

The Inauthentic Use of African American English on Instagram

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Introduction

In the modern technological era, the internet has become a vital part of people's daily lives across the world. Social media specifically has become a globally accepted way to communicate and interact with others while sharing life updates, entertainment, news, and so much more. It had already become a fascinating and quickly evolving entity for human interaction up until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when there was suddenly even more interaction occurring online as the majority of our daily communication began occurring through the internet. The internet and social media platforms are interwoven with modern youth culture in North America as many young individuals use it as a way to communicate with friends, make new friends, and interact with the world around them. Youth internet culture is always evolving at a rather rapid rate, but across the last decade, from my personal observations, there is one particular aspect of internet lingo that has seemingly been a staple for as long as I have been on social media: the usage of AAE as a linguistic tool in internet comedy. What I plan to do is investigate this linguistic phenomenon concerning the inauthentic usage of African American English (AAE) as a means of comical performance on the social media platform Instagram.

The usage of AAE in this sense that I have noticed has often been from non-Black individuals which do not speak AAE as an L1 and instead adopt a highly stylized version of it. There is much to be analyzed around the origin of this linguistic phenomenon, the reasons for it, and its impact. In this paper, I will first overview background studies about social media investigations, surveys of online linguistic landscapes, and a history of the appropriation of AAE in media. I will then go into the methodology of how I investigated the inauthentic use of AAE on Instagram before discussing findings. By the end of this paper, I will demonstrate that AAE is inauthentically performed by non-Black non-L1 AAE

speakers on social media in a way that relies on harmful stereotypes of African Americans in order to demonstrate the status of belonging to internet comedic culture.

1 Background

A small yet growing field of linguistics is one called linguistic landscapes (LL). Most simply put, linguistic landscape studies can be described as “the study of writing on display in the public sphere” (Coulmas et al., 2009). In other words, this field is dedicated to the language choices made by individuals and/or groups in public signage in the world. A newer and even smaller field focuses on the linguistic choices of online landscapes, and this field includes inspecting the language used publicly on social media such as comment sections. For my purpose here, I will call this subsect online linguistic landscapes (OLL). Maly and Blommaert (2019) propose “to study social action and space from a post-digital perspective” which involves a higher emphasis on discourse and discussion rather than heavy numerical analysis, much like this current study (Maly and Blommaert, 2019).

Instagram began as an image-sharing site in which one could only create a post with an image. Only if an image was posted was there the option to also add text descriptions beneath the image. Instagram has begun slowly focusing more on videos as well as images, but the option to type text descriptions is still available and largely utilized by users. Under each video or image post, other users can leave text-only comments. Instagram also has a feature called “stories” in which a user can post a temporary image or video that is only accessible on their feed for 24 hours. After this period, it is permanently inaccessible to other users unless the original poster posts it again. Due to the difficulty of collecting such temporary data such as Instagram “stories,” I will be looking at the descriptions and comments of regular image and video posts.

It is not uncommon that AAE speakers can be misunderstood by non-AAE speakers. These misunderstandings can have very serious repercussions and consequences that unproportionately affect Black North Americans. A very stark example of such misunderstandings was researched by Taylor Jones in 2019. Jones found that when Black individuals testified in court, official transcribers frequently made glaring errors in transcribing AAE both phonologically and syntactically, sometimes completely misconstruing what was being said by the Black testifiers. If AAE is being misconstrued by professionals whose job it is to precisely and exactly transcribe what is being said by individuals, then this misinterpretation can be assumed to be happening elsewhere such as in healthcare, education, and even in online communities. That is exactly what Ilbury

(2020) found in white British homosexual men appropriating AAE as a form of in-group culture: the users who were using AAE inauthentically on Twitter were not “accurately represent(ing) the systematicity of AAVE phonology, but rather they have stylistically appropriated” the phonological rules and other lexical items (Ilbury, 2020). This misconception of AAE by non-L1 AAE speakers is even further complicated when it is considered how AAE is not a monolith but rather is a language full of dialects and varieties (Jones, 2019). In fact, while AAE itself is not monolithic, the inauthentic use of AAE projects a rather monolithic stereotype of invariable “Blackness,” causing further harm in reducing its speakers to a single, often detrimental, image.

In addition to misconception, AAE is affected by cultural appropriation. There are many linguistic studies into this phenomenon, many of them focusing on the inauthentic use of AAE by white speakers. When it comes to the inauthentic use of AAE in media, many studies focus on forms of entertainment such as television, movies, and social media. Bucholtz and Lopez (2011) introduce the term linguistic minstrelsy as the “sociolinguistic processes of deauthentication, maximizing of intertextual gaps, and indexical regimentation of the performed language” in television and movies that “reproduce(s) and undermine(s) the symbolic dominance of hegemonic white masculinity” (Bucholtz & Lopez, 2011). They claim that this mock language “reinscribes stereotypes about African Americans and their language while participating in a longstanding and often controversial pattern of European American appropriation of Black cultural forms,” which is exactly what we see in the appropriation of AAE on social media and other entertainment. AAE has been a popular form of language to “borrow” from across many non-Black non-L1 AAE speaking communities. White female social media personalities have been found to hyper-perform “Blackness” via their usage of AAE in such a way that it “surpasses ‘real’ community members,” i.e., Black women (Fix, 2010). A white drag queen in the southern United States has been documented using features of AAE while on stage in order to entertain performance guests with comedy and jokes, linguistically “blurring her racial identity” (Mann, 2011). Most applicable to this paper’s research is the study concerning inauthentic and performative use of AAE among white British homosexual men in England (Ilbury, 2020). Ilbury’s study shows how white homosexual men take on and then perform the role of the “independent, strong, sassy, fierce Black woman” stereotype as a form of in-group projection and communication style and how that stereotype has a strong foundation on the Internet from decades-old memes. I argue that the inauthentic and appropriated use of AAE in comedic and humorous settings on Instagram share a similar

background with the subjects in Ilbury's study: a decades-old internet culture that make jokes of AAE at Black peoples' expense.

Based on a review of three highly viral internet memes (Chris H., 2017; Crazy Laugh Action, 2012; KFOR Oklahoma's News 4, 2012), I was able to conclude that, oftentimes, the sole requirement for humor is the presence of a Black individual or AAE. All three videos revolve around highly upsetting and concerning situations composed of a drug overdose, attempted sexual assault, and an apartment building which caught fire, yet they have all soared to extreme comedic popularity based on the language used by Black individuals within the materials. In fact, the AAE phrases of the Black individuals in all three videos became "network catchphrase memes" (Chen, 2019) which can still be found in comments by non-Black non-L1 AAE speakers today.

2 Methodology

For my data, I chose to look at Instagram's "meme pages." "Meme pages" are Instagram accounts dedicated to making or re-uploading comical images or videos (memes), and some of these accounts have created entire communities out of their interactions with their followers. I will refer to accounts and pages I examined eight posts in total. Of these eight posts, I looked at four posts per account on two separate "meme pages" on Instagram. Of the four posts chosen to be analyzed per account, I chose two random posts that involved the mere presence of a Black individual or AAE and two random posts that involved no Black individuals or AAE whatsoever. This comparison was done to see if there was any type of relation between the content of the post and the usage of AAE by non-Black individuals in the comment section. Originally, I had only planned to do two random posts per page, but as I was choosing my posts for data, I noticed there seemed to be a slight uptick in AAE in the comments depending on the content. Upon noticing this difference, I decided to specifically look for the two types of posts I mentioned above and selected random posts fitting the above descriptions.

I manually looked for comments involving certain phonological and syntactic AAE features that are often incorrectly appropriated by non-L1 AAE speakers online as outlined by Ilbury (2020). A few of these features include the zero copula, -ng reduction, various lexical items with origins in AAE, and attempts to spell words according to AAE phonetics. I also drew from Maly and Blommaert's (2019) post-digital analysis framework which emphasizes discourse over numerical statistics and focused on the circumstances surrounding the comments. In this case, the circumstances around the comments are the

perceived ethnicity of the commenters and the content of the original post under which the comments were made (i.e. whether or not the post involves the mere presence of a Black person or features of AAE). After collecting comments by non-Black users using AAE, I manually double-checked for AAE linguistic features in the collected comments by referencing Ilbury (2020) and Green (2002).

Determining the humorous content of the comments relied in part on understanding the typical format of internet memes. Due to the fact that memes are typically imitated from other sources then altered and reproduced to fit different contexts, I relied on a mixture of “the study of network catchphrase memes” wherein “language is replicated quickly and disseminated” (Chen, 2019) and a personal understanding of the ongoing catchphrase meme trends that were relevant at the time of data collection. In addition to this, since I was looking particularly for inauthentic uses of AAE by non-Black commenters, I looked for comments that attempted to be clever, witty, and/or offensive based on Merritt et al.’s research (2021) which demonstrated that stereotypical and potentially offensive memes seem to pair with clever, witty attempts at humor as “the threshold for tolerance of discriminatory statements (may be) influenced by ingroup/outgroup status” due to the fact that “social acceptability of expressing prejudice may be a critical feature for the creation, enjoyment, or transmission of” internet comedy and catchphrase memes.

There are many apparent caveats to this initial research and methodology. First, the sample size is very small. Some accounts post up to ten or more memes every day, so future studies will have to largely expand the sample size to get a clearer picture of the situation. Second, these posts are often removed by Instagram due to being reported or are simply taken down by the poster themselves. In addition, the same is the case with the comments beneath the post: they are often removed for various reasons. There is also the possibility that more comments were left after the data were initially collected, therefore changing the numbers of the data. Next, because you can choose how private your information is on Instagram, it is not easy to find reliable data on a commenter’s ethnicity. If the commenter decided to make that information public, then I counted their comment(s) as data in the final calculations. However, if they have not shared this information publicly, I did not add their data to the final calculations. Finally, there is always the chance of misinterpreting the data as I am not an L1 speaker of AAE and may over-interpret or under-interpret the comments.

Discussion

Most comments under the meme pages' posts were jokes themselves. There seems to be a culture amongst the followers of meme pages to comment with jokes that bounce off the content of the posts. In other words, commenters seem to want to add something to the meme in the form of comedy rather than simply commenting that they liked the post or found it funny. There is a kind of scaffolding between the posts, the comments, and sometimes replies to the comments. The commenters seem to want to joke around themselves instead of simply looking at a meme without participation. This joking manner is no exception to the comments containing AAE by non-Black individuals: each comment, except for a few criticizing a famous Black woman, uses AAE in comedic comments.

Every single post analyzed, except one, contained non-Black individuals using AAE in a comedic sense which strongly implies that non-Black individuals are using AAE inauthentically in a performative way to add more humor to the comment section of a humorous post. While it is impossible to prove that these individuals do not speak AAE natively, it is unlikely. It is more likely that the commenters are using AAE as a way to gain social capital in an era where social media fame and attention are highly coveted. In this instance, these kinds of comments are an inauthentic use of AAE as a means to gain social capital focusing on humor which uses AAE as a tool in their comedic style. In addition, this behavior is enlivened by non-Black individuals when they are commenting in the context of memes involving Black individuals or AAE. When interacting with these kinds of memes, non-Black individuals feel more encouraged to participate in the performative and inauthentic usage of African American English.

Figure 1 shows the percentages of comments by non-Black commenters containing AAE between the four posts involving a Black person or AAE and the four posts that do not involve a Black person or AAE. Almost all four posts involving a Black person or AAE have a higher percentage than the four posts not involving a Black person or AAE. The exception to this trend is Post 6 which overall had a higher percentage of comments utilizing AAE features but with many commenters who had chosen to conceal their ethnicity and race, meaning I could not include their comments as data. Figure 2 shows that when there is a meme involving a Black person or AAE, non-Black Instagram users are over three times as likely to use AAE features in their comments. This number supports the fact that non-Black users are opting to use AAE in certain circumstances and therefore likely using it inauthentically. In addition, this difference in percentages also supports the

suggestion that non-Black users will change their language depending on the context of the meme they are commenting about. In this case, they are changing their language by including AAE features or not depending on if the meme involves a Black person or AAE. Figure 3 offers a brief sampling of the kinds of comments that were collected for analyzation.

Figure 1: Percentages of AAE across post categories

	Posts involving a Black person or AAE	Posts not involving a Black person or AAE
Percentage of comments with AAE	Post 1 – 9.9% Post 2 – 13.1% Post 5 – 13% Post 6 – 4.8%	Post 3 – 5.8% Post 4 – 0.0% Post 7 – 2.4% Post 8 – 3.2%

Figure 2: Average percentage of AAE across post categories

	Posts involving a Black person or AAE	Posts not involving a Black person or AAE
Average percentage of comments with AAE	10.2%	2.85%

Figure 3: Illustrations of comments

Comment with AAE posted by non-Black person	AAE Feature	Post
“Pineapple be hitting different [sigh emoji]”	<i>habitual be</i>	Post 3
“bro think he Kanye”	<i>null-3rd person singular verb morpheme, zero copula</i>	Post 4
“cappin”	<i>AAE lexical item, -ng reduction</i>	Post 6

One could argue that users of social media who are non-Black non-L1 AAE speakers choose to utilize AAE to fit in with online circles are simply “crossing” and are not doing anything too different from Black individuals who are crossing into North American Standard English to “fit in” with European American circles. However, I would argue that there is a notable difference between individuals who truly cross and use audience-designed language and those individuals who use AAE inauthentically and performatively on the internet. In the case of online social media users using AAE, while they may be doing so to fit in with a sort of in-group communication style, it is not required

or even expected of them to do so. There are countless and very famous non-Black internet comedian figures (ex., Drew Gooden, Kurtis Conner, or Charles White Jr.) who do not employ the use of AAE yet remain widely and openly accepted and enjoyed in comedic circles. However, Black individuals who are L1 AAE speakers that cross into North American Standard English are expected to perform in North American Standard English to succeed in education and ultimately their careers (Baugh et al. 305-318). If they do not perform to European American standards, their livelihoods may suffer greatly.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that non-Black individuals on social media are using AAE features even though they are likely not L1 AAE speakers in the comedic realms of the internet, specifically on the comment sections of meme pages on Instagram. While this usage of AAE may happen unprompted, it seems that there is more willingness to use AAE in comments if the context of the original post involves a Black person or AAE. This usage of AAE depends on non-Black individuals' stereotypical perception of what the language sounds like and can sometimes end in certain features being selectively chosen and employed without employing other features typically found in AAE. Non-Black individuals seem to be using AAE inauthentically, performatively, and jokingly to fit in with the Instagram meme community, possibly due to AAE alone being found to be humorous to said community, especially when the meme they are discussing involves a Black individual or AAE.

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