

Black Rhetoric/ Black Language: Discourse Strategies & Communication Styles--- by Carmen Kynard (Spring 2025)

Approaching Black Language Rhetorically/Philosophically:

- 1) means looking at the ways specific cultural histories are communicated, where attitudes toward life itself are central;
 2) means hearing/seeing/feeling stories, dance, sound, images, bodies, and everyday banter from within belief systems, a sense of the past, notions of shared identity, political contexts, and communal aspirations.

PART I: Highly Researched Aspects of Black Rhetoric in Literary & Educational Studies

Strategy	Explanation of Discourse Strategy	What examples of this discourse strategy did you hear/feel? What's the communication philosophy? Purpose?
Call-and-Response	Rhetors become directly involved with their topics (also called direct address) and seem to be speaking to the audience. It is almost as if they are waiting for a response when they are asking questions. This is very different from using the traditional academic/school convention of distancing yourself, staying neutral, or avoiding personal injections.	
Signifyin'	This is the art of insult where humorous and/or decorous put-downs serve as an indirect form of serious criticism or casual joking. Such verbal indirection is also linked to cultural survivance as in the African American Spiritual during slavery, "Steal Away," which referenced slave escapes as well as a heavenly home.	
Tonal Semantics	The sounds of things get captured through repetition, alliteration, and rhyme. Think of talk-singing and intonational stresses where sound communicates meaning. With "intonational contouring," there might also be specific stresses and pitches in pronunciations (like PO-lice for police).	
Semantic Inversion	This refers to reversals in meaning. Rhetors bring attention and impact by using a term and yet mean the exact opposite. A well-known and still popular semantic version is: bad meaning good (i.e., <i>that dress is baaad</i> is a HIGH compliment).	
Directness	This is verbal aggression that is regarded as confrontational. In other words, these rhetors get all up-in-yo-face and forego more Westernized and bourgeois notions of fake-politeness and etiquette (and, therefore, not "appropriate" for academic/school/professional writing, etc).	
Narrative Sequencing	These are meandering stories that are narrated right alongside a main story. Narrative sequencing remains a highly discussed aspect of Black children's discourse styles since it often stigmatizes them. When asked to offer an explanation, many Black children tell a sequence of stories vs. a linear record and often get regarded as inadequate.	

PART II: More Units of Expression as Defined by Geneva Smitherman	
<p><u>Proverbial Statement & Aphoristic Phrasing</u> Sprinkling of a text with familiar Black proverbs or sayings (notice how we do not depict Black words and sayings to mere “slang”)</p>	
<p><u>Spontaneity & Improvisation</u> Use of spur-of-the-moment ideas, audience response, or new member participation to extend the conversation and experience</p>	
<p><u>Image-Making & Metaphor</u> Use of images, metaphors, and imaginative language</p>	
<p><u>Braggadocio</u> Boasts about one’s abilities and selfhood</p>	
<p><u>Exaggerated Language</u> Unusual/ uncommon words, high talk, rarely used expressions</p>	
<p><u>Mimicry</u> Imitations or mannerisms of someone else (for effect, ridicule, or authenticity)</p>	
<p><u>Punning & Play on Words</u> Use of common Black experiences to show verbal wit</p>	

NOTE: The point is for these definitions to become a natural part of how you talk about and hear Black rhetoric/Black language. We use these definitions to build new vocabularies and understandings beyond the white teaching canons of ethos, pathos, logos, linearity, abstraction, distance, politeness, etc.