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## COMPOUNDING IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SLANG

Compounding is a very productive process in forming African American slang. Interestingly, the form of African American slang is not fundamentally different from that of standard English. The same wordbuilding processes – including compounding – are applicable, disproving uninformed allegations of linguistic deficiency in African American slang when compared to standard English. In fact, compounding can even be used in a more creative way in African American slang. This paper presents the main compounding patterns employed in the creation of African American slang, including those universally known in the English language and those characteristic solely of African American usage. Partially drawing from earlier studies (Widawski & Kowalczyk 2011), the presentation is based on lexical material from a sizable database of citations from contemporary sources, collected through extensive fieldwork in the United States and research at academic institutions such as Yale University, Columbia University, Duke University, and the University of Mississippi.

### COMMON COMPOUND TYPES

In African American slang compounds may be created from individual words of various parts of speech and juxtaposed in any order; the end result may be any given part of speech; they may also be made from two standard or two slang words, or one of each. Moreover, as observed by Eble (1996: 28 and 31), compound elements are underspecified semantically or grammatically, which gives rise to complexity in meaning and figurative interpretation. Let us take a closer look at some of the most typical combinations found in African American slang.

By far the most common type is the noun-noun combination. As explained by Algeo (1991: 7), ‘this is probably because there are more new things to name than there are new actions or qualities. We rarely come upon a new action or characteristic, but often invent or discover new objects.’ Moreover, given the possibility to use a noun to modify another noun, there is less need for distinctive adjectives in English. In African American slang the use of such compounds is especially widespread with concepts of objects or persons with specific characteristics. Here are some citational findings from the database:

*The dress is accessorized with oversized red **apple cap** [= round, bright-colored cap with a wide brim and a pompom] and red and black sandals — Ebony, 2006*  
*The black one is borderline BBW but she was a **brick house** [= sexually attractive woman, especially if curvaceous] when she started — Nah Right, 2010*  
*It's that diversity that makes black hair so beautiful: straight hair, braids, dreads, **cornrows** [= very small braids arranged in rows of identical size and very close to the scalp], Afros — Hair Show, film, 2004*  
*According to Busta, he lost a serious **rap battle** [= teasing, especially by making provocative rhyming comments in a gamelike manner] to Jay-Z in high school — Prefix Mag, 2010*  
*I got a **snow bunny** [= white woman, especially young] and a black girl too. You pay the right price and they'll both do you — Hustle and Flow, film, 2005*

The second most frequent compound pattern in African American slang involves a combination of adjectives and nouns. Similarly, the end result frequently involves a change in the part of speech. The most common combination of this kind is the adjective-noun series, which naturally reflects the normal word order of the English language. Here is some citational corroboration:

*He probably **badmouthed** [= criticized and disrespected] me, trying to poison your mind against me — Crossover, film, 2006*  
*Sippin on Cristal and countin them **bigfaces** [= new hundred-dollar bills], that's just the way of life! — Black Planet, 2010*  
*He's been a **fat cat** [= wealthy, powerful or privileged person, especially a business person] ever since Braineless signed that contract — Atlanta Journal Constitution, 2011*  
*I'd like to dedicate this record right here to my **main man** [= close friend] — Snoop Dogg, 2008*  
*I was born a **white nigga** [= white person who has assumed the behavior and values of the African American culture, especially rap and hip-hop]! — SOHH, 2007*

Yet another frequently recurring pattern involves compounds made of verbs and nouns, combined in either order. Naturally, due to conversion — a change of grammatical category without a change in form — it is sometimes difficult to establish whether a given element in these compounds was originally a noun or a verb. Moreover, the end result can be either, which is usually conditioned by word order. Consider the following examples:

*I wanted to **bitch-slap** [= slap someone with the back of one's hand across the face] every single one of 'em — Huffington Post, 2011*  
*We got through the 1980s without having to see Smokey **breakdance** [= do a kind of dancing that evolved in inner-city ghettos and is characterized by intricate writhings and shows of balance close to the floor] — San Francisco Chronicle, 2010*  
*The new **drop top** [= convertible car] will join Mazda's MX-5 as the two sole offerings in the entry compact roadster segment — Automobile Magazine, 2011*  
*I'm going to **pimp-slap** [= to slap with the back of one's hand] the next person who says that — Democratic Underground, 2009*  
*You call that a **pimp walk** [= male style of walking or strutting with a slight dip in the stride, especially characteristic of pimps]? It looks like you need to take a dump — Funny Junk, 2010*

A number of compounds involve numerals combined with other parts of speech, usually nouns. Again, the association may be straightforward but more often requires specific knowledge and is indiscernible to the uninitiated. In standard English such combinations are usually but not exclusively used in technical language, for instance *F-14*, *V-2*, *B12*, *401k account*, *20/20 hindsight*, *18-wheeler*, *two-seater*. There are numerous such alphanumeric compounds in African American slang. Citational corroboration yields the following:

- They never received the promised **forty acres** [= symbolic reparations for enslavement] – Kansas City Star, 2008*  
*If soda was a **forty dog** [= forty-ounce bottle of strong and cheap malt liquor], then I would be like drunk – Common Sense, 1993*  
*When they passed each other along the ropes at the next hole, Woods offered a **low-five** [= handshake or slap with hands held low, in greeting or congratulation] – San Francisco Chronicle, 2008*  
*Wink got more than **seven digits** [= telephone number] from your bitch – 8 Mile, film, 2002*  
*I'm a cat from Meridian, Mississippi, representing for the **Third Coast** [= Southern USA, especially touching the Gulf of Mexico] – Hip Hop DX, 2010*

#### LESS COMMON COMPOUND TYPES

Interestingly, African American compounds are often created in less ordinary ways. In certain compounds the usual 'right-headed' word order can sometimes be reversed in African American slang to form a syntactic pattern atypical of standard English (Lieber 2010: 46). This is the case with adjective-noun compounds: such word order is normally encountered in only a few fixed phrases such as *attorney general*, *court martial* or *heir apparent*, which were mostly derived from French (McArthur 1992: 14). While such compound words are relatively rare, they nevertheless serve as an interesting African American innovation in the English language. Here is a handful of examples found in our database:

- Rocket was looking down, because his main man, his **ace cool** [= close friend] was dead – Kirk Mitchell, 1988*  
*She turned out to be a **ghetto fabulous** [= obsessed with the culture of ghetto, especially in hip-hop context] white ass – University of Mississippi Student, 2010*  
*It turned high school dropouts into self-styled **ghetto fabulous** [= living lavishly and surpassing the standard of living in an inner-city ghetto] entrepreneurs – Washington Post, 1999*  
*In one recent episode, Bernie is angered by a huge phone bill; he jokingly admonishes his wife that they are not 'old-money rich' but '**nigga rich**' [= (of an African American) having a lot of money, but which is still not a lot for whites] – New York Times, 2002*  
*Who was that **nigga happy** [= very fond of African Americans] chick? – University of Alabama Student, 2009*

Compounds can also be formed by combining adjectives with other adjectives. While such 'double adjectives' are not particularly frequent in African

American slang, and certainly not in standard English, there are a few notable expressions of this kind found in our database:

*If we have some **actual factual** [= real or based on facts] information, then people can know if they should be alarmed or no – News, WFAA-TV program, 2010*

*You know you're **cold chillin'** [= excellent or admirable]! Yeah! – Bamboozled, film, 2000*

*Ain't no party like a **funky fresh** [= excellent or admirable] party! Let's rock! – Facebook, 2010*

*You think I'd be more handsome if I were **high yellow** [= light-skinned African American, especially a sexually attractive young woman], like you? – Washington Post, 2004*

*That was a really **stupid fresh** [= excellent or admirable] jam – Fayetteville Observer, 1998*

Some compounds are made of a noun and a letter of the alphabet; the letter often stands for a word which is deliberately left out, as in *A-bomb*, *C-section*, or *F-word*. Because of their rather enigmatic form, such compounds are often used as cryptic devices to enhance in-group solidarity, or among people who wish to conceal their activities. Moreover, their abbreviated form often makes them function as euphemisms. They are also used in African American slang for the same reasons. Consider the following examples:

*There were **b-boys** [= male devotees of breakdancing] and b-girls dancing at the clubs I went to – Marcyliena Morgan, 2009*

*I wish I was a **d-boy** [= street-level drugs dealer]. Instead I got stuck in this shitty dorm! – Urban Dictionary, 2009*

*The only way to get it is to go outside and sell a **G pack** [= quantity of prepackaged drugs worth one thousand dollars] – Sun, 1993*

*They may not have known that a '**G-ride**' [= stolen automobile] is a stolen car – Salt Lake Tribune, 1997*

*Once the jurors heard the tapes it was clear that he had indeed used the **N-word** [= African American] – Toni Morrison, 1997*

## COMPOUND WORDS

A sizeable number of compounds are created according to a pattern of using a particular word in first or last position, very much like a prefix or suffix. For instance the prefix word *power* is used in this way to form such compounds as *power broker*, *powerhouse*, *power lunch* or *power train*, while the suffix word *burger* serves to form such compounds as *cheeseburger*, *lobster burger* and *vegie burger*. Such affix-like compounds are common in English, possibly because their meaning can be easily guessed from the meaning of affix words used in similar constructions.

Affix-like compounds are also very popular in slang. Certain patterns are enormously productive and are employed to form a theoretically infinite number

of combinations. African American slang is no exception here. Let us present some of the most recurrent affix-like words below:

*Gerber, **baby** boy [= insignificant and irresponsible man], are you there? – Taking of Pelham 123, film, 2009*

*I got to get this cheese with my crew but **baby** momma [= insignificant and irresponsible mother, especially a teenage mother] full of drama – Snoop Dogg, 1998*

*Nagin once declared that New Orleans would be a **Chocolate City** [= any city with a predominantly African American population] again as black residents who left after the hurricane returned to the city – Business Week, 2010*

*It launched several revitalization projects, including hosting the 2006 Super Bowl to bring attention to improvements in the **Motor City** [= Detroit, Michigan] – Ebony, 2008*

*I'm still trying to keep a straight face when DD gets angry at DS and calls him a **butterhead** [= African American regarded by others as a discredit to the African American community] – Windsor Peak, 2009*

*The audience of mostly old **heads** [= older persons] really seemed to enjoy this, but I found it a little too hotel lobby for my taste – Rah Rah, 2009*

*He was a hipster, thief, and dope **peddler** [= street-level drugs dealer] during his teenage years in Boston – USA Today, 1992*

*You are either an ass **peddler** [= male prostitute] or one of those guys who gossip with women – Blogspot, 2006*

*You can't understand this, it's a black **thing** [= any sociocultural practice, behavior or attitude characteristic of African Americans] – Newsbusters, 2010*

*I mean I saw this hip-hop **thing** [= hip-hop] on every level – LL Cool J, 1995*

Certain patterns have become stereotypically associated with African American usage and are identified as African American by most people. Below is a selection of characteristic affix words of this type, annotated with meaning, connotations and usage examples.

The suffix word *ass* designates a person who has a high degree of a specified characteristic or nature. This is by far one of the most productive suffixes associated with African American slang (Widawski and Kolwaczyk 2011: 28). It is usually combined with adjectives to form nominal compounds. Consider these examples:

*Golfers who skip this tournament because of the weather are **candy-asses** [= very weak or timid persons] – San Francisco Chronicle, 2009*

*She was also the **dumbass** [= very idiotic person] who left their money behind – Reality Rewind, 2010*

*The rest of us have to cut back but that **fat-ass** [= very obese person] can eat lobster every night – News, MSNBC-TV program, 2010*

*You're being a **smart-ass** [= annoyingly knowledgeable and arrogant person] – House M.D., Fox-TV series, 2011*

*He has made his reputation playing a series of **wise-asses** [= annoyingly knowledgeable and arrogant persons] – New York Times, 2007*

But the suffix word *ass* can be used in another, more productive way to form adjectival compounds meaning 'having a high degree of a specified characteristic or nature'. Dalzell (2009: 24) calls it simply but aptly 'an intensifier'. Although

used in general slang, this suffix word is more frequently used in African American slang. Its popularity may be rooted in its audacious and crude humor, as well as a relative easiness of attaching it to nearly any adjective. However, many compounds created with this suffix word have a rather ephemeral character. Here is a short selection from a long list of examples:

*Some woman must have really done a number on yo' ass, 'cause you sound like one **bitter-ass** [= very bitter] motherfucker* — Byron Harmon, 2004

*It's a lovely warm day in **cold-ass** [= very cold] SF today* — *Democratic Underground*, 2009

*He is known for his **crazy-ass** [= very crazy] political views almost as much as his music* — *Celebrity Gossip*, 2009

*These are some **lazy-ass** [= very lazy] bastards, so you gotta make sure they don't slough off* — *Ray*, film, 2004

*I just moved into a new house with a **serious-ass** [= very serious] ant problem* — *Meta Filter*, 2004

The prefix word *black* is used to form nominal compounds. It quintessentially refers to African Americans and their experience, so the compounds formed with its use reflect this. Consider the following examples:

*It's coming from the industry people that are trying to push my **black ass** [= self, when referring to an African American] out* — *News*, MTV-TV program, 2006

*All are monuments to Joe Louis, the late boxer who grew up in this city's **Black Bottom** [= area of a city with a predominantly African American population] section and who became, like his monuments, a larger-than-life symbol* — *New York Times*, 1988

*This ain't a **Black thang** [= any sociocultural practice, behavior or attitude characteristic of African Americans], but we sure like to do it* — *Ebony*, 2008

*The interest these artists are generating is not based on the idea they are white singers doing a **black thing** [= any sociocultural practice, behavior or attitude characteristic of African Americans]* — *Ebony*, 2009

*There was a bar on Hastings called the Cozy Corner. It was a **black-and-tan** [= interracial, especially occupied or patronized by both African Americans and whites] place* — Laurie Palazzolo, 2003

The suffix word *daddy* is used to create nominal compounds. It designates a man who is older, experienced or rich. In most cases, the association is jocular and affectionate but may also be ironic and dismissive. This is yet another element often associated with African American usage, where its connotation is potentially negative. Consider the following examples:

*Marry your **baby daddy** [= insignificant and irresponsible father, especially a teenage father]!* — *Ebony*, 2009

*He said **fat daddy** [= very obese man] needs snacks! And I agree with that!* — *Rap Battles*, 2010

*I'd rather be a **mack daddy** [= pimp] in the ghetto than a mogul in Hollywood* — *New York Times*, 2001

*Who was that **sexy daddy** [= very sexually attractive man] I saw you with last night?* — *University of Alabama Student*, 2009

*Yes, I know that women are out looking for a **sugar daddy** [= male lover who supports a younger mistress] to take care of them, so they can remain little girls — Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 2010*

The prefix word *gangsta* is used to form nominal compounds. It is associated with the world of inner-city violence, especially as heard in the lyrics of rap music and hip-hop culture, and thus stereotypically associated with African American usage. Notable is the spelling which reflects the loss of final, postvocalic /r/ characteristic of African American pronunciation. Here is a selection of relevant examples:

*I'm a ride, I'm a slide, with that **gangsta glide** [= male style of walking or strutting with a slight dip in the stride, characteristic of criminal gang members], I'm a gangsta nigga — The Dogg Pound, 2010*

*I got my cap to the back and my AH-47 in a **gangsta grip** [= holding an object, especially a gun, sideways] — Aaron Peckham, 2005*

*I'm the brother that makes you cling more tightly to your purse and cross the street when you see my silhouette coming down the street with a **gangsta limp** [= male style of walking or strutting with a slight dip in the stride, characteristic of criminal gang members] — Louisiana Weekly, 2009*

*I like **gangsta rap** [= kind of rap music characterized by rapacity, violence and mysogyny] as much as the next white guy — Ebony, 2008*

*He is perfecting his **gangsta walk** [= male style of walking or strutting with a slight dip in the stride, characteristic of criminal gang members] — Twitter, 2009*

In like manner, the noun-forming prefix word *ghetto* is used specifically and almost exclusively in African American slang. It refers to life experience in the inner-city ghetto filled with harsh economic difficulties and crime. There are many compounds created in this way:

*I figured it was only a matter of time until a **ghetto bird** [= police helicopter, often used in inner-city ghetto communities] buzzed the neighborhood — Whittier Daily News, 2009*

*That sucker is the fifth thief I seen this morning with brand new **ghetto blasters** [= large portable stereo players] — Joseph Wambaugh, 1983*

*Tamisha calls the gunfire and sirens that tear through her Dorchester neighborhood at night her **ghetto lullaby** [= innercity-ghetto noise, especially sirens, gunfire, helicopters] — Wiki Name, 2009*

*Merritt still had his **ghetto pass** [= fictitious pass given to someone who is not from an inner-city ghetto but who socializes with people who are], he understood his students' hip-hop slang and knew their music — Charlotte Observer, 2009*

*You find it ironic that **ghetto rags** [= clothes typical of the inner-city ghetto] would inspire high fashion — St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1991*

The prefix word *home* is used to form nominal compounds. In African American slang it is roughly used to denote 'a fellow friendly person, especially African American, and especially from one's neighborhood,' or 'a member of a criminal gang.' Here is a handful of such compounds:

*It was not hard to persuade other **homeboys** [= fellow African American men] to repeat it — Toni Morrison, 1998*

*He and his **homebuddies** [= male members of a criminal gang] have never shown any remorse for what they did — Politics Forum, 2009*  
*I heard from my **homegirl** [= good female friend] that your live performance is very good — Examiner, 2011*  
*I'm gonna call a coupla pipe-hittin' niggers who'll go to work on this **homes** [= man] here with a pair of pliers and a blow torch — Pulp Fiction, film, 1994*  
*What up, **home slices** [= fellow African American persons]? You okay? — Time Out New York, 2009*

The noun-forming suffix word *mama* is used to form numerous compounds. By analogy to *daddy*, it designates 'a woman, especially older, characterized by what the first compound element indicates, especially a woman who exhibits certain physical or psychological traits'. Again, the association is usually jocular and affectionate. See the following corroboration:

*She ain't nothing to me now, she just my **baby mama** [= insignificant and irresponsible mother, especially a teenage mother]. So, can I get your number? — Aaron Peckham, 2005*  
*Reasons being is weight, weave and **big mama** [= African American woman, especially if big or stout] stereotypes — Ebony, 2009*  
*It allows four halter-top wearing **hoochie mamas** [= sexually promiscuous women] to sit at a good table and sip on champagne — Knox News, 2010*  
*I'm not looking for a **sugar mama** [= female lover who supports a younger lover], I have my own money — San Jose Mercury News, 2010*  
*I looked at my **sweet mama** [= mistress] who was standing there beside me — Calhoun Times, 2008*

The noun-forming suffix word *nigger* (or *nigga*) designates 'an African American who has certain characteristics'. Compounds created in this way often serve as labels which telegraphically comment on to the degree of acceptance of the dominant white-oriented society on the part of African Americans. Interestingly, when used by people other than African Americans, the connotation is extremely racist and offensive. However, when used by African Americans themselves, it becomes perceptibly less so, and can in fact be used with affection. Major (1994: xxxi) aptly explains it in this way: by calling themselves 'niggers', African American speakers in a way make null and void racial slurs of white bigots. This remark pertains not just to the word itself, but also to a number compound combinations in which it is used:

*In rebellion, the **bad nigger** [= African American who is rebellious and aggressive] exhibits an autonomous will — Murray Forman, 2004*  
*The **field nigger** [= African American in the working class, especially working on a farm] was the militant who wanted freedom, while the house nigger saw himself as part of the master's household — News24, 2005*  
*Being the **house nigger** [= African American working for a white person's household] that he is, it does not surprise me that he would want to go along with such terminology — Ebony, 2009*  
*I'm just a **street nigger** [= lower-class African American, especially involved in some illicit activity] who's come here to rap with you — Pop Subculture, 1999*

*The **yard nigger** [= African American in the working class, especially working on a farm] lived a Spartan life in the field where they slaved from sun up to sun down — Bahamas Press, 2007*

The noun-forming prefix word *soul* is yet another lexical element associated with African Americans. It is used to describe any characteristic of African Americans including food, music, language, handshake, etc. It suggests a deep and shared cultural identity as well as group allegiance and affirmation. Here is the relevant corroboration:

*She says no boom-boom with the **soul brother** [= fellow African American man] — Full Metal Jacket, film, 1987*

*Gullah spices make meals taste differently than traditional **soul food** [= food characteristic of and preferred by African Americans, especially of Southern culture] — Ebony, 2009*

*He gives the guy a strong **soul shake** [= intricate handshake to demonstrate solidarity, popular especially among African Americans] followed by a hug — Esquire, 2010*

*So, what up, my super-sassy sexy **soul sista** [= fellow African American woman]? Let me be yo' mista! — Black Planet, 2009*

*Lauren Turner goes for a retro **soul sound** [= moving form of popular music rooted in African American tradition, especially rhythm and blues] with Etta James — USA Today, 2011*

The prefix word *white* is used to form nominal compounds. By analogy to *black*, it quintessentially refers to white people and their experience, and the compounds formed with its use reflect this. In African American slang, however, the connotation is usually, although not exclusively, derisive or otherwise negative. Consider the following examples:

*Get your **white ass** [= self, when referring to a white person] away from that window! — Forrest Gump, film, 1994*

*We can't go to no march with a **white boy** [= white man, especially young] driving — Get on the Bus, film, 1996*

*Who is more like the 17-year old white girl audience of MTV than a 17 year old **white girl** [= white woman, especially young]? — Ebony, 2009*

*When did your brother-in-law turn into such a **white nigger** [= white person who has assumed the behavior and values of the African American culture, especially rap and hip-hop]? — Urban Dictionary, 2010*

*I have just as much disdain for **white trash** [= poor white Southerner or poor white Southerners] as any other race — Ebony, 2008*

## REDUPLICATIVE COMPOUNDS

A special case of compounding is reduplication. While it is scarcely used in standard English, it appears to be a surprisingly potent way of forming new words in slang. Broadly speaking, reduplication entails the repetition of a sound, word or word element. Reduplicative compounds (or reduplicatives) are often based on assonance, the poetic device which involves a deliberate repetition of

the same or similar vowel sounds to achieve the desired rhyming effect. The association is usually jocular and sometimes reminiscent of baby talk.

Reduplication is a long-attested feature of African American slang, according to Flexner and Soukhanov (1997: 16), dating back to the colonial period. So is African Americans' predilection for rhyming, so often employed in rap and hip-hop music. Rhyming communicates verbal forcefulness and promptness, augmented by syncopated rhythm, and can be jocular in nature.

A few types of reduplication can be discerned. Exact reduplications involve precise doubling of the entire word. They are the simplest, and at the same time, rather rare creations. Citational corroboration yields the following:

*Today, he is back in his right mind, no longer using teenspeak or wearing **bling-bling** [= jewelry, especially rings] and low-riding jeans — Walker Moore, 2007*  
*'I think it's a .357 Magnum!' 'Really? I got a **deuce-deuce** [= 22-caliber handgun]. My brother gave it to me before he went to jail' — *Boyz in the Hood*, film, 1991*  
*Sure you would have to find a cheap **mo-mo** [= motel], but its still way less than driving from a far distance — Arcade Museum, 2009*  
*Listen up, niggaz! The **po-po** [= police] know, that's why they on my dick — Snoop Dogg, 2008*  
*It's, I'd say, on the **way-way** [= freeway] from Chichi through Santa Cruz del Quiche. The drive took us about five hours — Trip Advisor, 2010*

In non-exact reduplications, which are much more common, it is usually the beginning of the second element that is changed, while the consonant remains the same. Again, the rhyming is based on the poetic principle of assonance. There are numerous reduplications of this type found in African American slang:

*She had a hoe with her named Bama, a big bad **mama-jamma** [= sexually attractive woman] — Snoop Dogg, 1996*  
*This **mo-fo** [= contemptible or despicable man] and cronies oversimplified highly complex issues with the typical sprinkling of bad rhetoric — News, CBS-TV program, 2009*  
*What kind of metaphysical **mumbo-jumbo** [= meaningless or deceptive talk, especially jargon] is that? — Washington Post, 2010*  
*That would sound fine in a philosophy course, but what is, as you say here, the **nitty-gritty** [= the most crucial and basic aspects or elements]? — Alice Walker, 1999*  
*I came through in a **zoot suit** [= man's suit with a loose jacket and high-waisted tapering pants, popular in 1940's and 1950's], lookin' too cute — Snoop Dogg, 1996*

Interestingly, most reduplicative compounds found in African American slang are traditional reduplications where the main operating mechanism is the sheer rhyming sound effect. In contrast to British or Australian English slang, there are no implied reduplications, where the two combined elements are supposed to rhyme with another word which carries the meaning, for instance *forty four* is supposed to mean 'whore' and *elephant trunk* means 'drunk'. Complete lack of such cryptic compounds and a striking abundance of traditional reduplications may suggest African Americans' preference for linguistic playfulness expressed through rhyming over the need to be secretive or enigmatic.

## BINOMIAL COMPOUNDS

Binomials are similar to reduplicative compounds in that they involve an exact or non-exact repetition of a word element; however, the two elements are linked with the conjunction ‘and’. Binomials, which are sometimes classified as phrasal compounds, form a series of three words constituting a single entity, for instance *black-and-white*, *go and get*, *flesh and blood*. Sometimes the first and last elements are synonymous and thus tautological: the idea is to strengthen one element by adding another with the same or similar meaning. However, not all such constructions are tautological, and sometimes one element is merely loosely connected with another. According to Biber (1999: 1031) binomials are relatively rare in standard English, nevertheless some of them are quite popular in African American slang. Consider the following examples:

*The Sutherland was known as a **black-and-tan** [= interracial, especially patronized by both African Americans and whites] bar where blacks and whites mingled freely – Chicago Sun-Times, 1996*

*These fab soothers can help you **max and relax** [= have a good time] – Out Magazine, 1999*

*He is an Asian American rapper who stands to **show and prove** [= provide hard and concrete proof] that race is irrelevant as long as you have will and talent – Hip Hop Press, 2011*

*I guess he has to verbally **shuck and jive** [= deceive or mislead] as instructed by his Great White Nope puppeteers – Hill, 2009*

*Yes, this year as our guests arrive, they can **style-and-profile** [= boast or act in a showy way] for the paparazzi on the green carpet during the reception – Charlotte Observer, 2010*

## RHYMING COMPOUNDS

A salient feature of African American slang (Major 1994: xxix), rhyming is not always restricted to reduplicative and binomial compounds. Another poetic device based on sound repetition used extensively in slang is alliteration (alternatively termed head rhyme). It involves a repetition of the same consonant in a compound, typically an initial or final consonant, as in *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers*. Naturally, alliteration has always been the property of literary language and has been used extensively in poetry. However, it is a noticeable feature in African American slang (Safire 1982: 80). Here are a few instances:

*He was just a **baby boy** [= insignificant and irresponsible man] – New York Newsday, 2005*

*They try to **baller-block** [= be envious and try to prevent someone from doing something successful or funny] us, use absolute power – Kanye West, 2010*

*It's **chump change** [= small or meager amount of money] for the photo-op* – *Ebony*, 2009  
*Ain't no party like a **funky fresh** [= excellent or admirable] party! Let's rock!* – Facebook, 2010  
*That requires a real **soul sister** [= fellow African American woman] who can embody the role* – *Black Planet Universe*, 2011

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