

**A Linguistic Analysis of the Untold  
Stories in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help***

---

**Dr. Rehab Farouk Gad**

*Lecturer of Linguistics  
Mansoura University  
Faculty of Arts  
Department of English  
PhD University of Leeds*

**Abstract**

Though rejected by some publishers, *The Help*, a novel by Kathryn Stockett, a contemporary American author, was eventually accepted and published in many countries and languages, ending on The New York Times Best Seller list in 2011. In this novel, Stockett depicts the brutality against African-Americans by telling some stories about the lives of black women; it critically highlights the Whites' colonial enslaving strategy that seeks to distort and obliterate the history of the Blacks (the untold stories). This is accomplished through a variety of linguistic tools which are meant to show the Blacks as inferior and to justify the slavery of the Blacks.

As the novel vividly describes the Black-White conflict, most of the literature has focused on the analysis of its social value and theme rather than its literary or stylistic features. The present paper provides a stylistic analysis focusing on the language employed. The theoretical framework within which this study is conducted is that given by Geoffrey Leech (2007) in his *Style in Fiction*. The paper therefore examines the novel's stylistic features especially *lexical* features, such as the choice of slang words. It also deals with syntactic features such as sentence patterns and structures. The paper also discusses two different linguistic styles of narration: the one by black women, the other by white ones. Analyzing the novel with the help of linguistic tools has made it possible to deal with both social and psychological issues as well as to examine the role language plays to convey some untold stories, and to reflect a dramatic shift from a state of identity loss to a state of self-consciousness that black women experienced. The paper falls into the following sections: section (1)

surveys the narrative modes employed in *The Help*. Section (2) describes the main features of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and provides a brief background on the Black-White conflict. Section (3) analyses the lexical features of *The Help* within the framework of Leech's *Style in Fiction* and section (4) provides a syntactic analysis of the text. In section (5), conclusion and remarks derived from the analysis are summed up.

**Keywords:** Narrative modes; African American Vernacular English; Stylistic Analysis.

## 1. The Narrative Modes

Identifying the units of narrative is a challenging task. As Culler (1975, 123) argues, the examination of plot structure is difficult as it requires determining the units of narratives and investigating how these units integrate. Culler (1975, 126) discusses different theories governing the investigation of structure or units of plot. According to him, theory A assumes the existence of three classes of elements: situations, thoughts and actions. Theory B assumes that plot contains actions which succeed, actions which fail and actions which neither succeed nor fail but maintain the story. For theory C, a plot contains actions which destroy equilibrium, actions which restore equilibrium and actions which seek to destroy equilibrium.

Rutherford (1975, 178) argues that there are three main parts of narrative texts: character ('man'), setting ('space'), and story ('time'). In *The Help*, there are two different linguistic styles of narration: one by a white woman (Ms. Skeeter) and the other by black women (e.g., Aibileen and Minny). So, we can say that the novel contains two narrative processes: one made up of the events as they actually happen, and the other of Ms. Skeeter's as well as the reader's quest for the truth about the stories told by the black maids. The untold stories of the black women are revealed by some main characters like Aibileen. She represents a type of narration which Labov (1972, 354) referred to as *narration of personal experience*. Aibileen narrates and comments on events of her past:

"I LOST MY OWN BOY, Treelore, right before I started waiting on Miss Leefolt..... That was the day my whole world went black. Air look black, sun look black. I laid up in bed and stared at the black walls a my house..... A bitter seed was planted inside a me. And I just didn't feel so accepting anymore."(p.2)

What is so special about Aibileen's narration here is that her words represent a type of narration referred to as *minimal narrative*. It appears as a sequence of clauses temporally ordered. If any change occurs to the temporal order, a semantic interpretation will consequently change. Though this excerpt contains 28 sentences, only 12 are narrative clauses and the other 16 clauses are supportive and do not serve as narrative clauses. These narrative clauses are classified as indicated by the following table based on Labov (1972, pp.363-370):

-	Type of narrative clause	Meaning of this type	Example from Aibileen's narration (p.2)
1	Abstract	an initial clause in a narrative that reports the entire sequence of events of the narrative	I LOST MY OWN BOY, Treelore,
2	Orientation clause	gives information on the time or place of the events of a narrative, the identities of the participants and/or their initial behavior	right before I started waiting on Miss Leefolt
3	Complicating action	complicating action is a sequential clause that reports a next event in response to a potential question	By the time I found out, he was dead.
4	resolution	the set of complicating actions that follow the most reportable event.	That was the day my whole world went black. Air look black, sun look black. I laid up in bed and stared at the black walls a my house
5	Coda	a final clause which returns the narrative to the time of speaking, precluding a potential question	A bitter seed was planted inside a me. And I just didn't feel so accepting anymore

The peculiarity of Stockett's narration lies in inter-mixing all types of narrative clauses in one narration made by a main character. As the novel advances, a succession of events narrated by other black maids presents itself to the reader. Narration of events accumulates so black-white conflict dominates the novel and becomes more vivid. For example, what is hidden from Ms. Skeeter is also hidden from the reader, though the reader can expect some facts before Ms. Skeeter does.

## 2. AAVE and the black-white conflict

*The Help* depicts some talks and discussions on race; however, some viewed it as flawed by describing its author as biased (Free, 2014). The main setting of the novel is the early 1960s where civil rights were an issue to consider. In *The Help*, it is the white author who narrates the miseries and misfortunes of African Americans; thus highlighting racial inequality and discrimination as well as the morals of some white Americans. In *The Help*, a white author, raised in the south by a black help, shows interest in discovering the inner thoughts and the untold stories in the lives of black women.

AAVE was viewed, 400 years ago, to be ungrammatical and non-standard as it reflects lack of knowledge and enthusiasm; it was previously thought to be a corrupt language reflecting black American's economic failure triggered by difficulty of integration. However, a closer examination of AAVE has altered this view. For example, Toliver-Weddington (1973, p. 111) proposes the following advantages of Black English:

- (1) It is a perfect expression and representation of black culture.
- (2) Black English continued in spite of all attempts to eliminate it.

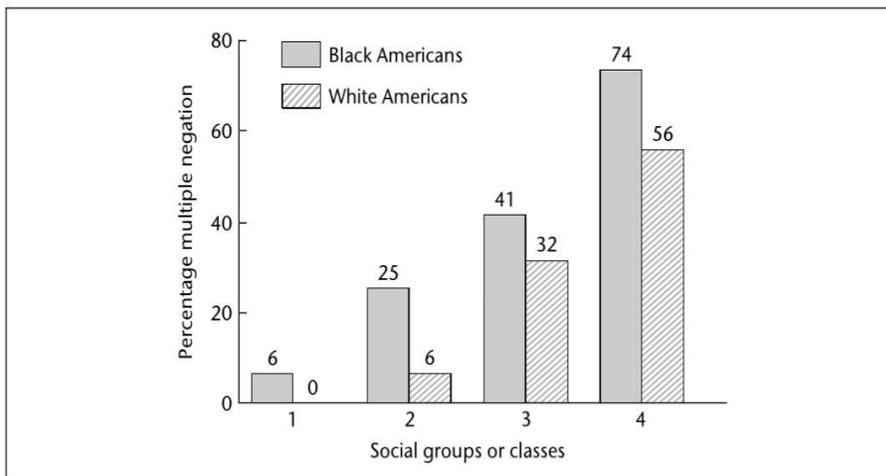
- (3) It represents the speaker's desire to be part of a group; a feeling that cannot be conveyed within the white culture

In *The Help*, communicability between black, who speak AAVE, and white Americans is not an issue; hence AAVE cannot be viewed as an indigenous language. Pullum (1999) attempted to get the myth about the indigenous state of AAVE out of the way by arguing that it is very close to English, which is a language of higher prestige; AAVE encompasses slang words and phrases which are part of subculture's slang that could not constitute a discrete language. All phrases and grammatical structures of AAVE are based on a language and are given new slang meanings by some minority group.

Holmes (2013) argues that African Americans, though physically distinctive, used AAVE as a way to set themselves apart from the majority group in the USA. For them, AAVE symbolizes ethnicity. It is a means of highlighting Black identity and culture. It differs from Creole languages as the latter refers to African languages which retained their African syntactic structures while using English words from the dictionary (Debose, 1994).

Labov (1972, 2010) describes the grammar of the Black English Vernacular as a variety of English spoken in the southern United States. AAVE has a uniform grammatical structure and it is viewed as a means of expressing the identity. What fosters the wide spread of AAVE was the oppression and the injustice to the Blacks. Brown and Casanova (2014, 211) views AAVE as a means of resistance: a resistance to white American's oppression and dominance.

The first important feature which highlights AAVE is *copula deletion*. The frequent deletion of the copula *Be* is representative of lower socio-economic class of African Americans. AAVE is also marked by the use of invariant *be* to refer to repeated events and actions (e.g., she be as school on weekdays). *Multiple negations* are another feature of AAVE. Though these features are highly characteristics of AAVE, some of them are also employed by white lower class Americans, though on a smaller scale. The following figure, from Holmes (2013, 189), compares the use of multiple negation in black and white Detroit speech. As the figure indicates, 1 refers to the highest social class whereas 2 is the lowest social class.



**Figure 8.1** Multiple negation in black and white Detroit speech

Source: This diagram was constructed from data in Shuy, Wolfram and Riley (1967).

### 3. lexical Features of *The Help*

There are two types of stylistic analysis: formal and non-formal; the former normally focuses on the language features of a text whereas the latter emphasizes thoughts. The present paper is concerned with the

first type which is formal stylistic analysis. The theoretical framework for a stylistic analysis normally encompasses four categories: lexical, grammatical, context and figures of speech. However, the focus here is only on the lexical and the grammatical features of the novel. In this section, the lexical features of the novel are investigated within the framework of Leech's *Style in Fiction* (2007) and *Language in Literature* (2013).

To provide a lexical analysis of the novel, the following questions, based on Leech (2007, pp. 61-62), will be addressed:

- Is the vocabulary simple or complex? formal or colloquial?
- How far does the writer make use of the emotive and other associations of words, as opposed to their referential meaning?
- Is there any use of rare or specialized vocabulary?
- Are any particular morphological categories noteworthy (e.g. compound words, words with particular suffixes)?
- To what semantic fields do words belong? Are the nouns abstract or concrete?
- Are the adjectives frequent? To what kinds of attribute do adjectives refer? Physical? Psychological?
- Do the verbs carry an important part of the meaning? Are they stative (referring to states) or dynamic (referring to actions, events, etc.)? Do they 'refer' to movements, physical acts?

Davies and Mehan (2007, 597) argue that "to understand social behavior, social interaction, and social institutions, one must study language use and the behavioral manipulations of language and communication in everyday settings". In order to explain the behaviors and interactions of people in *The Help*, the language they use has to be

part of the stylistic analysis. To begin with the lexical features of *The Help*, it can be argued that the narration mode is enhanced by the lexical choice made by the main characters like Aibileen. The word selection made by each character deepens and reflects former insights about their history as well as offers new ones. As for nouns, *The Help* witnesses a low frequency of nouns as the main focus is on events and actions rather than on objects. The lack of nouns, on the other hand, is read as a lack of identity and understanding as well, since common nouns are means of object identification. What the low frequency of noun implies is that the world has lost meaning; nothing is identified and everything is regarded as anonymous. The nouns that are frequently used by black maids are specialized and concrete nouns that use on daily basis such as 'toilets, bathrooms, tables, tray, eggs etc.' The Whites, on the other hand, used some nouns which are employed in well-formed sentences to express their ideas. For example, in the following short conversation between Miss Leefolt and Miss Hilly (narrated by Aibileen), they discuss an initiative made by Miss Hilly which bans the Help's use of the toilets:

"It would be nice," Miss Leefolt say, taking a little puff a her cigarette, "not having her use the one in the house. I bid three spades."(p.9)

Now, we will consider an example of a type of nouns used by the one of wahites in the following quotation which sums up a major event that highlights Black-White conflict. We knew about this conflict via narration made by the Whites as seen below:

*"Hilly Holbrook introduces the Home Help Sanitation Initiative. A disease preventative measure. Low-cost bathroom installation in your Garage*

• *99% of all colored diseases are carried in the urine*

- *Whites can become permanently disabled by nearly all of these diseases because we lack immunities coloreds carry in their darker pigmentation” (p. 161)*

In the above quotation, we notice the whites’ use of compound and specialized nouns (e.g., disease-preventative measure, Low-cost bathroom installation) and referential nouns (e.g., colored, Help). This suggests their high self-image and tendency to look prestigious.

Regarding the use and frequency of verbs, the blacks employed two main types of verbs: dynamic and stative. The former type appears in the blacks’ narration of the actions they carry out. This is motivated by the need to magnify their roles, stress the type of duties they perform as Aibileen says:

“I rush past Miss Leefolt, pick Baby Girl up, She keeps getting up. I put her back in bed three times this morning.”(p.15)

“I got a load a Mister Leefolt’s shirts to iron..... I cleaned the bathrooms already, got the sheets changed, the rugs vacuumed.” (p.29)

The novel is abound with stative verbs which highlight the miserable conditions the Blacks experience as Aibileen comments on her financial situation:

“I set down to look over my finances cause two things done happen..... That means after I pay the light bill, the water bill, the gas bill, and the telephone bill, I got thirteen dollars and fifty cents a week left..... And my work shoes is so thin, they look like they starving to death. New pair cost seven dollars though, which means I’m on be eating cabbage and tomato till I turn into Br’er Rabbit.”(p.16)

What is noted about the narration mood in *The Help* is that one can encounter a physical description of duties maids normally do mixed with a bitter reflection of emotions and agony; the following lines (said by Aibileen) is an example:

“I put the iron down real slow, feel that bitter seed grow in my chest, the one planted after Treelore died. My face goes hot, my tongue twitchy. I don’t know what to say to her. All I know is, I ain’t saying it. And I know she ain’t saying what she want a say either and it’s a strange thing happening here cause nobody saying nothing and we still managing to have us a conversation” (p.30)

Minnie, the other main black character, described her new duties at Miss Celia’s home after she was previously accused of theft and got fired.

“First, I swat at the dust with my broom, but it’s thick, matted up in his fur. All this does is move the dust around. So I take a cloth and try and wipe him down, but I squawk every time that wiry hair touches my hand. White people. I mean, I have cleaned everything from refrigerators to rear ends but what makes that lady think I know how to clean a damn grizzly bear?” (p.43)

As whites struggle to ban the colored’s use of their toilets and to stress the necessity of building them separate ones, a high frequency of action verbs are encountered.

“Miss Hilly raise a eyebrow. “I will do whatever I have to do to protect our town”(p.9)

The abundant use of verbs refers to the need of a revolutionary action that alters the deteriorated situation; it also refers to The Blacks ‘revolt against the world’s negative doing-nothing stance regarding the White’s oppression. Besides, this might suggest the Black’s hysteric state of mind that drifts them to be hysterically over energetic and dynamic.

Regarding the frequency and the use of adjectives in *The Help*, it is noted that there is a sparse use of adjectives and descriptions which occur in two main courses of events: Blacks commenting on their living conditions and describing brutality against them and Whites criticizing Blacks. Regarding the former type of description, The Black characters 'choice of adjectives reflect their obsession with dirty, indecent, and abusive ones; this expresses their dissatisfaction, resentment and their resistance through language as indicated by the following words by Aibileen:

“No ma’am, she just... asking do I want some old clothes,” I say and it sound like I’m down in a well-hole. Grease already working itself up my arms. Smell like a underarm in here. Don’t take no time fore sweat’s running down my nose and ever time I scratch at it, I get a plug a crud on my face. Got to be the worst place in the world, inside a oven..... I figure she looking at where she gone build me my new colored bathroom.” (p.11)

In the above quotation, Miss Skeeter, the white author, was asking Aibileen, the black maid about her reaction towards their decision to build separate bathrooms for the colored when suddenly Mrs. Leafolt (Aibileen’s mistress) interrupted them. In the above quotation, Aibileen expresses her worries that Mrs. Leafolt could have heard her talk with Miss Skeeter. Adjectival phrases were used here to describe Aibileen’s physical attributes (I’m down in a well-hole, Grease already working itself up my arms); she drifts into grease though the phrases are actually employed to reflect non-physical attributes, mainly to describe her life as drifting into a deep dark hole of depression. Color adjectives are frequently used; the whites frequently refer to the Help as Negro, Black and Colored. This indicates the inferior conditions of the blacks and how

the whites classify them based on their skin color. This also reflects a satiric attitude towards the blacks. Telling Miss Skeeter about her son Treelore, Aibileen said:

“He read this book call Invisible Man. When he done, he say he gone write down what it was like to be colored working for a white man in Mississippi”. (p.87)

Aibileen, on the other hand, reflected on her life after her son’s death:

“That was the day my whole world went black. Air look black, sun look black.  
I laid up in bed and stared at the black walls a my house..... Took three months fore I even look out the window, see if the world still there. I was surprise to see the world didn’t stop just cause my boy did” (p.3)

In *The Help*, description plays a crucial role in highlighting the Black-White conflict. As argued before, the Whites and the Blacks are leading two different lives, living in two different worlds and using two different linguistic styles. Though Ms. Skeeter and her maid Constantine were very close, they have two different worries. Ms. Skeeter’s main concern is to please her mother while Constantine was very careful not to let anyone know about her white daughter as Ms. Skeeter comments:

“While she was wanting her own daughter back, I was longing for mother not to be disappointed in me.”(p.367)

Another example is illustrated by Aibileen’s description of her friend Minny; she described Minny’s physical features and praised her physical power:

“I spot Minny in the back center seat. Minny short and big, got shiny black curls. She setting with her legs splayed, her thick arms crossed. She seventeen years younger than I am. Minny

could probably lift this bus up over her head if she wanted to. Old lady like me's lucky to have her as a friend." (p.13)

On the other hand, when Minny was describing Mrs. Walters, she used abusive language:"

" . . . so I said, Miss Walters, the world don't want a see your naked white behind any more than they want a see my black one. Now, get in this house and put your underpants and some clothes on. Her behind hanging to her knees." (p.13)

Minny's words represent what Leech (2013) referred to as (unique deviation); this is the unexpected choice of words. This type of lexical deviation is meant to sharpen the struggle of the Black maids and their need to dismantle the myth which the Whites devised about them. According to this myth, Blacks deserve slavery due to their physical features, which are distinguished from the Whites, and their females being viewed as a stereotype of corrupt women. Here, Minny is trying to show white ladies as corrupt and to criticize their physical features at the same time. The white author (Miss Skeeter), unlike other white ladies, took the initiative to disclose the miserable conditions of the Blacks. Kathryn Stockett here assigned Miss Skeeter some physical and personal qualities that convince the reader of the type of character and attitude she has. Miss Skeeter was described by Aibileen as follows:

"I dry a tray with a towel. When I sneak a look over, she's still got her worried eyes on that window. She don't look like other ladies, being she so tall. She got real high cheekbones. Blue eyes that turn down, giving her a shy way about her. It's quiet, except for the little radio on the counter, playing the gospel station. I wish she'd go on out a here" (p.10)

The only character who used abusive language is Minny, even when describing herself:

“I yank my hose up from sagging around my feet—the trouble of all fat, short women around the world”(p.31)

In addition to the physical description, personal experiences were revealed by bitter narration of events. For example, Aibileen's first experience at the toilets which were built for them was reflected by the following lines:

“THE HEAT WAVE finally passes round the middle a October and we get ourselves a cool fifty degrees. In the mornings, that bathroom seat get cold out there, give me a little start when I set down. It's just a little room they built inside the carport. Inside is a toilet and a little sink attached to the wall. A pull cord for the lightbulb. Paper have to set on the floor” (p.92)

Color adjectives are frequently used (by Whites and Blacks) in the novel. These adjectives resonate with the readers and produce instant mental images of characters. Blacks are frequently referred to as (black, nigra, nigro and colored folk). For the whites, all the black's essence is dumbed down to one thing which is skin color. Different color adjectives are used to describe minority group and to ironically show them as inferior. Table 1 shows the distribution of the open class words in two main chapters: chapter (5) where Miss Skeeter was narrating her experience with her black maid Constantine who disappeared suddenly and chapter (14) narrated by Aibileen respectively.

**Table 1 Distribution of open class words in selected chapters**

	<b>Nouns</b>	<b>Main Verbs</b>	<b>Adjectives</b>
Miss Skeeter Chapter (5)	Plantation	Roomed	furious
	Spinsters	Graduate	favorite
	Secretaries	Threatened	frizzy
	Man-meeting situation	Slip off	
	Childhood bedroom	Walk down	
		Drift down	
		Pull up	
	Get out		
Aibileen Chapter (14)	Streetlight	feed	panicky
	Feeling	worked	smaller
	Zippers	try	white
	Road block	keep	colored
		shake	
		Pull up	
	Get out		

This stark intentional variation of the use of nouns, adjectives, and verbs should be read as a denotation of a call for a change of attitude. One of the major observations about the lexical features of *The Help* is that the novel was written after the 9/11 attacks; a period of time that witnessed a dramatic change of white Americans' attitudes towards non-White Americans. Free (2014, 81) argued that after the 9/11, the unemployment rate among the Black American has risen and in case any job offers were made, Black women, rather than Black men, were preferred. This reflects the revival of the racial discrimination of the 1960s presented in *The Help*. Though Stockett meant her work to be a 1960s issue, we encounter some words which make it look like a contemporary modern novel. Some sophisticated words were used (especially by White females) that reflect

higher social and educational backgrounds though there was no reference to the white characters' education; examples of these nouns are: *asthma*, *malnutrition*, "That's exactly why I've designed the *Home Help Sanitation Initiative*," Miss Hilly say. "As a *disease-preventative measure*". It is through language that we know how Aibileen fights racism, not by violence, but by teaching the new generation to be kind; and she started with little Mae Mobley:

"I got my prayer book out so I can write some things down. I concentrate on Mae Mobley, try to keep my mind off Miss Hilly. Show me how to teach Baby Girl to be kind, to love herself; to love others, while I got time with her." (p.196).

#### 4. The Syntactic Features of *The Help*

To analyze the syntactic features of the novel, the following questions proposed by Leech (2007: 62-63) will be addressed:

- Does the author use only statements (declarative sentences), or do questions, commands, exclamations or minor sentence types (such as sentences with no verb) also occur in the text?
- Do sentences on the whole have a simple or a complex structure?
- What types of dependent clause are favored: relative clauses, adverbial clauses, different types of nominal clauses (that-clauses, wh-clauses, etc.)
- Are there any significant departures from the use of the simple past tense? For example, notice occurrences and functions of the present tense; of the progressive aspect (e.g. was lying); of the perfective aspect (e.g. has/had appeared); of modal auxiliaries (e.g. can, must, would, etc.). Look out for phrasal verbs and how they are used.

The syntactic features of *The Help* can be summarized as follows:

1. It is noted that Stockett did not use a wide range of sentence types. Sentences formed by white figures are typical examples of imperative structures. Aibileen commented "Miss Leefolt give me the look, say "Go get some more tea, Aibileen" (p.8). On the other hand, when Miss Hilly was talking to Miss Skeeter, she used a more formal and polite request: "I don't think you ought to be joking around about the colored situation" (p.9). Here, Miss Hilly is implicitly urging a more concerned and serious attitude from Miss Skeeter towards their main problem which was building separate bathrooms that the Black (the help) can use instead of sharing the same toilets.
2. Since Miss Skeeter is the only character who is tirelessly striving to discover the truth about things, most of her sentences are in the form of wh-questions, yes/no questions and rhetorical questions. In the following excerpt, Miss Skeeter was talking about her maid Constantine:

"And every week, I ask Aibileen about Constantine. Can't she get her address for me? Can't she tell me anything about why she got fired? Was there a big to-do, because I just can't imagine Constantine saying yes ma'am and walking out the back door" (p.84)
3. Some dialogues represent a shift from a well-formed wh-question to a yes/no question. For example, in the following conversation between Aibileen and Miss Skeeter, one of the untold stories about the maid Constantine was revealed:

“I don’t think it’s fair, you not knowing what happen to Constantine.....Constantine never told me she had a daughter.” I knew Constantine for twenty-three years. Why would she keep this from me? “It was hard for her. The baby come out real . . . pale.”..... “You mean, light? Like . . white?” Aibileen nods..... “Had to send her away, up north I think.” “Constantine’s father was white.....Constantine’s man, Connor, he was colored. But since Constantine had her daddy’s blood in her, her baby come out a high yellow.”(p.87)

4. A different sentence pattern is also employed where the subject is fronted (such structure is described by Chomsky (1995) as a focus construction):

“Aibileen nods, turns her knife around another soft red tomato. “My boy Treelore, he like to write.” “I didn’t know you had a son.” “He dead. Two years now.” (p.87)

As Stockett’s main themes are racism and discrimination, language was also a reflection of these themes. The Whites and the Blacks used different sentence patterns and structures. All features of AAVE are recursive whenever one of the Black maids is narrating her stories; here are some examples:

#### 1. Double negation

*Aibillen:*

- “I don’t ask Miss Leefolt no questions about it and Miss Leefolt don’t offer no explanation”(p. 20)
- “Aw, I ain’t mad at her no more” (p.130)

- "I ain't never called her house except two times cause I had no choice" (p.191)
- "TOO bad FOR Miss HILLY there wasn't no other news going on. Nothing on Vietnam or the draft" (p. 295)

*Minny:*

- "She telling everybody in town I'm stealing! That's why I can't get no work!" (p.21)
- "I ain't done nothing but feed that old woman good food and look after her!" (p.21)
- "I ain't never gone get no work again, Leroy gone kill me . . ." (p.21)
- "I ain't doing this no more. You making this too personal. I don't care about telling white people how it feel." (p.187)

## 2. Short sentences:

In this novel, the elite white ladies use a variety of length of sentences, ranging from two clauses to sentences extending over many lines whereas the Blacks' sentences are short and fragmented. We notice the length and the sentence structure in the following letter, sent to Miss Skeeter (p. 73), as opposed to those used by Aibileen (p.5):

Dear Miss Phelan,

I am responding personally to your résumé because I found it admirable that a young lady with absolutely no work experience would apply for an editing job at a publisher as prestigious as ours. .... You'd know this if you'd done any amount of research on the business. Having once been an ambitious young lady myself, however, I've decided to offer you some advice: go to your local newspaper and get

an entry-level job..... Don't waste your time on the obvious things. Write about what disturbs you, particularly if it bothers no one else.

Yours sincerely, Elaine Stein, Senior Editor, Adult Book Division.

Aibileen:

She say, "Aib-ee." And then she laugh and laugh. She so tickled she talking and I got to say, it's about time..... One day I say Crisco. He scratch his head. He just can't believe I done won the game with something simple as Crisco.... Plus he the greasiest no-count you ever known."

### 3. Copula Deletion:

In literature, the phenomenon of copula deletion in AAVE has been investigated from different perspectives. Frassica (2009) examined the distribution of the copular forms in AAVE and suggested that the null copula is governed by a pragmatic restriction and is allowable only when the proposition is contradictory to another. Bender (2000, 141) explains the absence of the copula in terms of some social meanings. She argues that the rate of copula absence in AAVE vary with the topic of conversation; a good example is the following quotation by Aibileen (deleted copula is marked by ??) :

"By the time she ??a year old, Mae Mobley following me around everywhere I go .....Mae Mobley ?? two years old now ..... I LOST MY OWN BOY, Treelore, right before I started waiting on Miss Leefolt. He was twenty-four years old. The best part of a person's life. It just wasn't enough time living in this world." (p.2)

One major observation is that though Aibileen's language is typically AAVE with all its grammatical features of "copula deletion" and

“double negation”, in the above quotation, as shown by the underlined structures, both syntactic features of AAVE disappeared. This suggests that the Blacks tend to violate grammatical rules to reflect carelessness about whatever may happen; for them, there is nothing to care about. However, well-formed structures are employed when recapping experiences similar to what Aibileen described as “the best part of a person’s life”. This scarce instance of copula absence is contrasted to frequent deletion in the course of events as shown by the following examples:

Aibileen:

- “This what she been trying to ask me the past two weeks in Miss Leefolt kitchen. “You think Miss Leefolt gone agree to that? Me telling stories about her?” (p.104)
- “No, no. She nice” (p.131)

Minnie:

- “She crazy if she think we do something dangerous as that” (p.131)
- “You feeling bad?” / “you sick?” / “You sick Miss Celia?” (p. 135)

Leech (1983) investigated the role of Syntax in literary analysis. He views the order and the place of words in a sentence as a *Syntagmatic* relation. A well-formed sentence follows this linear order. A *Paradigmatic* relation, on the other hand, refers to a type of deviation where some nouns (opposite to the normal system) are followed by some adverbs: using an inanimate noun in a context appropriate to a personal noun is an example. Stockett’s structures represent the two types of relations. In *The Help*, reflecting upon past events and experiences is

carried out through a sequence of clauses and sentences that narrate events in the order they occurred. In this novel, two different means of recapitulating events are recognized: when one of the main white characters refers to a past event, she employs independent clauses that appear in a normal order which matches the events. This reflects a state of stability and a noting-to-worry-about attitude; Miss Skeeter's narration is an example:

“For two hours, I smoke cigarettes and read Life magazine. I finish *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Finally, I pick up the Jackson Journal, pick through it. It's Friday, so there won't be a Miss Myrna column. On page four, I read: Boy blinded over segregated bathroom, suspects questioned. It sounds . . . familiar. I remember then. This must be Aibileen's neighbor.” (p. 113)

The Blacks, on the other hand, are suffering psychic fragmentation. Mature blacks tend to use sudden narrative shifts as they narrate a story which leads to readers' shock. These shifts act as an outlet of their feelings of alienation, frustration and loss of identity. The novel opens with Aibileen commenting on the day when little Mae Mobley was born in 1960. She gave some details about that day. At first glance, the reader gets the impression that Aibileen is narrating happy events and celebrating birth of a child whom she considers her own baby. Suddenly, she recapitulated the worst experience she ever had which was the death of her son Treelore two years before the birth of Mae Mobely.

“MAE MOBLEY was born on an early Sunday morning in August, 1960. A church baby we like to call it ..... By the time she a year old, Mae Mobley following me around everywhere I go ..... Mae Mobley two years old now ..... I LOST MY OWN BOY, Treelore, right before I started waiting

on Miss Leefolt. He was twenty-four years old. The best part of a person's life. It just wasn't enough time living in this world.” (p.2)

A shift is also marked by a sudden use of the past perfect tense. Labov (1972, 1997) argued that the past perfect tense is used to represent a reverse order. Aibileen commented on all her duties as a maid (past simple tense), then a shift to the past perfect took us back to a change of her life after the death of her son:

“Five month after the funeral, I lifted myself up out a bed. I put on my white uniform ...But it weren't too long before I seen something in me had changed. A bitter seed was planted inside a me.” (p.3)

Throughout the novel, present perfect is replaced with other grammatical forms. For example, when Aibileen was commenting on what has happened in Alabama, she used a shortened perfect structure where the helping verb *have* is deleted while the past participle is there to confirm the action:

“They already say all they can about the church blown up in Alabama, killing those poor colored girls” (p. 295)

Another example of the reduced form of the perfect tense is employed when Aibileen was commenting on the whites 'initiative being a matter of fact:

“Miss Skeeter done printed Hilly's toilet announcement in the newsletter alright. The list a them reasons why white folk and colored folk can't be sharing a seat.” (p. 295)

Now, it can be concluded that the narrative structure here served a typical role as syntax to the communicative system; so syntax and narrative have successfully functioned to package meanings of the untold stories uncovered in the novel.

## 5. Conclusion

*The Help* contains two different narrative processes: one made up of the events themselves (actual events which reflect brutality against the Blacks) and the other of Aibileen's and other maid's quest for the truth about these events and the quest for revenge. Analysis of the structure and the function of language used in *The Help* was the focus of the present study. The other part of the analysis was concerned about the syntactic features of the novel, centering in double negation, copula deletion, long complex sentences versus short simple ones. By means of language and text analysis, we can further explore vocabulary and different structures in Stockett's work to expose the constructive role literary styles play in highlighting her themes and the outcome of expressions she employed. After analyzing the novel through the lens of language, it can be concluded that every word and almost every element of the syntax in *The Help* contributed to a certain feeling, and that feeling is self-fragmentation. For the Whites, fragmentation lies in (inability to find a husband, inability to please a husband or a mother, fear of contagious disease if maids use their toilets). Each element of the narrative is manipulated to make the Whites look "happy" and the Blacks look "miserable".

The miserable life conditions of the Blacks were reflected by Stockett's use of unusual lexical items as she bombards her reader with

strange and powerful words. The paper is an attempt to reflect how the choice of words in *The Help* reflected hidden meanings and untold stories. So the present paper highlights the role language plays to uncover some hidden meanings; the lexical features of *The Help* were employed as a projective technique to criticize contemporary racial disparities. Though *The Help* appeared to be a direct attack against the 1960s America, it is, in reality, an indirect attack against contemporary America and the attitudes of the American community after the 9/11 attacks towards non-white residences. In other words, though Stockett attempted to make her novel look like a 1960s novel, language uncovered her desire to evaluate responses to racism; this explains why her novel was first rejected by some publishing houses. However, it can be argued that *The Help* was a reflection of the untold stories of the novelist who witnessed black-white conflict as a child, rather than of her characters.

---

## References

- Bender, E. (2000). *Syntactic variation and linguistic competence: the case of AAVE copula absence*. Stanford University.
- Brown, T & Casanova, E. (2014). Representing the language of the “other“: African American Vernacular English in Ethnography. *Ethnography*. 15(2), 208-231.
- Culler, J. (1975). “Defining narrative units”. In R. Fowler (Ed.), *Style and structure in literature: Essays in the new stylistics* (pp.123-142). Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
- Davies P & Mehan H. (2007). Aaron Cicourel's contributions to language use, theory, method, and measurement. *Text and Talk*, 27(5/6), 595-610.
- Debose, C. (1994). A note on ain't vs. didn't negation in African American Vernacular. *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* (9), 127-30.
- Fowler, R. (1975). *Style and Structure in Literature. Essays in the New Stylistics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Frassica, A. (2009). *Copula Variation in African American Vernacular English: an investigation of the individual- and stage-level predicate hypothesis*. (Honors Thesis). Linguistics Department Swarthmore College.
- Free, Jodie. (2014). *Southern Bestsellers in the Twenty-First Century*. (MA thesis), The University of Mississippi.

Holmes, Janet. (2013). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Routledge: London and New York.

Labov, W. (1972a). *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.

Labov, W. (1972b). "The transformation of experience in narrative syntax". In *language in the inner city*. University of Pennsylvania.

Labov, W. (1982). Speech actions and reactions in personal narrative. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk*. Georgetown University Press.

Labov, W. (1997). Some further steps in narrative analysis. *Journal of narrative and life history* (7),395- 415.

Labov, W. (2010). Un-endangered dialect, endangered people: the case of African American Vernacular English. *Transforming Anthropology* 18(1).

Leech, G & Short M. (2007). *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. Pearson Education Limited: United Kingdom.

Leech, G. (2013). *Language in literature: style and foregrounding*. Routledge: London and New York.

Pullum, G. (1999). African American Vernacular English is not standard English with mistakes. In R. Wheeler (Ed.), *The Workings of Language: From Prescriptions to Perspectives*. pp. 39-58.

Rutherford, J. (1975). "Story, character, setting, and narration Mode in Galdos's *El Amigo Manso*". In R. Fowler (Eds.), *Style and*

*structure in literature: essays in the new stylistics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 177-212.

Toliver-Weddington, G. (1973). The scope of black English. *Journal of Black Studies*. 4 (2), 107-114.