

The Woke Project

Linguistics 389: Introduction to African American English, Spring 2025

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Introduction:

Figurative uses of the word *woke* begin in the 20th century and expand in both usage and meaning into the 21st century. We provide analysis of contemporary use in social media and political contexts as well as chart morphological and syntactic properties. It is important to recognize that the collected definitions and uses here of the word *woke* do not necessarily represent future applications or even all current applications. Therefore, through approaching *woke* from historical development, current use, lexical meaning, and grammatical properties, we may holistically approximate its varied use.

History:

- Since the 1930s, *woke* has been used to encourage awareness and unity in facing social injustice and discrimination
- Through the civil rights movement, *woke* further functioned as a warning to be awake during the period of change
- As the movement gained success, *woke* began to reach outside of Black communities
- Many notable people (see timeline below) have been quoted using *woke* to encourage power and community over social injustice

Current Uses:

Social Media

- Pro-woke: Twitter hashtags (#stayWoke, #wokeAF)
- Anti-woke: GamerGate

Political

- Right-wing-affiliated media
- Loss of nuance for the term

International

- Political uses in France, UK, Australia—pejorative, negated pejorative
- Eastern Europe; Macedonia, Hungary

Morphology and Lexicon:

Affix	Part of Speech	Construction	Meaning
-ify	Adj → Verb	wokify	To make someone or something <i>woke</i>
de-	Verb → Verb	dewokify	Inverse meaning of <i>wokify</i>
-ism	Adj → Noun	wokism	1. The concept of being <i>woke</i> 2. Pejorative reference to left-wing ideology
-ness	Adj → Noun	wokeness	State or quality of being <i>woke</i>
-er	Adj	woker	Comparative form
-est	Adj	wokest	Superlative form
-ed, -∅	Verb	woked, woke	Past tense verb; variable
out-	Verb → Verb	outwoke	To be more <i>woke</i> than another

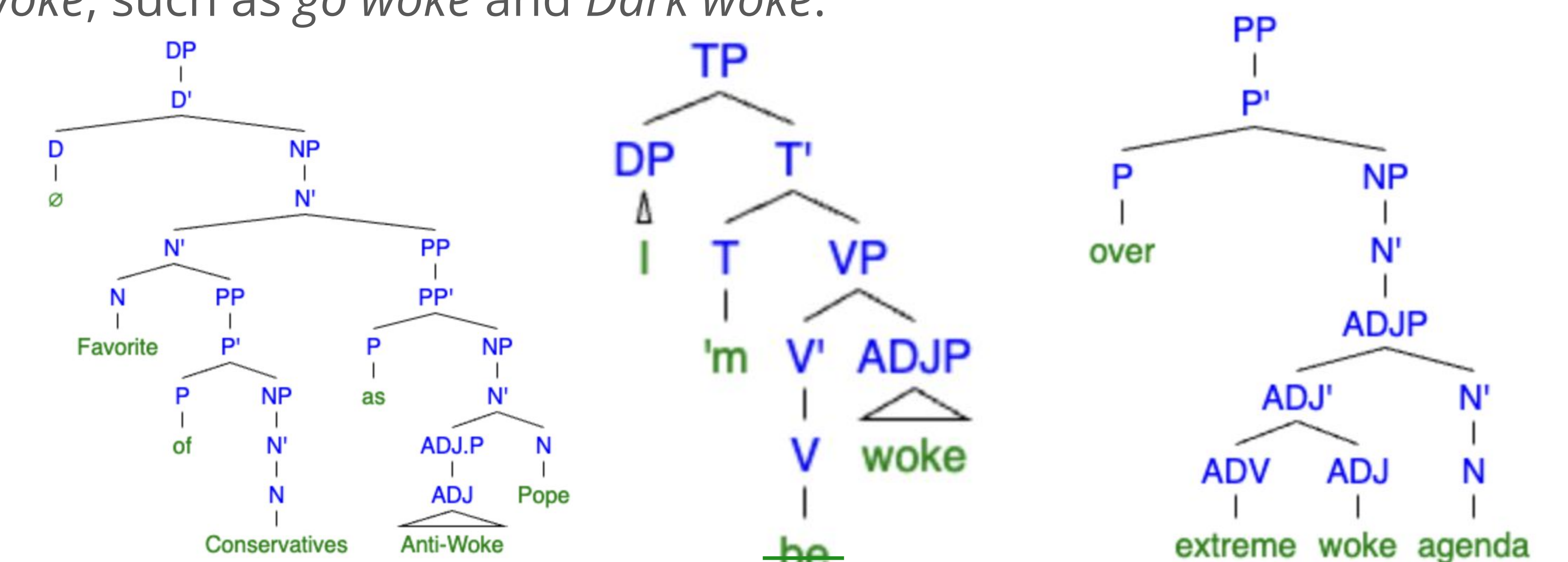
Table 1. Possible affixes for *woke*

Grammar:

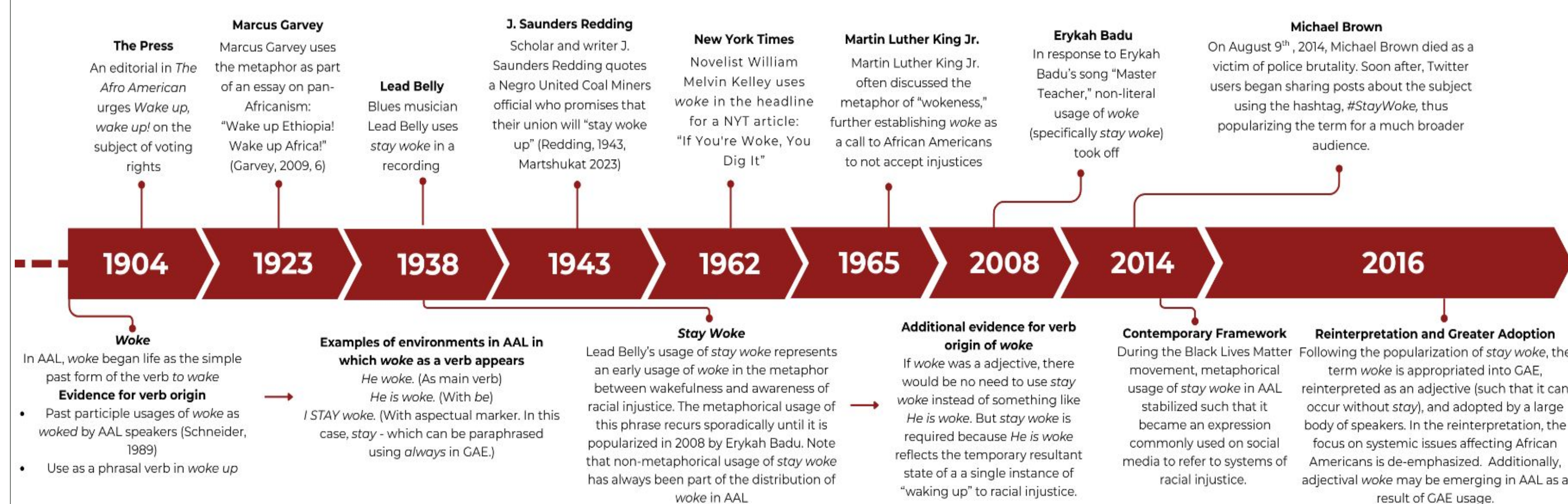
The grammatical forms of the term *woke* fit into 3 different definitions.

- The ability to be physically awake
- The ability to be socially aware
- Association with left-wing or progressive ideas (sometimes derogatory)

Woke by itself (without additional morphemes attached) can be used as a verb, noun, and adjective. Various fixed paradigms have emerged with *woke*, such as *go woke* and *Dark woke*.



Timeline of Uses:



Conclusion:

Woke as a word has undergone a series of changes over time, moving from its original use as a verb to figurative use as an adjective indicating awareness of police violence to an expanded use as an adjective indicating a pro-social-justice stance. This expanded use can be found not just in the original African American Language (AAL) lexicon but also in the General American English (GAE) lexicon.

Selected References:

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