Gay Black Men and the Construction of Identity via Linguistic Repertoires

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1. Introduction

Gay African-American men hold membership in at least three groups – Gay, Black, and male – that are grounded in ideologies and provide linguistic resources that are complex and potentially conflicting. As such, these men exist at the cross-section of socio-cultural groups whose perspectives and presentations are often framed in opposition to one another. This chapter explores the ways in which such complex identities are negotiated through the use of language. Specifically, this project will investigate how a Gay African-American man constructs his complex identity by negotiating his multiple memberships over the course of an online video message in which his audience shifts require multiple stance-taking practices. These shifts are managed via a type of code-switching that I argue more closely resembles a mixing. By examining how a single speaker manipulates multiple varieties in this way, I seek to better understand the social meanings indexed by and linked to each variety in the speaker's repertoire along with the motivations and methods for how varieties are chosen and managed at the level of the individual speaker.

2. African American English

At its onset, the linguistic exploration of African American English (AAE) was largely restricted to descriptions of the vernacular speech of young, urban, working class males (Labov 1966, 1972; Wolfram, 1969; Fasold, 1972) as an attempt to legitimize the variety in the eyes of those who denigrated it as a marker of lesser intelligence (Jensen,1969; Farrell, 1984a), by demonstrating its uniformity and thus systematicity (Baugh, 1999). While these efforts, which Bucholtz (2003) referred to as "strategic essentialism," were rooted in good intentions, the limited focus erased space for variation within AAE, rendering invisible several sub-varieties including Middle Class AAE, African American Women's Language (AAWL) and Gay male English (GME), and their speakers. In recent years, linguists have revisited and expanded their definitions of AAE through the exploration and inclusion of said varieties (Britt & Weldon, 2015; Troutman, 2001; Rahman, 2008; Alim and Smitherman, 2012). However, there remains little to no research concerning the use of AAE by Gay Black men.

Linguists have examined the use of AAE as a resource from which men of varying ethnicities have drawn in order to express masculinity and aggression (Bucholtz, 1999; Bucholtz and Lopez, 2011; Chun, 2001). In these cases, AAE has been linked to hyper-masculinity and violence, a trope-like attribute historically assigned to African-American men (Bucholtz, 1999; Hill, 2008). A high level of aggression is one of the most notable features linked to this imagined/performed masculinity and while we cannot be sure in which direction they were acquired, AAE has been associated with these attributes as well (Davis, 2006; Gray, 1995; Henry, 2004; Hopkinson and Moore, 2006). These fixed definitions of Black masculinity have functioned much like the original tapered preoccupation with African American Vernacular English (AAVE) by removing any potential for variation within Black male-hood, and effectively excluding all who do not strictly conform to said ideological behavior, including Gay Black men.

3. Gay Black Men

Beginning in the 1990s, the analysis of queer speech moved sociolinguistic work beyond gender and into sexuality (Leap, 1996,1996a; Livia & Hall, 1997). In an effort to introduce this dynamic and give voice to the queer community, these researchers challenged and complicated what we knew queer identity to be. They presented a much more complex view of Gay identity than had been previously discussed, contesting the stereotypes of Gay men as effeminate, weak, and lacking masculinity, through discussions of linguistic gender bending (Livia & Hall, 1997) and the distinguishing of sexuality from gender identity by transexual Gays and lesbians (Bagemibl, 1997).

Though the work on Gay male speech has made great strides towards challenging stereotypes placed on the LGBT+ community, the focus of this work has been largely geared towards either the discursive turns of gay males in discourse and coming-out narratives (Kim 2009; Leap 1996, 1996a) or the acoustic analysis of elements such as pitch and intonation (Gaudio 1994), and what is labeled as the "gay lisp" (Munson 2010; Mack & Munson 2012; Van Borsel et al 2009). Furthermore, the exploration of Gay Male English (GME) has been rooted in variations of Standard American English (SAE) and gay identity as white by default. It has excluded the voices of gay black men, to which the virtually invisible body of work concerning gay black speech can attest. As is the case with the cultural expectations of African American masculinity, there is a considerable void that denies gay black men and their respective varieties full membership in both the Black community and the Gay community.

4. Intraspeaker variation

The phenomenon of code-switching presumes the existence of language systems that consist of multiple linguistic codes and resources (Myers-Scotton, 1988; Heller, 1995). These resources are manipulated by bilingual and diglossic speakers as a means of navigating various social settings (Fishman, 1965; Blom & Gumperz, 1972) and cultural memberships of groups defined by their ethnicity, sexuality, gender, etc. Eckert and Rickford (2002) address this switching beyond the strict and distinct moves between languages and label it "style-shifting", expanding their scope to include multiple varieties as well as audience, identity construction, and register. Barbara Johnstone's (1996) work focus on the linguistic individual hones in on the concept of intraspeaker variation by observing the phenomena of discursive turns and their extensive complexity in language

resources as well as identity construction practices by a sole speaker, to better understand what the variation is doing. Contrastively, Benor (2010) approaches intraspeaker variation from the view of its form and sources first, and function later. She describes such compositions of linguistic elements as repertoires, placing emphasis on how the diverse features are drawn from varying language sources and are pieced together to function in a type of bricolage arrangement. Much like Benor, Young's (2011) work expands the treatment of intraspeaker variation by rejecting the "switching" theory in favor of what he calls "code meshing", the simultaneous mixture of two varieties as one draws from them each in concert. While the research concerning intraspeaker variation is extensive, there is still a limited understanding of the mechanics of the process as it occurs in moments of talk where there are not clear cut switches or shifts, implying an on/off function, but are more of a meshing of sorts, drawn from multiple sources and employed with no clear transitions. This paper seeks to contribute to that discussion through a closer analysis of what motivates switches, the proximity in which the varieties surface and their function in stance-taking practices.

5. Stance

In evaluating the data, I drew from varying frameworks that held elements crucial to my understanding of Gazi's performance. I draw largely from Stanton Wortham's (2001) framework for narrative analysis, featuring the enactment of selves during the recounting of narrative. This approach is built upon the analytical tools provided by Du Bois (1997), Goffman (1981), and Bakhtin (1981,1986). While these sources are the major ones upon which I ground my analysis, it must be noted that the use of indexicality (Peirce, 1932) in the evaluations and stances taken in discussion is critical to the positioning of the self as a method of identity enactment. Goffman (1981) introduced the concept of footing and positioning of speakers as they navigate between narratives and conversational interviews. He established the framework of footing, which evaluates the participant's alignment and how said alignment (or stance) becomes our frame for the events which are recounted. He argues that our stance towards events within narratives create a framework through which we organize, evaluate and place ourselves with respect to them. Goffman's discussion of footing provides a framework for addressing participation in contextually specific instances of language use and the roles that interlocutors take up in conversation.

John W. Du Bois explores the concept of stance as an event of evaluation and signaling of relations during interactions and conversations. The stance which is taken by the speaker signals the positioning of varying social actors and is rooted in the evaluation of an object or other interlocutors. The evaluation of an object leads to the positioning of one's self in terms of other speakers. While one evaluates an object according to Du Bois, a speaker aligns (or misaligns) with another speaker in much the same way. Du Bois' approach provides much of what Goffman's lacks which is the role of evaluations by the speaker in the expression of stance and the establishment of footing. The participants are not the only focus of the stance triangle that Du Bois provides as a framework that specifically explores how the speaker's evaluation of an object works towards creating his stance.

Stanton Wortham's approach is referential, interactional, and cultural in evaluating the enactment of personhood within narratives. Wortham draws upon all of the beneficial elements of the aforementioned frameworks in order to establish his own

method of narrative evaluation. As evaluative stance leads to positioning, one is able to establish themself within the narrative as well as during the performance, enacting various selves throughout the process. Wortham incorporates Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) notions of voicing, double voicing and ventriloquism to demonstrate how speech is used in the process of positioning and enactment. Bakhtin's proposal of a dialogic self is pertinent to the understanding of how multiple selves are enacted over time and over the course of a narrative/performance. Bakhtin expresses the idea that text cannot be interpreted in isolation as everything builds upon previous texts and meaning is rooted in context. I would argue the same logic for the enactment and construction of personae. In the data provided, Gazi enacts varying selves via positioning with regards to race, gender and a racially marked masculinity. These selves are enacted in context to one another but also in the context of the societal treatments of them. Wortham's framework extends this approach of the dialogic self and the enactments of multiple levels of personhood during the telling of narratives. He thoroughly discusses the role of positioning in the construction of identity which is rooted in stance taking towards varying manifestations of selves and others. Gazi performs his identity very much in the same way, through the use or moral stance and evaluation, he constructs his multi-faceted persona, through attributes that are inherent to himself, and in contrastive juxtaposition of undesirable figures per his evaluations.

6. Data

Gazi Kodzo is a prominent Youtube personality who often delivers commentary on social issues, particularly concerning the plight of the African-American community in the United States. Gazi does identify as an openly Gay man, but often discusses how he negotiates a complex identity as a member of the Gay community who is also pro-Black-two cultural memberships that historically conflict. The presumption of hyper masculinity for Black men conflicts with Gay identity (as discussed above) but, in addition to that tension, the label "pro-Black" is generally assigned to African-Americans who are extremely invested in the future of the Black community and perform a very strong Black identity rooted in ethnicity and information. His profile description is a quote from notable Black activist Marcus Garvey and reads: "Be Black, Buy Black, Think Black, and all else will take care of itself!" Several pro-Black people have expressed the belief that a significant amount of African-American men are Gay or feminized as a plot by White people to emasculate Black men and weaken them. Gazi's membership as a Gay man, then, is quite complicated as he must negotiate these beliefs while existing in both cultures. He has openly challenged those who hold this belief in his video "Is Being Gay Anti Pro-Black?" which was posted on 5/28/15. He currently has 47,521 Youtube followers and a total of 4,251,864 video views. Gazi's online presence extends beyond Youtube as he expresses his online persona rooted in Blackness to his more than 30,000 Instagram and 48,000 Twitter followers as a self proclaimed "revolutionary." This project's data is a video posted by Gazi on October 15, 2014 entitled "White Gays Hate me…!" and currently moment has 15,020 views. The clip is a discussion of responses to an online message he sent stating "Gay people legally fighting to walk down the aisle. Black people legally fighting to walk." The criticism Gazi faced came from the Gay community and implied that he was attempting to downplay the struggles that members of the LGBTQ+ community face.

Given that gay African American men have complex identities that reflect their membership and existence in various distinctive cultural groups, we should consider their

linguistic repertoires as equally complex, with features drawn from African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), Standard African American English (SAAE), Mainstream American English (MAE), and Gay Male English (GME), among others. The speech of Gay men has often been linked to female speech, much like stereotypes of Gay male behavior. Despite the ideological biases that mark Gay men as less masculine, there has been overlap between female speech and Gay male speech as is demonstrated in Barrett's (1999) discussion of the use of female speech by Drag Queens for indexing stereotypical femininity as it is linked to the cultural value of White women. Barrett draws on Lakoff's description of female speech which includes hypercorrect grammar, careful pronunciation, empty adjectives and hedges several of which are used by Gazi as he begins the video, addressing his broad audience in SAE. In addition to the aforementioned features, Gazi also employs female pronouns to refer to himself despite not identifying as a trans-woman or a Drag Queen. As he begins to speak directly to the Gay community in response to their criticism, he defends himself in the third person as a female using careful speech along with gestures marked as feminine.

(1) **She** made no comparison. **She** did none of that ((flips imaginary hair)). She's pure.

In this line, Gazi is defending himself by creating a persona of innocence. He draws on the patriarchal assumption of female purity and meekly asserts his position as the attacked and blameless. In this moment, Gazi has marked himself as feminine but only when addressing the Gay community, reproducing the association of Gay identity with femininity. However, as he begins to shift away from the innocence he portrays in jest and defend himself in a more aggressive manner, he shifts into AAE. At this moment, his audience is still the Gay community, but he has effectively disaligned with them, chastising their behavior.

(2) No **heffa**, I wasn't making comparisons but since you wanna make a comparison, let's make a comparsion.

As his voice lowers in pitch significantly, Gazi shifts to an offensive position and leads with the AAE insult "heffa" (or heifer) which maintains the association of femininity with the Gay community and critiques them simultaneously. In this moment, Gazi becomes significantly more aggressive and in contrast to the previous line, portrays a more heteronormative masculinity, taking up the narrative that aligns Blackness with aggression. After carefully explaining, his point of reference, Gazi shifts back into SAE and the use of careful speech. His voice raises in pitch and he addresses the Gay audience in an almost condescending manner, maintaining the disalignment.

(3) Do you get the difference? You are not fighting to legally walk. I'm sorry about it. **It's it's** no comparison. You are totally right. You are a cat we are dogs. We are the ones being attacked. We are the ones who are being **legally** killed.

As he maintains this distance from Gay people Gazi is also aligning with Blackness via the chastisement. Instead of including himself in the LGBTQ narrative, he makes the claim "YOU are not fighting" which is followed by "WE are the ones being legally killed" and uses pronouns to enact his stances. These stances are further demonstrated through the AAE speech act of "Calling Out" (Green, 2002; Smitherman, 1977; Troutman, 2001) where he blatantly criticizes the Gay community's lack of support for African-American causes.

(4) I've checked yo' resume.
    You ø right there wit' them other assholes

      Again, as he aggressively calls out the transgressions of the Gay community, AAE arises via post-vocalic /r/-lessness, copula absence and eth stopping. At this moment, Gazi shifts his attention to his African-American audience aligning with them by othering White people and producing significantly more AAE features.

(5) White people **kill me** cause they **be** like "oh don't judge me cause of my ancestors."
No I'm judging you because your resume shows you ø just like yo' ancestors.

      As he shifts focus to his Black viewers, he employs the lexical term "kill me" alongside the habitual be and the speech act of "marking" (Green 2002). As he mimics the words of White people, his voice raises in an almost mocking tone and is an example of Bakhtin's voicing, through which he recites the words of White people as a means of distancing himself from them. Gazi's familiarity with AAE speech events indexes his constant performance of his Blackness which functions like an anchor to which he returns after he enacts various other facets of his identity through speech. As Gazi shifts in these moments, it would seem that his linguistic choices function more as audience adaptation instead of solely identity enactment. In the below examples (6) and (7), he speaks to White Gays and then African-Americans with almost the exact semantic lines but translated into the codes appropriate for each audience.

(6) Nobody is legally attacking you. Nobody is legally killing you White Gay man.
Nobody's out here doin' that okay. The police **ain't killin'** Gay White men.

(7) Ain't nobody. Ain't nobody. Ain't no Gay. Ain't no Asian. Ain't no White lady
Ain't nobody comi**n'** outta the woodwork being like "oh it's okay."

      A myriad of seminal works in the subfields of variationist Sociolinguistics and second language acquisition have demonstrated that the induction of code-switching is significantly dependent on social dynamics presented by interlocutors and addressees (Ervin Tripp, 2001; Labov, 2001; Fishman, 1965; Myers-Scotton, 1988; Heller 1995) as well as the topic (Labov, 1966a, 2001; Baugh 2001; Fishman, 1965). Bell (1984), as cited by Labov, argues that "all stylistic variation is a product of audience design" (Labov, 2001). The stark contrast here is worth exploring as it would indicate that despite a sense of rootedness in one's identity, the audience is still a significant motivating factor for code-switching. Finally, as Gazi prepares to end his presentation, he presents a number of GME features to include: a returned higher pitch, /t/ and /d/ lenition (8) and lexical items (9, 10) generally used in the Gay community.

(8) And currently even now **to** this **day.**

(9) That's what you ø **givin'** right now.

(10) Tryna **hang** my post or watever, **drag** my post.

      While we cannot determine his own self-awareness in these final lines, it would appear that Gazi returns to some GME features. One potential reason could be to serve as

a reminder that he is still a part of the Gay community though his Black identity seems to be paramount.

7. Discussion

Gazi consistently indexes Blackness but in conjunction with several other identity markers. His use of AAE in moments of confrontation marked as aggressive (particularly during the AAE speech act of "calling out" reproduce the ideology linking Blackness with aggression and masculinity. Likewise, when addressing the LGBT community and White people in general, Gazi's use of GME and SAE maintain the ideological alignment of these varieties with feminine speech and behavior. Furthermore, Gazi's reference to himself as "she" marks him as feminized in these moments of talk which one would expect to conflict with the masculinity presented via AAE. It would seem that while Gay speech as it is directed at White men would seem to index them as feminine, this is not necessarily always the case for Black Gay men and both masculine and feminine speech may be used. This feat seems to be accomplished through the use of AAWL which (though it reproduces the "Angry Black Woman" trope) allows for the maintenance of both feminine and masculine elements of his identity.

In this way, Gazi challenges and subverts the notion that Blackness and Gay identities may not coexist through his constantly emerging stance-taking practices as demonstrated by his near simultaneous code-switching. These stances are influenced by power and ideology and are ever shifting but well negotiated as is his membership in these multiple communities. It is evident that these complex memberships are not haphazardly present but are carefully negotiated through the purposeful shifts that occur for each addressee and stance. What is surprising is that at some point Gazi stops "switching" or switches so rapidly that it becomes a mixing of sorts. This phenomenon seems to occur naturally and it could create space for a new approach in how we evaluate intraspeaker variation. This paper proposes that we move more towards the concept of code-mixing and examine the phenomenon based on the external factors which trigger switches in speech as motivators for stances and position a means of enacting identity. This may lead us to a better understanding of how language and identity interface and fully understand the enactment of identity in moments of talk.

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