

The Enduring Voice: Langston Hughes's Poetic Trajectory and Its Contemporary Significance through Systemic Functional Linguistics

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Abstract

This study examines the stylistic evolution of Langston Hughes's poetry over the decades using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It focuses on three major poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1920), "I, Too, Sing America" (1926), and "Theme for English B" (1951), to trace how his style evolved across three key poems and to investigate how his linguistic choices create meaning that reflects changing historical and cultural realities. The SFL analysis focuses on transitivity (process types) and mood (subjectivity/dialogue). In the 1920 poem, relational and material processes realize the communal, historical projection; in the 1926 poem, declarative mood and direct action establish the assertive political voice; and in the 1951 poem, shifts toward mental and verbal processes exhibit the introspective complexity and explicitly dialogic engagement. This established connection between poetic style and social meaning demonstrates how Hughes's grammatical architecture both actively shaped and captured the developing discourse of African American identity, resilience, and expression, resonating strongly in current conversations about race, equality, and belonging.

Keywords: Hughes, stylistic evolution, Systemic Functional Linguistics, identity, race, African Americans

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Introduction

"Words mean more than what is set down on paper." – Maya Angelou. Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was a prominent figure of the Harlem Renaissance, also known as the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race" (Hodges, 1986). He captured the subtleties and challenges of black life more realistically than any other black poet or writer. Hughes dedicated his poetry to the people, specifically Black people and while the majority of American poets were writing arcane, esoteric poetry; he consciously drew upon the vernacular, rhythms, and experiences of the African American community, making his work a direct, public statement throughout the 1920s (Gibson, 1971). According to the study, Hughes's major themes are not limited to the early 20th century but rather reflect important, unresolved, and prevalent American problems.

Hughes went beyond white racist conceptions to define what it means to be Black in America. This battle for true identity is ageless and relevant to everyone. His poems captured the need for complete, unconditional inclusion in the American promise, the enduring nature of structural injustice, and the spirit of tenacity and defiance that accompanied it. The subsequent civil rights movement was built upon this central theme of fighting against oppression. This paper examines how Hughes, known for his complex and creative encoding language (Dualé, 2018), used linguistic choices to express both personal and social realities, thus depicting a stylistic shift in his major poems: "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1920), "I, Too, Sing America" (1926) and "Theme for English B" (1951). The study specifically uses SFL's metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) to decode the construction of meaning, examine Hughes' stylistic evolution, reveal how language acts as a tool for social change, and preserve culture and history. Hence, an analysis of these poems illustrates his early, middle, and later stylistic development, respectively.

Literature Review

Langston Hughes's vital role as the voice of the Harlem Renaissance and the recorder of the Black experience in the 20th century has been thoroughly established by the area of African American literary studies. Hughes's poetry offers a fundamental lens for examining questions of identity, protest, and social belonging; therefore, it is essential to comprehend his stylistic complexity (Davis, 2019). Although substantial research examines his significant thematic contributions, especially those on musical innovation and racial consciousness (Lee, 2020), these studies often rely on impressionistic form assessments. Most importantly, there is an apparent lack of rigorous, methodical application of linguistic methodologies in literature. Therefore, to assess current critical understandings of Hughes's stylistic growth, this review synthesizes the literature and demonstrates the special need for the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach used in this work to account for his linguistic evolution.

Scholars widely recognize Hughes's role in raising the issues of racial injustice and in amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, particularly African Americans. Mahmoud (2022) highlights Hughes' depiction of African American adversity and resilience, accenting the "hopes of would-be American Dreamers," (p. 45) and connecting his poetic voice to Maslow's theory of self-actualization. This perspective demonstrates his profound engagement with the African American experience, portraying adversity not as defeat but as a source of hope and empowerment. Furthermore, the literature affirms Hughes's cultural grounding. Jones (2002) and Kun (2005) examine Hughes's strategic integration of jazz and blues, not merely for artistic effect but as a powerful means of cultural preservation and resistance, rejecting the *racial mountain* of conforming to white cultural norms. This infusion of music, as Komunyakaa (2002) notes, shows that Hughes's attraction to the interplay of humor and melancholy becomes a defining element of his poetry,

which echoes the highs and lows of jazz music. It shows how music served as both a cultural foundation and a literary device.

Hughes' relevance extends beyond domestic concerns. Patzer (2022) notes that his global experiences fostered solidarity with colonized people worldwide, inspiring unity and resistance. Most importantly, Dualé (2018) argues, through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor literature," that Hughes used everyday colloquial language innovatively as a deliberate rejection of conventional literary standards, giving voice to the oppressed. Jyothi argues that Hughes's enduring legacy is that he was an activist whose poetry serves as social criticism. His poems, such as "I, Too, Sing America" and "Let America Be America Again," reveal how America's ideal of freedom contradicts the ongoing realities of social injustice, urging society toward fair treatment. His legacy continues to influence contemporary writers like Angie Thomas and Ta-Nehisi Coates, who carry on Hughes's tradition of addressing social injustice through literature.

Even though SFL is a well-known analytical tool—Eggins (1993) describes it as a framework for examining how language methodically creates meaning—the literature reveals a substantial methodological potential. Though some SFL scholarship exists on poetic language, few studies have conducted a comparative metafunctional analysis of Hughes's stylistic shifts across decades and examined their relevance to the contemporary age. Davis (2020) highlights Hughes's continued relevance, demonstrating how he connects the historical experiences of African Americans to today's problems and how he shapes modern protest language and digital activism. Indeed, Hughes's rhythmic language and repetition, once embedded in verse, can now be seen in the structures of hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #ICantBreathe, where small phrases and emotions perform the same social function as his poetry. This perspective places Hughes as a timeless figure who continues to engage with contemporary movements for equality, inclusion, and human dignity. This study, therefore,

addresses the gap by providing a detailed investigation of SFL to examine how Hughes's style transformed across these metafunctions, how Hughes's evolving use of language reflects broader transformations in African American identity and discourse, and how it provides a model for modern expressions of identity and protest.

Research Methodology

The current research study is qualitative and uses textual analysis as its key method. Moreover, the primary data consists of three selected poems by Hughes: "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921), "I, Too, Sing America" (1926), and "Theme for English B" (1951). The study utilizes Michael Halliday's Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) with a specific focus on the three metafunctions: Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual to achieve its objectives. Selected representative clauses are used to identify key metafunction patterns rather than conducting a detailed clause-by-clause analysis. This approach shows how SFL is commonly applied to highlight Hughes's stylistic evolution and the continued relevance of Hughes's poetry in current racial and cultural discussions.

Discussion and Analysis

To trace Hughes's stylistic evolution, this study analyzes three selected poems: "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"(1921), "I, Too, Sing America"(1926), and "Theme for English B"(1951). This analysis employs Halliday's (2004) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) model, with a particular focus on the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. This lens provides a nuanced understanding of how Hughes's poetic style and linguistic choices evolve to convey the shifting themes of identity, race, resilience, and personal journey.

Dominant Linguistic Features Across Three Metafunctions

Table 1

Meta-function	“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921)	“I, Too, Sing America” (1926)	“Theme for English B” (1951)	Evolution
IDEATION AL (What is represented)	Relational processes (40%) - identity as BEING	Material processes (44%) - identity as DOING	Verbal processes (22%) - identity as DISCOURSE	Being → Doing → Questioning
INTERPERSONAL (Social positioning)	100% Declarative, Zero modals - CERTAINTY	100% Declarative, 'will' (33%) - PREDICTION	76% Declarative, 'guess/wonder' (26%) UNCERTAINTY	Certain → Confident → Tentative
TEXTUAL (Information flow)	'I' as Theme (80%) - MONOLOGIC voice	I/'They' alternating (56%/44%) - DIALOGIC struggle	15+ Theme types (37% 'I') -MULTI-VOICED negotiation	Single voice → Two voices → Many voices

This quantitative evidence shows how Hughes’ poems move from focusing on (relational processes) *being*, to *doing* (material processes), and then to *speaking* (verbal processes). His modality shifts from complete certainty to future prediction and finally to uncertainty in the later work. His themes also become more complex over time. These changes show that each step uses SFL tools purposefully, shaping Hughes's representation of African American identity, reality, and hope for change.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921)

Hughes wrote the poem while visiting his father in Mexico and passing through the Mississippi River by train. In the title of the poem, the word “Negro” is used, which is associated with the dark history of slavery, discrimination, hatred, and the oppression of African Americans in the United States. This poem accentuates what rivers meant to African

Americans, associating them with slavery and its history, as before the abolition of slavery in 1865, the shipping of the enslaved people was common as part of the slave trade system, and the Mississippi River was the main route for trading goods and enslaved people.

Furthermore, Hughes's poetic style shows that rhythm and grammar are not only structures but a living record of resilience that reflects African American experiences. His words weave personal and communal identity together, which echoes history while reaching toward universal meaning. Through the use of ideational metafunction, Hughes represents time and experience as flowing and eternal, using rivers—the Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi—as historical metaphors of survival. These symbols still echo in modern America. The poem's rich rhythms and memory of struggle foreshadow the same cultural resilience expressed today in jazz, hip-hop, and spoken word poetry. This resonance echoes the collective remembrance seen in memorials like the National Museum of African American History and Culture which celebrates heritage through art and music.

The use of “I” in the first line of the poem, “I have known rivers” (Hughes, 1921, line 1) functions as the theme (textual metafunction). It reveals a direct relationship with the title's word Negro, emphasizing the idea that the speaker of the poem is the one who speaks of the rivers. The term encompasses not only individual experiences but also those of the entire African American community. The mental process “have known” (Hughes, 1921, line 1), in ideational metafunction linguistically constructs a deep historical connection. Halliday (2004) argues that “language provides a theory of human experience” (p. 29), underscoring the ideational metafunction of SFL. This metafunction enables one to understand a person's inner and outer experiences. Hughes further explains the idea, as the speaker claims to have just known the rivers, yet identifies them as “ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins” (Hughes, 1921, line 2). He discerns an ancestral knowledge and connection. This SFL choice of verb tense and circumstantial elements creates an endless connection between

the speaker's identity and his history. The flow and selection of words by Hughes in this line resemble those of a person who has immensely struggled in life, who has witnessed systemic racial discrimination, and experienced the bitter realities of being a Black artist among whites in early 1900s America.

The ideational meta-function in the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is shown in the table below:

Table 2

Processes Type	Examples from poem	Function
Material	<i>I bathed in the Euphrates</i>	Uses a physical process to place himself in the past.
Mental 30%	<i>I have known rivers</i>	Constructs meaning through his knowledge and experience.
Relational 40%	<i>My soul has grown deep like rivers</i>	Provokes themes of identity, suffering, and spiritual journey by forming the relationship between his soul and the rivers
Circumstantial	<i>I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids...</i>	Describes the history of long-term struggles and forgotten services.

Ideational Metafunction in the Poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921)

The dominance of relational processes (40%) and mental processes (30%) creates identity as being and knowing rather

than doing. Material processes like "bathed" and "built" function symbolically—representing spiritual connection to ancient civilizations, not just physical action. This distribution shows how the speaker testifies to truths grounded in ancestral memory and spiritual authority.

Hughes uses rivers as symbols in his writings, connecting himself to the ancient civilizations. Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) explain the material process in the ideational metafunction: "the prototypical form of the 'outer' experience is that of actions and events: things happen, and people or other actors do things, or make them happen" (p. 170). Rivers serve as a metaphor; in describing them, he refers to his deep-rooted identity. Furthermore, he writes "I bathed in the Euphrates" (Hughes, 1921, line 4). The Euphrates is deeply connected to mythologies and the origins of human civilization. The speaker says, "I built my hut near Congo" (Hughes, 1921, line 5), suggesting how historically his roots are connected to the second largest river in Africa and how he feels comfortable in his home in the little hut he made, as it "lulled [him] to sleep" (Hughes, 1921, line 5). Hughes was conscious of what he was writing; he mentions the Congo because it was later colonized. It is his way of expressing his resentment on how the oppressors eventually seized a place that once sheltered him. The speaker describes the magnificent Nile River, historically, the longest in Africa and the world: "I looked upon the Nile" (Hughes, 1921, line 6). According to Halliday (2004), "circumstantial elements express the relationship between the process and aspect, such as time, place, manner, cause" (p. 240). Looking upon the Nile reveals where the act of looking takes place. The Nile has symbolized the lifeline of Egyptian civilization since the Stone Age. Slaves built the great Egyptian pyramids, and the speaker claims his ancestors built them. These are the disremembered contributions of the African Americans to the world, as he says, "I raised the pyramids" (Hughes, 1921, line 6). Hence, stating this, he reinforces his pride and heritage.

Additionally, songs have a unique and sacred place for African Americans; their resistance resonates with the rhythms

of jazz and folk music. In the poem, the "singing of Mississippi" refers to the hopeful voices of African Americans and highlights the river's role as a witness to brutality. Abraham Lincoln witnessed this oppression when "Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans". The phrase "I have heard the singing of the Mississippi" (Hughes, 1921, line 7) reflects the perception and imagination of the speaker. This aligns with the mental process identified by Halliday (2004): "the prototypical form of 'inner' experience is that of perception, emotion, and imagination" (p. 170). The river's "singing" is not just a sound; it carries the feelings of history, the pain of slavery, and the powerful hope for emancipation. Hughes employs a symbolic style that evokes deep emotions and imagination.

The interpersonal metafunction is presented in the following table.

Table 3
Interpersonal meta-function in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921)

Poem Lines	Mood	Function
<i>I have known rivers</i>	Declarative	Declarative mood is used throughout the poem to emphasize the speaker's deep roots in history and profound historical knowledge.

Clauses are purely in declarative mood (100%) with no modal auxiliaries, suggesting possibility or uncertainty. The absence of interrogatives creates a voice that is experiential and spiritually self-evident.

Similarly, the transformation of the river's "muddy bosom" into "all golden in the sunset" (Hughes, 1921, line 7) symbolizes the shift from slavery toward the promise of freedom

in the 'Emancipation Proclamation' signed by Abraham Lincoln. The image of the sunset suggests both hope and uncertainty, questioning whether emancipation would bring change or remain a deferred dream. This reference reinforces the river's role as a silent witness to slavery and the struggle for freedom. The poem is written in free verse, with no symmetrical lines, no fixed rhyme, and frequent pauses. Nevertheless, it keeps a musical quality, influenced by folk traditions that connect Hughes to his cultural roots, history, and identity. The following table presents the poem's textual metafunction.

Table 4
Textual Meta-Function in the Poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921)

Poem Lines	Theme	Rheme	Function
<i>I have known rivers</i>	I	Known rivers	He focuses on his history and identity and talks on behalf of the entire African American community. This structure continues throughout the poem.
<i>I have seen its muddy bosom turn golden</i>	I	have seen its muddy bosom turn golden	He is pointing towards the transformation from a horrible past to a better future, made possible by the Emancipation Proclamation.

"I" as Theme is consistently placed in 8 out of 10 clauses (80%) which serves a specific function. The theme in textual metafunction is "the point of departure for the message" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 64), grounding what follows.

By maintaining "I" as a stable starting point, Hughes creates a consciousness that encompasses multiple historical experiences. Each Rheme adds new information, creating expansion from a fixed center, mirroring the river as a metaphor: one source flowing into many branches.

In his early works, Hughes underlines collective identity, speaking on behalf of the entire African American community and its shared experiences. The tone of the poem is spiritual and reverent, particularly in the line, "My soul has grown deep like rivers" (Hughes, 1921, line 10). It contains a rich vocabulary and layered imagery. Its flow depicts the twisting, flowing movement of rivers, symbolizing the connection between rivers and the speaker's identity, endurance, and resilience.

"I, Too, Sing America" (1926)

The title of the poem "I, Too, Sing America" is an allusion to "I Hear America Singing," a poem written by Walt Whitman. "I, Too, Sing America," compared with "The Negro Speaks of the Rivers," is a personal poem that transcends geography and time. In the poem, Hughes transforms collective pride into resistance, deploying strong declarative moods and material processes to claim inclusion. Using the interpersonal metafunction, he develops a confident, hopeful voice that asserts identity in the face of exclusion. The declarative mood in "I, too, sing America" (Hughes, 1926, line 1) exhibits dignity and quiet resistance.

Hughes's vision still echoes in today's society, as seen in the continuing fight for equality, visible in the #BlackLivesMatter protests, movements, and other initiatives promoting inclusion in schools, media, and the workplace. The poem's linguistic structure provides a framework for contemporary calls for equality. Just as Hughes's speaker of the poem uses predictive modality to state "They'll see how beautiful I am," (Hughes, 1926, line 16), this SFL choice shows how modern America grapples with the ongoing challenges of representation, systemic bias, and recognition. The poem remains a timeless work by

Hughes, portraying social injustice and faith in justice, linguistically indicated by Hughes's defiant voice.

Halliday explains the clause through interpersonal metafunction as "The clause of a grammar . . . is a proposition, or a proposal, whereby we inform or question, give an order or make an offer, and express our appraisal of and attitude towards whoever we are addressing and what we are talking about" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 29). "I" in the poem indicates the first-person speaker, writing from his perspective and experiences. "Too" here refers to a person being part of a large community. "I, Too, Sing America" (Hughes, 1926, line 1), is a statement that asserts belonging; it is a declarative clause used by Hughes placing his speaker in a position to raise his voice for his rightful place in society. The phrase "Darker brother" (Hughes, 1926, line 2) shows the close bonding between the speakers. It is also a declarative statement; Hughes uses it here not only to assume kinship with the one who listens but to highlight the difference that has led to historical exclusion. According to Halliday, "We call it interpersonal meta-function, to suggest that it is interactive and personal" (2004, p. 30). It also reveals the speaker's identity as an African American when he says, "I am the darker brother" (Hughes, 1926, line 2). Following is the table showing the interpersonal meta-function in this poem:

Table 5
Interpersonal Meta-function in "I Too Sing America" (1926)

Poem Lines	Mood	Modality	Function

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<i>I, too, sing America</i>	Declarative	None	Pointing towards inclusion in the American society.
<i>I am the darker brother</i>	Declarative	None	Drawing attention towards his marginalized, subjugated identity.
<i>Tomorrow, I'll be at the table</i>	Declarative	'will' in 'I'll' shows certainty about the future	He is being hopeful, using <i>tomorrow</i> as the natural cycle for renewal.
<i>They'll see how beautiful I am</i>	Declarative	The future is predicted	He is referring to the realization of oppressors in the coming future.

The poem maintains declarative mood throughout (100%) and uses varied modality through the modal verbs such as “will” and “shall”. This shift from "The Negro Speaks of the Rivers" (zero modals) to "I, Too Sing America" (6 instances of 'will' in 33% of clauses) represents a shift from testifying about the past to the claim of future change.

The “they” in the following line “They send me to eat in the kitchen,” refers to the oppressive people who denied his rights. They send him away “when company arrives” (line 3-4) because they are ashamed of him in front of others. According to Halliday & Matthiessen (2004), “[o]n the borderline between ‘material’ and ‘mental’ are the behavioural processes: those that represent the outer manifestations of inner workings, acting out of processes of consciousness” (p. 171). When the speaker's defiant action is described as “I laugh,” “eat well,” and “grow strong” (lines 5–7), his reaction is shocking, and his response is strong, which suggests that their behavior never bothered him, unveiling his inner strength. Now, there are multiple conditions for not complaining: one is that he is used to such behavior, tolerates it in daily life, or knows about the future. The ideational metafunction in this poem is illustrated in the following chart:

Table 6
Ideational meta-function in "I Too Sing America"(1926)

Process Type	Examples from a Poem	Function
Material	<i>They send me to the kitchen</i>	This physical action demonstrates the speaker's exclusion from the community.
Behavioral	<i>I laugh, grow strong</i>	It emphasizes a strong response to intolerable behavior, showing his resilience.
Relational	<i>I, too, am America</i>	He is reclaiming his identity with a climactic statement.

The Enduring Voice: ...

In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1920), material processes are metaphorically used (20%), but "I, Too Sing America" (1926) shows a shift toward material processes that represent real social actions (44%). Behavioral processes (22%) here exhibit inner resilience through outer actions. This marks a fundamental evolution in his style from being/known to doing/resisting.

The word "tomorrow" (Hughes, 1926, line 8) is used as a powerful symbol—a confident assertion of equal rights in the American society. It is a declaration of inclusion that stands in contrast to the historical exclusion. It shows the modality; he is so certain that he predicts the future. According to Halliday (2004), "Language enacts social relationships," and is frequently expressed through mood and modality (p. 29). Hughes is optimistic. It is clear from the poem's tone as he conveys the idea that life will not be the same throughout and that change is possible by emphasizing "tomorrow" and saying that "I'll sit at the table" (Hughes, 1926, line 9), predicting a swift future, and pointing towards "they," that these oppressors will certainly "regret."

He then challenges the community's superior groups and declares, with unwavering dignity and conviction, "I, too, am America" (Hughes, 1926, line 18). He identifies himself as an American "to relate one fragment of experience to another" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 170). A great defiance in his fight against exclusion can be seen in his writing style. Furthermore, "I" acts as a theme (the point of departure for the message), and "am America" as a rheme, adding information to it. The use of textual metafunction in this poem is illustrated in the table below:

Table 7

Textual meta-function in "I Too Sing America"(1926)

Poem Lines	Theme	Rheme	Function
<i>I, too, sing America</i>	I, too	sing America.	This shows that the speaker is the main subject of the poem.
<i>They send me to eat in the kitchen</i>	They	send me to eat in the kitchen.	He emphasizes 'they' to show the true nature of the oppressors and his resistance against them.
<i>I, too, am America</i>	I, too	am America.	He is asserting his identity as a central character.

Unlike "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1920), where "I" dominates the theme position (80%) in "I, Too Sing America"(1926), the theme shifts between "They" and "I" (56%), linguistically enacting a struggle for control. When "They" is used in the theme position in "They send me to eat in the kitchen" (Hughes, 1926, line 3), the oppressors control the discourse.

However, when “But I laugh” (line 5) puts “I” back into the theme, the speaker resists and takes back control. This back-and-forth fight for the theme position reflects the real social struggle for equality. This shift, combined with the poem’s simple, colloquial vocabulary, grounds the narrative in real-life experiences while upholding a profoundly personal and political declaration of future inclusivity.

“Theme for English B” (1951)

“Theme for English B” (1951) is a contemporary theatrical monologue that shifts from forceful declaration to nuanced introspection. Through nuanced language processes and a variety of modalities, it displays Hughes's mature, introspective, and dialogic tone, reflecting the ongoing conflict between individuality and stereotyping in American classrooms today. The poem's message is still relevant in today's cultural discourse on voice and race.

The instructor's task, given as a Verbal Clause, opens the poem: “The instructor said, ‘Go home . . . and write a page tonight.’” And let that page come out of you—Then it will be true” (lines 1–5). Verbal clauses create narratives of dialogue, as Halliday points out, and in this case, they create the first authoritative relationship between the instructor and the pupil.

The student's first response, “I wonder if it is that simple?” undermines the instructor's confidence at the start of the second stanza. (line 6). The grammatical tool for interpreting the area of uncertainty between “yes” and “no” is the interrogative mood, in conjunction with low-probability modalities such as “I guess” (line 17) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). This hesitation is crucial because it represents the student's naïve yet honest perspective and contrasts dramatically with the instructor's declarative confidence

The student then employs Relational Clauses to clarify his identity, grounding this philosophical ambiguity in his lived reality: “I am twenty-two, colored” and “I am the only colored

student in my class" (lines 7–10). By identifying the speaker as someone who is "being" rather than just "doing" or "sensing," this Relational Process (the process of "being") choice highlights identity. By combining self-awareness with an understanding of our common humanity, the poet thus examines a multifaceted identity that is both simple (a 22-year-old student) and complex (a "colored" person in a white academic setting).

It illustrates how a person's race and position are inseparably linked to him. The following table explains the ideational metafunction:

Table 8

Ideational Meta-Function in "Theme for English B" (1951)

Process	Poem Lines	Function
Material	<i>I take the elevator/cross St. Nicholas</i>	Symbolically, his journey reflects the complexity of his life and the obstacles he faces.

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Mental	<i>I wonder if it's that simple/ I guess...</i>	These phrases show the uncertainty and the confusion of the speaker regarding his identity.
Relational	<i>I am twenty-two, colored, I am the only colored student.</i>	These phrases highlight the speaker's identity, age, and race. It also shows his role in the white-dominated society.
Verbal	<i>"The instructor said, Go home and write a page tonight.</i>	This shows the relationship between a teacher and a student, pointing towards power dynamics.

The emergence of verbal processes (22%) shows significant evolution. Verbal actions, such as "The instructor said" (line 1), focus on the act of writing itself. Also, the mental processes of questioning and wondering (29%), instead of the knowing in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1920), imply uncertainty.

The speaker describes his journey from a school in Durham to a college, situated "on the hill above Harlem" (Hughes, 1951, line 9). This metaphor represents the opportunities, prestige, and power he gained as an African American. However, this status is paid for with social isolation, as the speaker was the "only colored student" (Hughes, 1951, line 10), in his class. It demonstrates the relationship between race, class, and belonging, and how the speaker struggles with his identity when away from his own people. The juxtaposition of the setting further emphasizes the symbolism: "Steps from the hill lead down into Harlem" (line 11). Their social

segregation is emphasized by the verticality and physical separation between the community (Black) and the academic world (White). Similarly, Hughes's description of his long journey—from "school" to "Harlem," "crossing St. Nicholas," "using the elevator in the Harlem branch Y," and ultimately arriving at his "room"—is described (lines 8, 11, 12, 14, 15) to highlight the obstacles the speaker must overcome to start the task. Material Processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), which deal with our perception of the material world, are used to organize this explanation. The density of these Material Clauses vividly illustrates the complicated reality of African American existence, showing that although Black and white neighborhoods are physically close, there is still a great deal of social gap between them, even as the closeness creates the prospect of eventual integration.

"It's not easy" is the opening statement of the following verse (Hughes, 1951, line 16). The speaker explains to the reader or his instructor the difficulty of figuring out "what is true for me or you" at his age. The phrase "It's not easy" and the use of "I guess" (line 17) linguistically create the medium probability modality, preserving the sense of ambiguity surrounding race and identity. Halliday (2007) states that "modality construes the region of uncertainty that lies between 'yes' or 'no'" (p. 147), and so the uncertainty continues. Then, by ingeniously personifying the city, Hughes establishes a close bond with his neighborhood, Harlem, and his heritage: "I hear you: Hear me—we two, you and me" (line 19). In the ideational metafunction, this change to "hear" serves as a behavioral process (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). It highlights that identity is determined by the "outer manifestations of inner workings," which means that hearing is not only a sensory experience but also a symbol of mutual recognition between the place and the speaker. To identify his race and identity as essential to his relationship with Harlem, the speaker employs this discourse.

Some of the interpersonal meta-functions in this poem are described in the table below:

Table 9

The Enduring Voice: ...

Interpersonal meta-function in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1951)

Poem Lines	Mood	Modality	Function
<i>It's not easy to know what is true for you or me.</i>	Declarative		Addressing his teacher and recognizing the complexity of the assignment and his own life.
<i>I wonder if it is that simple?</i>	Interrogative		An open-ended question, expressing how difficult it is to find truth in the world.
<i>I guess being colored doesn't make me not like the same things other folks like who are other races</i>		Low Modality as "guess"	Justifying the notion of being human and discussing the idea of otherness.

The modal 'guess' appears three times, adding uncertainty. Interrogative mood appears four times—completely absent in the other two: “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1920) (0%) and "I, Too Sing America"(1926) (0%). “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1920), employed 100% declarative with no hedging; "I, Too Sing America" used 100% declarative with future-certainty; "Theme

for English B" uses 76% declarative with 26% low-probability modality. This progression from firm statements to questions shows a major interactive evolution in Hughes's style.

Similarly, Hughes may also be speaking to the readers when he says, "you, me, talk on this page" in his journey towards self-discovery. There are many pauses, punctuation marks, and dashes used by Hughes in "Me—who?" (Hughes, 1951, line 20) that linguistically represent the uncertainty and perplexity of the speaker's mind as he struggles to put the task together. This uncertainty is resolved through a stylistic shift to common human experiences, as Hughes describes universal desires such as "I like to eat, sleep . . . and be in love" (Hughes, 1951, line 21). He then expresses his emotions in a very melancholic tone, posing an implicit question: do you think that this single page can explain and reveal his race? He uses play on words, "Being me, it will not be white." (Hughes, 1951, line 28), contending that race cannot deny him or the professor from their inherent humanity.

He advocates racial harmony between Blacks and Whites, drawing on the metaphor of black ink on white paper, suggesting that the difference is not a barrier but an essential dynamic for creating harmony and balance: "You are white—yet a part of me, as I am a part of you" (Hughes, 1951, lines 31–32), which illustrates that "the clause is organized as a message by having a distinct status assigned to one part of it," (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 64). The poem closes with a melancholic but strong and compelling expression of identity: "Being me, it will not be white" (line 28). Here, "white" functions metaphorically to denote the imposition of a singular, dominant cultural script, proclaiming that the speaker's truth is inherently defined by his own non-white experience. Hughes says, "That's American," (Hughes, 1951, line 33), underlining interdependence. By stating, "But we are, that's true!" (Hughes, 1951, line 36), he offers a resolution to the problem and explains why he no longer feels uncertain.

The Enduring Voice: ...

According to Hughes, despite the disparities in privileges, status, and freedom enjoyed by the White Americans, both groups remain obligated to learn from each other. He uses the word “guess” while addressing his instructor, but in the poem, it conveys his respect for his teacher rather than his uncertainty. Finally, he says, “This is my page for English B” (Hughes, 1951, line 41). The poem ends in a powerful resolution, signaled by the stylistic shift: the line flows more smoothly than the previous lines of the stanza, with no pauses, no punctuation, and no dashes. It shows that he has now written from within himself, attained clarity regarding his identity and role in the United States of America. The textual meta-function in this poem is described in the table below:

Table 10

*Textual meta-function in "Theme for English B"
(1951)*

Poem Lines	Theme	Rheme	Function
<i>I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem</i>	"I am twenty— two, colored".	"born in Winston—Salem".	The first phrase introduces the speaker, and the second adds new detail.

<i>You are white— yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.</i>	"You are white"	"yet a part of me, as I am a part of you"	He is drawing a distinction between white and black and focusing on how closely they are connect.
<i>I wonder if it's that simple?</i>	"I"	"wonder if it's that simple?"	He is pointing to the complexity of finding a particular truth in life, which is not easy.

The increase in thematic variety—15+ distinct types compared to 3 in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921)—signals a fundamental shift in how identity is textually constructed. Theme position shifts constantly: from "I wonder" to "You are white" to "Me—who?" Only 37% consistency with "I" as Theme, compared to 80% in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921). This instability reflects the poem's main message: identity in an unequal, mixed America cannot be stable but must be negotiated across multiple positions and voices. This poem is self-reflective, underscoring the speaker's self-discovery. The tone is conversational, almost inquisitive, showing the interconnectedness of black and white identities.

Table 11

Cross-Textual Stylistic Evolution

Linguistic Feature	"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921)	"I, Too Sing America" (1926)	"Theme for English B" (1951)	Evolution Pattern
IDEATIONAL META-FUNCTION				
Total Main Clauses	10	18	41	Increasing complexity
Material Processes	2(20%)	8(44%)	10(24%)	Peak in the middle period
Mental Processes	3(30%)	2(11%)	12(29%)	Returns in the late period
Relational Processes	4(40%)	4(22%)	10(24%)	Decreasing proportionally
Behavioral Processes	0(0%)	4(22%)	4(10%)	Emerging in the middle period
Verbal Processes	0(0%)	0(0%)	9(22%)	New in the period
Dominant Process Type	Relational (40%)	Material (44%)	Verbal /Mental combined)	Being → Doing Questioning
Temporal Orientation	Past (present perfect)	Future (will /tomorrow	Present (now/here)	Ancestral Predictive Immediate
INTER-PERSONAL META-FUNCTION				
Declarative Mood	10 (100%)	18 (100%)	31 (76%)	Remains dominant

Interrogative Mood	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (10%)	Emerges in the late period
Imperative (embedded)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (instructor's voice)	Metadiscursive frame
High Certainty Modality	10 (100%)	12 (67%)	8 (26%)	Progressive decrease
Future Certainty ('I will')	0 (0%)	6 (33%)	2 (6%)	Peak in the middle period
Low Probability ('guess/wonder')	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (26%)	New in the late period
Modal Auxiliaries (total)	0	6	11	Increasing modalization
TEXTUAL META-FUNCTION				
Distinct Theme Type	3	5	15+	Increasing complexity
'I' as Theme	8 Clauses (80%)	10 clauses (56%)	15 clauses (37%)	Decreasing dominance
Theme Consistency Ratio	High (0.8)	Medium (0.56)	Low (0.37)	From mono-logic dialogic → multi-voiced
Average Words per Line	10-12	5-7	3-15 (variable)	Flowing → Clipped → Conversational

Cohesive Device	Ana-phora bathed, I built)	Temporal markers (tomorrow	Interro- gation repetition	Ritual Progression Dialogue
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This systematic comparison reveals three different stylistic time periods. His early work (1921) constructs identity through relational processes (40%) and mental processes (30%), using 100% declarative clauses with no modality, creating an ancestral voice. Middle work (1926) shifts to material processes (44%) and behavioral processes (22%), containing potent future modality (33% of clauses contain 'will'). It shows resistance and certainty for inclusion. His later work (1951) introduces verbal processes (22%, absent in earlier poems) and interrogatives (10%, also absent earlier), with low-probability modality appearing in 26% of clauses—forming a dialogic voice. Overall style moves from being/knowning → doing/resisting → questioning/negotiating, demonstrating a clear evolution in Hughes's style.

Conclusion

The Linguistic analysis of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921), “I, Too, Sing America” (1926), and “Theme for English B” (1951), through the lens of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), demonstrates how Langston Hughes's evolving writing style is a testament to both the mastery of his art and ideological depth. His early poetry speaks with a collective and historical consciousness, celebrating African American identity through ancestral memory, mainly through relational processes and high-certainty modalities. His collective voice changes into one of assertion and equality. Hughes is more introspective in his later poems. His tone is reflective, dialogic, and self-exploratory within a racially divided society, deploying verbal processes and modalities. In particular, the analysis showed a methodical change in Mood structures and Process Types that transformed the speaker from a collective, historical identity to a complex, dialogic individuality.

This SFL-based development highlights not only a shift in his style but also the linguistic construction of an individual's journey from shared heritage and collective past to self-discovery. Hughes connects emotion and intellect through his SFL choices in language. He turns rhythm and structure into linguistic tools of resistance and remembrance. Significantly, his linguistic choices, use of process, mood, and tone exhibit how poetry can serve both as an artistic expression and an impactful social act. Even a century later, Hughes's voice still echoes in the classrooms, communities, and cultural movements in America. His words continue to reverberate in contemporary writings and protests advocating equality and justice. His evolving language, his linguistic blueprints based on SFL, thus demonstrate that Hughes's evolving linguistic choices correlate with his ideological shifts across the decades, and poetry can both preserve history and inspire change, proving that words never fade when born of truth.

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