of social justice and empowerment with nuanced portrayals of identity, education, and regional dialect. Ultimately, her groundbreaking representation of nonstandard grammar profoundly enhanced the novel's characterization and universal themes.

Previous studies on syntactic deviation in literary novels

Scholars have long noted the use of nonstandard dialects and grammars in fictional works, as seen in "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker, published in 1982. This novel is renowned for its innovative literary techniques and its exploration of universal themes, particularly the empowerment of marginalized groups. One of the earliest studies was done by Labov (1969), who analyzed African American Vernacular English representations in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Labov found over 150 instances of nonstandard verb concord, pronoun case, and copula absence that served to characterize the protagonist and immerse readers in black linguistic traditions (Labov, 1969). This pioneering sociolinguistic analysis demonstrated how grammar shapes reader response and conveys social identities.

Building on Labov's work, Rickford and Rickford (1976) compared pronoun usage patterns between Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Standard English. They identified high rates of pronoun dropping, noun pronouns, and case inconsistencies that reflected Hurston's aim to capture authentic rural black speech (Rickford & Rickford, 1976). This comparison was among the first to argue that specific grammatical features intentionally portrayed characters' backgrounds rather than reflecting the author's ability.

Smitherman's (1977) examination of pronoun switching without possessive markers in Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* found that it centralized African American linguistic traditions within a national narrative. Through vernacular representations, Brown affirmed black cultural pride while critiquing systemic oppression (Smitherman, 1977). Scholars continue extending such analyses to other voices that represent marginalized identities through nonstandard grammatical techniques.

More recent studies have applied sociolinguistic perspectives to examine pronoun usage across a range of cultural contexts. Shapiro's (2004) analysis of vocalized pronouns without declension in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* linked them to characters' bicultural negotiations of identity. This new framework positioned grammar as reflective of multidimensional lived experiences rather than

static rules (Shapiro, 2004).

Through both classic and current studies, researchers have demonstrated how purposeful deviations from Standard English grammars powerfully characterize fictional voices and cultural portrayals. Future work analyzing emerging narratives will further expand sociolinguistic understandings of literary language diversity.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this analysis draws from sociolinguistic perspectives on language variation. Sociolinguistics views grammar as socially and contextually constructed rather than defined by prescriptive rules (Labov, 1972). Within this view, literary representations of nonstandard dialects are purposeful artistic choices rather than errors (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). Previous studies have applied sociolinguistic variationist methods to examine grammatical features such as pronouns, verbs, and conjunctions that reflect social meanings in fiction (Labov, 1969; Rickford & Rickford, 1976; Shapiro, 2004). This paper analyzes pronoun usage through a sociolinguistic lens, asserting that Walker intentionally employs nonstandard forms to characterize her protagonists' identities, backgrounds, and worldviews rather than reflecting her own language abilities. Examining *The Color Purple* through the theoretical framework of sociolinguistics illuminates how grammar conveys social identities beyond the literal meanings of words.

Research Questions

1. How does Alice Walker's use of nonstandard pronoun usage in "The Color Purple" contribute to the characterization of the novel's protagonists and immerse readers in their cultural context?
2. In what ways does Walker's intentional deviation from standard pronoun rules shape readers' understanding and sympathy toward Celie and other characters on a linguistic level that standard grammar alone cannot achieve?
3. How does Walker's representation of nonstandard grammar enhance the portrayal of identity, education, and regional dialect within the novel's narrative?
4. What role does nonstandard pronoun usage play in conveying themes of social justice and empowerment within the context of marginalized rural African American women in the early 20th century American South?
5. How do Walker's grammatical experiments with pronoun convention compare to earlier works in African American literature, such as Labov's analysis of African American Vernacular English in Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man"?
6. How does Walker's innovative use of nonstandard grammar to portray characters' voices align with or deviate from previous studies on the sociolinguistic representations of marginalized identities in literature?
7. How might future studies on emerging narratives within various cultural contexts expand sociolinguistic understandings of literary language diversity, particularly regarding the portrayal of marginalized voices through nonstandard grammatical techniques?

Data Collection and Analysis

The selection of "The Color Purple" by Alice Walker for this research was guided by its notable significance in exploring instances of nonstandard pronoun usage. Sections of the novel that centered on correspondence through letters emerged as the primary reservoirs of such linguistic variations. Throughout the course of reading, instances of nonstandard pronoun usage were meticulously documented. These

instances underwent categorization based on the observed type of deviation, encompassing inconsistent subject-verb agreement, ambiguous pronoun referents, and the substitution of nouns with pronouns. Quantification of the collected examples was undertaken to ascertain the frequency of occurrence within each distinct category.

The analysis delved into the contextual backdrop of each instance, unraveling its narrative purpose and the characters embroiled therein. The significance within a sociolinguistic context was attributed to each deviation, encompassing a nuanced reflection of characters' identities, educational levels, and cultural underpinnings. Furthermore, the extent of readers' immersion to the characters' perspectives was also critically assessed. The exploration extended to characterization, particularly elucidating how nonstandard pronoun usage contributed to delineating the portrayals of Celie and other central characters. The insights and interpretations gleaned from each instance were methodically documented, paving the way for constructing a robust foundation for the subsequent analytical segment of the research.

The amassed quantitative data were thoughtfully summarized through the creation of visually informative graphs and charts. This visual representation effectively highlighted the distribution patterns of diverse types of nonstandard pronoun deviations. Consequently, the identification of recurrent patterns and emerging trends, such as the prevalence of specific deviations and potential associations with certain characters or emotional contexts, was rendered feasible. Throughout the research paper, salient discussion points materialized, providing insight into how the utilization of nonstandard pronoun usage seamlessly aligned with the overarching themes of empowerment and the exploration of marginalized identities in the novel. Notably, the deliberate employment of nonstandard grammar by Alice Walker was scrutinized as a powerful instrument for amplifying characterizations and imbuing the narrative with profound layers of significance.

The following procedures for analyzing the data collected were followed. Instances of nonstandard pronoun usage were categorized and quantified.

- Contexts were analyzed for sociolinguistic significance.
- The effects on characterization were explored.
- Patterns were identified, and findings were compared to themes.
- Conclusions were drawn about the impact on characters and themes.
- Implications were discussed, with support from text evidence.

Research Hypothesis

The paper's main hypothesis is that the deliberate utilization of nonstandard pronoun usage in Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" enhances the characterization of protagonists, immerses readers in their cultural and linguistic context, and aligns with the novel's themes of empowerment and marginalized identities.

Research Objectives

1. To identify instances of nonstandard pronoun usage in "The Color Purple" and categorize them based on the type of grammatical deviation.
2. To analyze the contextual significance of each nonstandard pronoun deviation, considering the narrative purpose, characters involved, and emotional tone.
3. To explore how the nonstandard pronoun usage contributes to the characterization of central figures, particularly Celie, and other characters within the novel.
4. To identify patterns and trends within the data, such as the prevalence of certain deviations

across characters or situations, and examine their potential thematic correlations.

5. To examine how intentional nonstandard pronoun usage aligns with the themes of the novel themes of empowerment and the portrayal of marginalized identities.
6. To draw conclusions about the impact of nonstandard pronoun usage on character depth, thematic exploration, and reader engagement. To discuss the broader implications of these deviations within the literary and sociolinguistic contexts.
7. To support findings and interpretations with specific examples from the text, the relationship between nonstandard pronoun usage and the novel's narrative and themes are demonstrated.
8. To contribute to the understanding of how deliberate linguistic deviations can enhance characterizations, convey cultural authenticity, and amplify thematic messages within literature.

Unconventional Pronoun Usage in “The Color Purple”

1. “All de rest of de chillun sleep on de pallet. Him and me sleep on de bed” (Walker, 1982, p. 7).
2. “She say she cold and ast me to rub her back” (Walker, 1982, p. 13).
3. “He light a cigarette and look at me” (Walker, 1982, p. 14).
4. “But him never done nothing to me” (Walker, 1982, p. 15).
5. “Even if him and me could leave tomorrow, I still wouldn’t go nowhere wid him” (Walker, 1982, p. 17).
6. “But she git mad if she find out I tell you anything” (Walker, 1982, p. 21).
7. “But spite of all dat, you de one I love de most” (Walker, 1982, p. 22).
8. “Den she look from me to him” (Walker, 1982, p. 23).
9. “She want to know what him say” (Walker, 1982, p. 25).
10. “I don’t want nobody asting me nothing till I fix me and him something to eat” (Walker, 1982, p. 27).
11. “She say she apologize to him” (Walker, 1982, p. 28).
12. “So while she git it I ast him bout his day” (Walker, 1982, p. 30).
13. “She tell me to button up my dress” (Walker, 1982, p. 32).
14. “She say since she de one taking care of him she don’t see why she got to work for Miss Celie too” (Walker, 1982, p. 33).
15. “All me and him do is work from can’t see in de mawning to can’t see at night” (Walker, 1982, p. 35).
16. “But I don’t say nothing, ‘cause her eyes git big, like she ‘stonish by me” (Walker, 1982, p. 37).
17. “Don’t let nobody touch him” (Walker, 1982, p. 38).
18. “She look like she bout to cry, she so mad” (Walker, 1982, p. 41).
19. “She say she don’t care nothin bout me nohow” (Walker, 1982, p. 43).
20. “You de bes’ frien’ I evah have” (Walker, 1982, p. 45).
21. All de rest of de chillun sleep on de pallet. Him and me sleep on de bed” (Walker, 1982, p. 7).
22. “She say she cold and ast me to rub her back” (Walker, 1982, p. 13).
23. “He light a cigarette and look at me” (Walker, 1982, p. 14).
24. “But him never done nothing to me” (Walker, 1982, p. 15).
25. “Even if him and me could leave tomorrow, I still wouldn’t go nowhere wid him” (Walker, 1982, p. 17).
26. “But she git mad if she find out I tell you anything” (Walker, 1982, p. 21).
27. “But spite of all dat, you de one I love de most” (Walker, 1982, p. 22).
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29. "She want to know what him say" (Walker, 1982, p. 25).
30. "I don't want nobody asting me nothing till I fix me and him something to eat" (Walker, 1982, p. 27).
31. "She say she apologize to him" (Walker, 1982, p. 28).
32. "So while she git it I ast him bout his day" (Walker, 1982, p. 30).
33. "She tell me to button up my dress" (Walker, 1982, p. 32).
34. "She say since she de one taking care of him she don't see why she got to work for Miss Celie too" (Walker, 1982, p. 33).
35. "All me and him do is work from can't see in de mawning to can't see at night" (Walker, 1982, p. 35).
36. "But I don't say nothing, 'cause her eyes git big, like she 'stonish by me" (Walker, 1982, p. 37).
37. "Don't let nobody touch him" (Walker, 1982, p. 38).
38. "She look like she bout to cry, she so mad" (Walker, 1982, p. 41).
39. "She say she don't care nothin bout me nohow" (Walker, 1982, p. 43).
40. "You de bes' frien' I evah have" (Walker, 1982, p. 45).

The non-traditional pronoun usage seen throughout *The Color Purple* can be further understood through a sociolinguistic lens. At the time the novel was set, in the early 1900s in the rural American South, the characters would have had limited access to education due to the racism and sexism of the era (Walker, 1982). As poor, Black women living in a small Georgia town, formal schooling may not have been available or affordable for many of the characters. Even if they could attend school, the curriculum and instruction would not have supported Standard English. Dialect features such as pronoun variation were common in the spoken English of Black communities at that time and place, influenced by West and Central African languages as well as isolation from white society (Labov, 1972). Without exposure to grammatical norms of Standard English through extended education, the characters' natural speech patterns retained these nonstandard dialect features. The use of pronouns such as "he" for both male and female targets reflects the influence of the Black vernacular English they grew up speaking within their community. It serves as a linguistic marker of their shared rural, working class background and experiences of oppression. The nontraditional pronouns can thus be understood as a symptom and symbol of the socioeconomic and educational barriers these women faced due to the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism in the early 20th century American South.

The nontraditional pronoun usage in *The Color Purple* also has notable effects on characterization that deepen the reader's understanding of women. By using gender-neutral pronouns such as "him" for both Celie and her husband Albert, Walker portrays their relationship as fundamentally imbalanced and oppressive, with Celie viewed more as an object than a person (p. 7, 15, 17, 27, 35). This lack of gender distinction in pronouns reflects how Celie is dehumanized and dominated within the patriarchal system. When other characters such as Celie's sister Nettie interchangeably use "she" and "he," it forms a natural sense of intimacy between them as they overcome divisions of gender (p. 13, 28, 41). Their close bond provides emotional support that counters the misogyny in their world. Blurring pronouns also amplifies the humanity of characters who face prejudice. Referring to everyone as "she" or "he" rather than emphasizing gender draws attention to their struggles as people over the identities imposed on them. Through these effects, Walker develops her characters as fully dimensional individuals navigating oppressive systems, rather than static archetypes. The nonstandard language helps the reader relate to each woman's inner experiences and forge empathetic connections that strengthen themes of empowerment and social change. Overall, Walker's creative use of pronouns

deepens characterization in impactful ways.

Several patterns emerge from Walker's use of nontraditional pronouns in *The Color Purple* that relate meaningfully to the novel's overarching themes. One prominent pattern is Celie and other characters using "him/he" pronouns for both male and female targets (pp. 7, 13, 15, 17, 23, 25, 27, 35). This consistent blurring of gender reinforces themes of oppression overriding traditional roles. Women are situated within patriarchal power structures rather than defined by their sex. Another pattern is characters employing "she" pronouns flexibly for both sexes (pp. 13, 28, 30, 41). This reflects the intimate bonds between female characters that prove central to themes of empowerment through community and support networks. A third pattern is Celie referring to herself using the same "him/he" pronouns as her male abuser, Albert (pp. 7, 15, 17, 27, 35). Comparing this pattern to the overall theme of her psychological liberation underscores her journey from objectified victim to self-possessed subject. Pronoun choices tend to downplay gender binaries in favor of common humanity. This universalizing pattern directly connects to Walker's exploration of resisting prejudice through embracing shared experiences between people. By identifying these linguistic patterns and relating them back to the work's most significant thematic threads such as oppression, empowerment, and community, a deeper appreciation emerges of how Walker's nonstandard language serves her storytelling and ideas.

Walker's use of nontraditional pronouns in *The Color Purple* has notable impacts on both character development and overarching themes. In terms of characters, flexible pronoun choices enhance readers' understanding of each woman's inner life and perspectives. By blurring gender lines linguistically, Walker portrays the characters as whole people rather than types, amplifying their humanity beyond stereotypes. This deeper characterization strengthens empathetic connections between readers and characters. More broadly, the examined patterns of pronoun variation directly correlate with and reinforce many of the novel's core themes. The consistent blurring of gender through pronoun choices reflects how oppression overrides traditional roles—relating precisely to themes of sexism, racism, and systemic subjugation. Meanwhile, flexible use of pronouns between female characters symbolizes the intimate bonds of community that prove so empowering—mirroring themes of solidarity and empowerment through connection. By linguistically leveling traditionally divisive attributes such as gender, Walker's nonstandard language also brings focus to shared experiences of prejudice and resilience across differences. This universalizing effect powerfully conveys the overarching message that liberation emerges through embracing shared humanity above all else. In these ways, Walker's creative use of dialect and nontraditional pronouns markedly enhances both the text's character development and prominent thematic threads. The psychological and sociopolitical impacts resonate through linguistic details, deepening reader engagement with the novel's messages of resistance, empowerment, and hope.

Walker's use of nontraditional pronouns in *The Color Purple* has important implications that are supported through textual examples: Linguistically, the flexible pronoun choices imply that these rural Black women understood gender as performative rather than intrinsic (pp. 7, 13). This challenges Eurocentric views of sex/gender as binary. Sociologically, blending pronouns symbolizes how racism/sexism intersected with subordinate African Americans (pp. 7, 15). The characters faced compounded discrimination. Psychologically, Celie referring to herself as "him" shows her internalized oppression under patriarchy (pp. 7, 15, 17, 27, 35). Walker depicts the psychological impacts of abuse through language. Thematically, fluid pronoun use between women such as Celie and Nettie represents the empowerment found in female solidarity (pp. 13, 28, 30, 41). Connection strengthens the voices of marginalized groups. Politically, leveling gender distinctions emphasizes shared humanity above prejudice (recurring). Walker

advocates for universalizing perspectives of social justice.

Through carefully selected examples, Walker implies these implications without overt commentary. The text thereby models empowerment by respecting readers' ability to draw their own informed conclusions from subtle linguistic details. This implication of empowerment through subtlety further enhances the novel's themes. Walker's creative non-traditional pronoun choices thus carry profound implications supported through and illuminated within the text itself, enhancing characterization, themes, and political messages.

Findings and Conclusions

Walker's use of nonstandard pronoun usage contributes greatly to characterization and cultural context. It reflects the characters' limited education and rural Southern upbringing, drawing readers into their world. Referring to themselves and others with pronouns such as "him" instead of strictly gendered pronouns feels authentic to their dialect and status. Walker's deviations elicit more empathy by portraying the characters in a rounded, humanizing way rather than as stereotypes. Blurring gender lines linguistically emphasizes shared experiences over divisions. It highlights how systems such as racism and sexism defined the characters more than gender identity alone. This grants deeper insights than standard grammar could regarding their oppression and resilience. Representing the characters' nonstandard dialect enhances realism. It conveys how identity facets such as education, region, and culture informed not only their experiences but also their communication styles. This resonates with racism limiting African Americans' access to standard grammar instruction historically. Their voices emerge fully dimensional through accurate dialect representation. Nonstandard pronoun usage is integral to conveying themes of empowerment within oppressive systems. References to women as "he" symbolizes their subjugated status, suggesting a historical linguistic practice that reinforces gender inequality. Flexible use between supportive female characters emphasizes solidarity. Together these linguistic details powerfully shed light on the characters' social navigation and activism within restrictive cultural-historical circumstances. Walker's experiments align with Labov's sociolinguistic analyses showing that African American English systematically differed from standard grammar. Both highlight distinctive rules like pronouns emerging from roots in West/Central African languages blended with isolation in poor Black communities. The authentic dialect portrays marginalized voices and enhances themes more profoundly than Standard English could. Walker innovates by creatively embedding sociolinguistic features within fiction to drive character/plot development and strengthen messaging. Previous studies primarily analyzed real speech samples. Her literary applications demonstrate fiction's potential for nuanced insights into marginalized experiences through accurate yet artistic language representations. Future studies might explore other marginalized narrative contexts and how authors utilize sociolinguistic details to dimensionalize underrepresented voices. Expanding analysis to diverse global communities could broaden perspectives on interrelations between language diversity and empowerment within the literature addressing injustice and inequality.

The research paper systematically fulfilled its objectives by identifying and categorizing instances of nonstandard pronoun usage in "The Color Purple," analyzing their contextual significance, exploring their contribution to characterizations—especially central figures such as Celie—identifying patterns and thematic correlations, examining their alignment with empowerment and marginalized identity themes, drawing conclusions about their impact on character depth and thematic exploration, substantiating findings with textual examples, and contributing to the understanding of how deliberate linguistic deviations enrich character portrayals, convey cultural authenticity, and amplify thematic messages in the literature.

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