

Linguistic Play and the Vernacular Way: The Use of *Ain't* on CNN.com

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There is perhaps no greater example of the powerful effect of prescriptive grammarians on the English language than the word *ain't*. It first appeared as a contraction of *am* and *not* in the eighteenth century, and within the next 150 years it acquired the stigma that plagues it to this day. When a search through CNN's online archive yields 190 articles that contain the string *ain't*, however, it is safe to say that the word has found its niche within Standard American English (SAE). In this paper I analyze the 82 unique instances of the word that have occurred over the past two years in online CNN articles. While the results do reflect to an extent the continued use of the word as an ordinary contraction in several nonstandard varieties of English, they also show that the word has been adopted as a rhetorical device in certain domains of discourse, most notably entertainment and politics. By slipping the word once—and only once—into their discourse, politicians, movie reviewers, and anyone else with the freedom and desire, can simultaneously emphasize a point with a playfully dictatorial edge, and try to remove any perceived starch from their otherwise button-down demeanor.

Background

According to Flexner (1976), *ain't* started out as *an't* (*am*+ *not*), which was first recorded in 1706. By the 1830s, however, its use was extended to cover not only first-person singular, but all other forms as well, in addition to forms of the auxiliary verb *have* (e.g. *I ain't (haven't) done it*). Initial criticism against these new uses was so strong that the word fell out of favor among educated speakers, even in its original sense *am not*. Now anyone using the contraction in earnest is subject to the ironically phrased—and nowadays frequently incorrect—reprobation, “*Ain't ain't* in the dictionary.” Those who bemoan this stigma are quick to point out that the word, when used in its original sense, fills a gap in the English contraction system: whereas the

construction “Ain’t I...” used to be acceptable, speakers now resort to saying “Aren’t I...” Nunberg (2002) points out, however, that there is little chance of reviving the form back into standard use, because speakers have begun using it in a way that depends on its slangy nature:

Educated speakers have always used “ain’t” when they feel like a little linguistic slumming. But in recent years I’m hearing them use it more and more in a different way, when they want to suggest that a fact is just obvious on the face of things. A while ago a friend sent me an article from the ‘Chronicle of Higher Education’ that quoted a dean at a prestigious Eastern university: “Any junior scholar who pays attention to teaching at the expense of research ain’t going to get tenure.” That “ain’t” was a nice touch, I thought. It made it clear that the dean’s conclusion wasn’t based on expert knowledge or some recent committee report—it was something that should be clear to anyone with an ounce of sense.

In order to better understand the specific contexts in which speakers permit themselves this kind of “linguistic slumming,” and to test whether this use indeed represents a clear-on-the-face-of-things interpretation, I chose to analyze a particular domain of discourse in which several shades of use may occur. Article writers, forced to conform to Standard American English, are only able to use the word in special cases. Other people quoted in the news, on the other hand, may either be using it as part of their natural language, or, if their speech is otherwise standard, they may have their own rhetorical motive in mind.

Methodology

After a search for the string *ain’t* on CNN.com yielded 190 articles, I focused on the 82 that had occurred within the past two years (3/5/02—3/4/04). For each article, I noted which section of the news it occurred in (World, US, Weather, Business, Sports, Politics, Law, Technology, Science & Space, Health, Entertainment, Travel, Education, or Special Reports). Then I observed the specific context in which the word *ain’t* appeared, including whether it was used by the author of the article, in a quotation by somebody else, or as part of a song title or lyric. When authors of CNN articles use the word *ain’t*, they have a definite rhetorical intent in

mind, but when the word occurred in a quotation, I then further judged—when possible—whether the word was used seriously as part of the speaker’s natural dialect, or whether it was used facetiously. I judged the use serious if it was used in a clearly non-emphatic way and with no obvious rhetorical motive in mind, and I judged the use facetious when it was used in a clearly emphatic way within the context of otherwise standard English. In many cases such a clear distinction was difficult to make, and I marked the use ambiguous.

Results

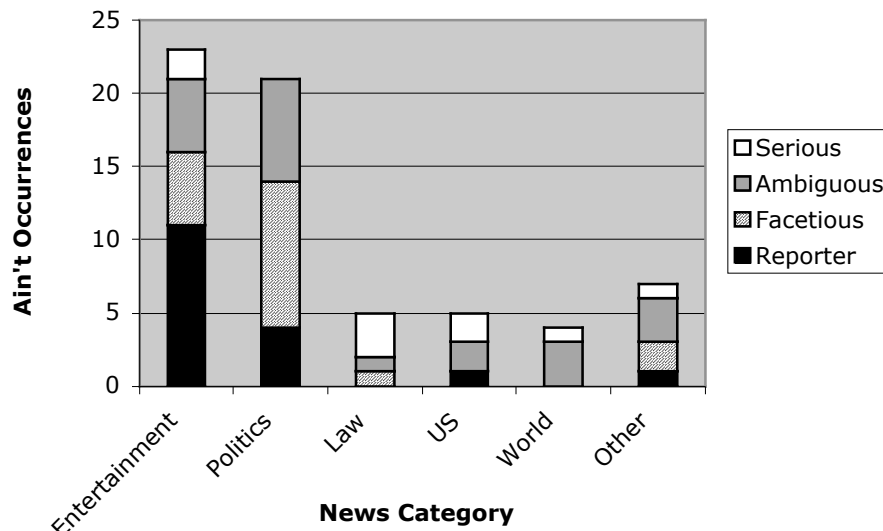


Figure 1: Ain't Distributions by News Category and Usage Type

Unfortunately no information is available on the total number of articles that appeared in each category over the two years, but given the importance of, for example, the US and World categories in reporting the news, it is unlikely that their low numbers here are merely due to fewer articles overall. Of the 82 tokens gathered, 17 occurred as part of song titles or lyrics (all of which were in Entertainment articles). For the remaining 65, Figure 1 above shows their distribution by news category. The columns are further divided to show how many of each usage

type occurred within each news category. Note that Serious, Ambiguous and Facetious types all denote direct quotations (i.e. *ain't* was not the author's own word.)

Even after removing the 17 song title/lyric uses, the Entertainment category still leads with 23 tokens, 11 of which were used directly by the author of the article. Following closely, the Politics channel contains 21 tokens, but only 4 of them are used by the author. The remaining categories exhibit relatively few tokens, and most of them are used in quotations or by interviewees who are clearly using the form either as a natural part of their dialect, or in a way that makes it difficult to tell.

Table 1 below shows prototypical examples for selected categories of use, along with the relevant context in which they occurred.

Category	Quote	Context
Entertainment—reporter	So “Rocky” it ain’t.	Negative movie review.
Entertainment—facetious	Well, I ain’t changin’.	Actor, on his character’s role in movie remake.
Politics—reporter	Perhaps Howard Dean was hoping Recordgate would fade into the shadows in the wake of the Gore supernova. It ain’t happening.	Description of link to Washington Post article.
Politics—facetious	I’ve thought a lot about the world and how George Bush sees the world and it ain’t even close.	Quote by democratic candidate.
Law—serious	You’re lucky somebody ain’t out there to put a bullet in your head.	Overheard phone threat in murder case.
U.S.—serious	Don’t raise your hand to a child—it ain’t worth it.	Former abusive mother’s advice to other parents, in interview.
World—ambiguous	If you’re embedded, you’re one of us, and we ain’t gonna let nary one of you get hurt.	Said by doctor to journalists stationed in Kuwait.
Travel—ambiguous	Oh, the city ain’t nothing but a big rip off, man.	New Orleans swamp-tour captain in interview.

Table 1: Selected examples of the use of *ain't* on CNN.com¹

¹ All articles quoted in this table, and through out the rest of the paper, are available in CNN’s online archives at <http://www.cnn.com>.

Discussion

I. Reporter use

Because of the great stigma against the word *ain't* in SAE, reporters cannot get away with using it as an ordinary function word. When they do use it, then, there must be some rhetorical justification; after all, it is widely held that only good writers are allowed to break the rules. In the data gathered, the use of the word has two noticeably recurring effects. First, it injects levity into the sentence: intentionally using a nonstandard form is playful. Second, it suggests that the idea being expressed is immediately obvious and closed for debate, as Nunberg noted. “‘The Sopranos’ ain’t quite as good as it used to be” says one article. How can one argue with a sentiment so simple that such nonstandard (and hence, in the eyes of the public at large, crass) language suffices to express it?

These two effects explain why reporter use of the word occurs for the most part in the Entertainment channel. On the first count, entertainment is one of the more “playful” domains of news reporting. Since it does, after all, cater to those interested in being entertained, writers have a liberty to be somewhat jocular. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a sentence such as “Things ain’t looking good for this convicted killer” in the US section, simply because the gravity of the situation requires a more somber tone. On the second count, entertainment writers, because they often write movie or TV show reviews, have more freedom to delve into opinion than in the other more factual domains of the news. As stated above, using *ain't* suggests that the claim being made is obvious. Pragmatically speaking, the fact that a statement would require such emphasis implies that it is, at some level, mere opinion; a purely factual, incontestable statement would be sufficient in itself.

There is, however, one arguably more serious domain of the news in which reporters also sometimes have occasion to use *ain't*: politics. “You ain’t seen nothing yet,” states the caption to an article on the impending fiasco of the California recall election. This perhaps mirrors the popular notion that politics is a mere game, and as such it is appropriate to occasionally lighten the mood with this nonstandard form. These examples, then, are revealing of the possible intentions behind using the form. The writers, whether in the domain of entertainment or politics, want to show that they are not excessively stodgy; that despite their carefully polished prose they are not above roughing it in appropriate situations.

Given the role of *ain't* in news domains that emphasize opinion, it is interesting to note that no such usage occurs in the Travel or Sports section. Without further research into why this might be the case, one can only speculate that this is due to there being fewer articles overall in these areas. After all, only 11 reporters usages occurred in the Entertainment channel over the course of two years; this is less than once every two months.

II. Facetious Use in Quotation

Unlike reporters, people quoted in the news are usually not directly bound to any externally imposed linguistic standard. On the other hand, *ain't* is often facetious, just as it is for reporters, and thus the same dynamics are operating. The majority of such examples occur in Politics articles, and are usually in quotes by politicians. Here, the intention behind the word becomes more salient. Whereas article writers are merely concerned with writing good articles, politicians are concerned with public opinion. As such, their relatively high use of the word *ain't* is indicative of their desire to appear down-to-earth. Also, as with article writers, the word has the effect of emphasizing opinion. It is in this domain that such tried-and-true platitudes as “you ain’t seen nothing yet” and “it ain’t going to happen” often show up. These expressions convey

the plain-spoken determination that impresses the public. The second largest vehicle of this category of usage is the Entertainment channel. “Tiger Woods I ain’t,” says Tom Clancy, addressing his golf skills in an interview. Here, actors, actresses, and other entertainment figures, who have similar vested interest in public opinion, also play themselves down with a bit of nonstandard English.

III. Ambiguous Use in Quotation

One tip-off that *ain't* is intended facetiously is its presence within a fixed expression: *things ain't what they used to be; if it ain't broke, don't fix it*, or the cookie-cutter phrase *such-and-such it ain't*, where *such-and-such* is anything being contrasted with *it*. Often, however, this is not the case, and because *ain't* is indeed a naturally occurring, standard function word in some dialects of English, it is sometimes unclear whether a given use of the word by a non-reporter is indeed intended as a rhetorical device.

Because African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) employs the contraction as a normal function word, it is not always apparent whether African-Americans in the media are using it facetiously. Most likely, however, many of them realize that the public will perceive it as nonstandard, and they want this effect. In other words, it is part of a conscious choice to foster a desired public image. In Sports, for example, a prominent African-American basketball player was quoted as saying, “I ain’t going nowhere.” While this is clearly an emphatic statement, this construction could very well be natural in his dialect of English. As seen in the Politics channel, many African-American politicians perhaps intentionally maintain a variety of AAVE in order to come across as genuine or uncorrupted. A sentence such as “There ain’t nobody got capital gains” is more indicative of a large-scale dialectal variation than a mere quaint use of *ain't*, and so it is neither clearly emphatic nor clearly without self-consciousness. Finally, in the

Entertainment channel, there are a number of ambiguous examples by actors and actresses, some, but not all, of whom are African-American. As mentioned above, both politicians and entertainment figures are concerned with public image. When part of this image includes using nonstandard English, *ain't* is often the result.

IV: Serious Use in Quotation

If the data collected in this research is taken as representative, then the media offers a grim picture of the kinds of people who use the word *ain't* as part of their natural dialect. Of the nine examples gathered, four are from murder suspects, one is from a police officer suspected of beating an arrestee, and one is from a reformed abusive mother. While this situation might not be so grim if some of the ambiguous cases treated above were resolved and deemed serious, there are also three cases where non-criminals are clearly using the word non-emphatically. An African-American rapper, for example, stated in an interview, “Which is, it ain't a bad thing, it just makes you go off and do other things.” The way *ain't* occurs in a phrase inserted parenthetically within a larger thought clearly demonstrates that the word is part of his fluent speech. As with some of the ambiguous cases, though, it is likely that this forms part of a larger dialectal variation, which, while natural, is intentionally maintained in order to create a desired public image.

V: Use in Song Titles and Lyrics

A full 17 of the 83 instances of *ain't* gathered occurred as part of song titles or lyrics. While these may be of secondary importance here because in their original context they were neither intended for the news or newsworthy in any other way, they are still indicative of a significant domain of usage. Of all places, freedom from stiffness is especially important in songs, which are largely used to induce tranquility. Songwriters can use *ain't* as a linguistic

shorthand for lightening up the mood. The song title “Age ain’t nothing but a number,” for example, might lose some of its soulful edge as the more matter-of-factly phrased “Age isn’t anything but a number.”

Conclusions

A clear demonstration of linguistic power-play emerges from the various ways different people use *ain't*. Because of the historically arbitrary stigma against the word, the dominant social class has shed itself of an ordinary function word, and now sees it as a sign of ignorance when used without specific intent in normal speech. Speakers of socially marginalized dialects of English, on the other hand, continue to use the word freely. While this stigma gives the socially dominant one more way to set themselves apart, they then take it a step further by co-opting the word in a way that exploits its now stigmatized nature. As the data show, news reporters, actors and actresses, and politicians, all of whom speak Standard American English, have the option of using the word to ingratiate themselves with the public by showing that they are not aloof. At the same time, those who continue to use the word naturally seem all the more powerless: people can symbolically stoop down to their level when appropriate, but they themselves have no choice but to stay where they are.

Time will tell whether *ain't* will continue to be preserved in earnest in nonstandard varieties of English, or whether the effects of social evaluation will limit the context of the word to a few fossilized expressions, as is slowly occurring in standard English. We can lament the loss of a useful contraction, or of prescriptivism as a whole, and its effects on people’s attitudes toward nonstandard language, but there is no denying the social stratification that this word has helped demonstrate. As always, things just ain’t what they used to be.

Works Cited

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