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Iggy Azalea's Dialectal Disguise: A pursuit of power through speech and privilege¹

Caroline JH Allen

1. Introduction

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and linguistic appropriation have been utilized to understand how community-specific speech is used inside or outside of the community, or ingroup. In the literature of sociolinguistics, speech communities focused on are often vernacular and/or the so-called standard variations of a language. However, such a notion may be expanded to a speech style specific to a music genre. This is particularly relevant within the genre of rap music, as 'singing' style in rap music could be described as 'musical speech.' This study with respect to speech production in rap music has shown such investigation is possible.

White Australian rapper, Iggy Azalea, has been subjected to public criticism for her use of African American English (AAE) in her music. The rapper, who was born in Australia and did not move to the United States until she was 16, and who speaks Australian English in all of her public speech, uses native-like AAE consistently throughout her entire discography (Eberhardt and Freeman 2015). This study examines her language use in both the music domain as well as the speech domain, arguing that Iggy's language demonstrates Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles 1973) and linguistic appropriation (Hill 2008; Eberhardt and Freeman 2015).² This

¹ This research is supported by the Davidson Honors College's Watkins Scholarship at the University of Montana. I would like to thank my mentor, Dr. Mizuki Miyashita, for her diligent work with me on this project. I would also like to thank the audience at the University of Montana Conference on Undergraduate Research for their constructive feedback.

² This theory was first introduced by Giles (1973) as "Speech Accommodation Theory," and later developed into "Communication Accommodation Theory," as we know it today.

study offers a synthesized analysis of Iggy Azalea's speech behavior in terms of CAT and linguistic appropriation, and demonstrates its social implications. The study also discusses the results from a survey of University of Montana students about their perceptions of Iggy's use of AAE.

This study is significant for several reasons. First of all, it expands CAT studies to include music, particularly rap music, which could be considered 'musical speech' and thus merits in-depth study just as do other domains of speech. Secondly, it expands the study by Eberhardt and Freeman (2015), marrying together linguistic appropriation and CAT. Looking at these two ideas in conjunction enhances our understanding of racially-charged linguistic behavior and can help us better grapple with issues of race and speech.

This paper is organized in the following way: Section 2 provides background in African American English, linguistic appropriation, and Communication Accommodation Theory. Section 3 describes how Iggy's speech can be explained in terms of CAT, and how CAT, in this case, reflects linguistic appropriation. It also includes the University of Montana student survey. Finally, section 4 summarizes our findings and discusses their implications in today's society.

2. Background

This section provides background information and theoretical framework relevant for our discussion of Iggy Azalea's use of AAE, including information about AAE itself, the concept of linguistic appropriation, and Communication Accommodation Theory.

2.1 African American English

African American English, also referred to as African American Vernacular English, Black Vernacular English, Black English, or Ebonics, refers to the dialect of American English spoken largely by black Americans. It should be noted here that while linguists use the term to refer broadly to the dialect, the term AAE actually represents many subdialects and variations spoken by black Americans. Moreover, not every black American speaks AAE, and not every speaker of AAE is black (pbs.org). In this paper, AAE refers to the dialect of American English described by Rickford (1999) which provides a general summary of the main grammatical features common to AAE cross-regionally.

Historically, AAE, like many nonstandard dialects of English spoken in the United States, is a stigmatized dialect—many people throughout the United States consider it to be 'poor English' or 'bad grammar.' On the contrary, AAE is a valid and complete dialect with its own fully developed, rule-governed grammatical system (Rickford 1999). Negative perceptions of AAE, a dialect born out of the Atlantic slave trade and resulting African diaspora in North America, is one mark of the racism against African Americans that persists in the United States (pbs.org). Purnell, Idsardi and Baugh (1999) demonstrate linguistic profiling and show prejudice against African American English, as well as Chicano English, in white dominated neighborhoods. Calls were made inquiring about available apartments in African American English, Chicano English, and Standard American English. Calls made using African American English and Chicano English secured far less appointments than did calls made in Standard American English.

2.2 Iggy's AAE production

Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) explore Iggy's use of this highly stigmatized dialect. Through a thorough examination of Iggy's entire discography, the study demonstrates Iggy's consistent use of AAE. Furthermore, Eberhardt and Freeman show that not only is Iggy making consistent use of AAE grammatical features, she is producing them "in the same environments a native speaker would." For instance, her use of monophthongal /ai/ before voiced segments and word-finally (pronouncing words like 'my' and 'time' as 'mah' ([mɑ]) and 'tahn' ([tɑm])) but not in pre-voiceless contexts (such as in the word 'life'), demonstrates her native-like proficiency in AAE.

Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) argue that Iggy's employment of African American linguistic styles as a white woman and ensuing success constitutes as *linguistic appropriation* which is discussed by Hill (2008) as one component of white privilege. She describes white privilege as "one of the most important projects of White racist culture," created by "recruiting both material and symbolic resources from the bottom of the racial hierarchy, Color, to the top, Whiteness (158)." Linguistic appropriation is an example of this work. While linguistic resources are transferred across language and dialect boundaries all the time, linguistic appropriation takes into account the racial power dynamics that constitute some of these borrowings as "theft." Hill describes this process:

In linguistic appropriation, speakers of the target language (the group doing the borrowing) adopt resources from the donor language and then try to deny these to members of the donor language community. (Hill 2008:158)

Hill discusses "Mock Spanish," the use and misuse of Spanish phrases by white Americans, as a salient example of linguistic appropriation. Hill argues that in Mock Spanish, materials from Spanish are used and reshaped by white people to create positive identities for themselves while simultaneously calling on racist stereotypes of Hispanics. For instance, Hill cites the common use of *cerveza* for 'beer' by white Americans. She argues that when this is used, it encodes a very specific underlying meaning: "On this occasion, we will be relaxed about alcohol, the way we believe Mexicans are relaxed about alcohol, rather than careful and responsible and sober like White people." (Hill 2008:42). Here, white people use Spanish to turn negative stereotypes about Hispanics into positive attributes about themselves.

Black Americans suffer from the racist culture of White America; the degradation of AAE is both proof of this racism and an example of it. AAE is ridiculed by many non-African Americans (as well as some African Americans) as being somehow incorrect, crude, or a mark of unintelligence. And yet, items from AAE's lexicon as well as certain phonetic features have been adopted by outgroup members—primarily white people—as hip, cool, or trendy; a symbol that one is 'in the know.' As black speakers of AAE are criticized for their speech, white people are simultaneously adopting these very cultural resources as accessories.

Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) describe Iggy's linguistic choices as an example of this. Although she has no native ties to the dialect, she employs AAE as a tool to achieve status and power; a vehicle to project authenticity and coolness to her listeners. Simultaneously, she avoids association with black culture outside of hip-hop music; she has been repeatedly criticized by black artists and writers for her failure to speak out on prevalent issues of racism, such as recent instances of racialized police brutality.

Most notably, black female rapper Azalia Banks has engaged in a long-standing twitter feud with Iggy. The feud began with Banks's criticism of an Iggy Azalea lyric from her song "D.R.U.G.S." in which she refers to herself as a "runaway slave master," demonstrating her insensitivity to important issues within the black community. In 2014, Banks criticized Iggy's failure to speak out after the murder of Michael Brown, and unarmed black man, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri:

[I]t's funny to see people Like Igloo Australia silent when these things happen...
Black Culture is cool, but black issues sure aren't huh? (Chen 2014).

Banks's frustration at Iggy's adoption of black cultural resources and simultaneous ignorance of black issues is echoed by Eberhardt and Freeman's summary in the conclusion of their paper:

...it benefits whites, personally and materially, to adopt aspects of African American culture when and how it is advantageous to do so, while ignoring all of what it means to be non-white in a culture that privileges whiteness (Eberhardt and Freeman 2015).

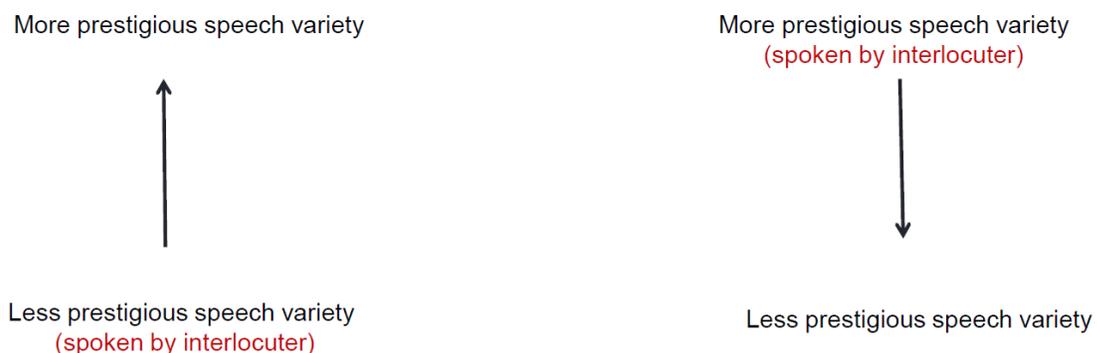
Iggy uses AAE in her music, a context in which it brings her economic and social capital, then turns around and uses Australian English in her public speech to avoid the negative associations of AAE in more 'formal' settings. Furthermore, she avoids all other negative aspects of the black American experience by refusing to engage with issues of injustice at the forefront of black American life, such as the Ferguson shooting.

2.3 Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication Accommodation Theory, or CAT, developed by Howard Giles (1973), aims at explaining the processes by which individuals adapt their communication styles to maximize, minimize, or maintain social distance between themselves and an interlocutor, or conversation partner. CAT argues that this is accomplished by two main techniques, *divergence* and *convergence*, which can occur both in upward and downward fashions (Giles et al 1991).

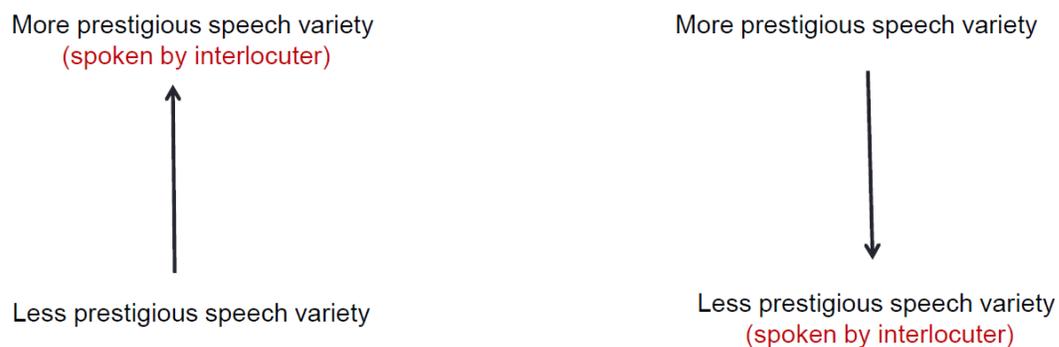
Divergence is when an individual changes their speech to be more dissimilar than that of whom they're speaking with. This can occur in two directions; either upward or downward. Upward divergence involves use of a more standard variety of speech, where downward divergence emphasizes non-standard features, as shown in Figure 1. Divergence is used to maximize social distance between two interlocutors and may aid a person in establishing prestige or demonstrating their social position.

Figure 1. Upward and Downward Divergence



Convergence, on the other hand, occurs when an individual adapts their speech to be more *similar* to that of an interlocutor. Downward convergence is when an individual adopts a more non-standard speech variety. Upward convergence involves the adoption of more prestigious, standard speech features, as shown in Figure 2. Convergence minimizes social distance between interlocutors and may be used when an individual wishes to align themselves with or gain acceptance from an ingroup member.

Figure 2. Upward and Downward Convergence



A final technique is *overaccommodation* (Giles et al. 1991). In overaccommodation, an individual, attempting to minimize social distance between themselves and an interlocutor by converging, actually "hyperconverges" or "overshoots" and often times ends up appearing condescending to the interlocutor. A commonly cited example of overaccommodation occurs between younger persons and elderly persons when a younger person alters their speech to compensate for perceptions of psychological or physical deficits of an elderly person, often termed *patronizing talk*, *elderspeak*, or *infantilizing* (Schaie 2001). In these cases, a younger person often ends up using a kind of 'baby talk' with an elderly person, in order to accommodate

them. This type of communication is often perceived as unnecessary and condescending by the elderly person.

These concepts are useful in our discussion of Iggy Azalea's use of AAE in her music. The next section provides a synthesis of these concepts in the context of Iggy's speech patterns.

3. Discussion

3.1 Iggy, CAT and Linguistic Appropriation

Iggy's language usage fits into CAT in a variety of ways, depending on your vantage point. In her music, her usage of AAE could be considered downward convergence. While she is a native speaker of a standard variety of Australian English, she converges to AAE, the predominant language of hip-hop, in an attempt to be seen as a member of the ingroup. In a broad American context, Australian English holds more prestige than African American English, a highly stigmatized dialect. Thus, Iggy employs downward convergence when she shifts from Australian English into AAE.

However, this situation could be analyzed differently as upward convergence. Although AAE is a low-prestige dialect in the United States, it is the 'unofficial language' of the hip-hop nation (Eberhardt and Freeman, 2015). That is to say that within the sphere of hip-hop, AAE actually carries a lot of prestige. So while Iggy is converging *downward* to AAE in a broader American context, within the more narrow sphere of the hip-hop world, this convergence is *upward*. In the United States, a country where white culture is celebrated, normalized and valued above minority cultures, for a speaker of a higher-prestige dialect to be converging *upward* to a

low-prestige, stigmatized dialect is only possible within a smaller cultural sphere dominated by, in this case, black Americans.

Iggy's convergence may be upward in the hip-hop sphere, but it remains downward in the more general context of the United States. How, then, has it gained her mainstream prestige, both financially and in the form of celebrity status? How could a woman of relative privilege in the United States acquire more power and higher status by converging downward to a dialect that's highly stigmatized? While it might make sense that Iggy would achieve status this way in the hip-hop community, her fanbase extends beyond ingroup members; a large number of her listeners consist of white, non-speakers of AAE that may have come across her music from tuning into pop radio, and are not necessarily members of the hip-hop community.

This phenomenon demonstrates linguistic appropriation. In her downward convergence, Iggy is adopting linguistic resources from a low-status group and employing them in her own pursuit of power. While this convergence may appear to afford her power and privilege in hip-hop spaces, it does much more than that. These resources assist Iggy's construction of a deliberate identity; one that reads 'cool,' 'hip,' and 'powerful,'—all positive traits white American culture values about specific elements of black culture. Meanwhile, she escapes the negative connotations that so often accompany use of AAE when spoken by black Americans in their daily lives. Her use of this language is not perceived as a mark of low intelligence or lack of education. By contrast, she is rewarded with wealth, fame, and other markers of success.

While Iggy converges downward to AAE when it is useful to her, such as in her construction of identity as a hip-hop performer, she avoids using this register in all other public

speech (Eberhardt and Freeman 2015). This unexpected choice contrasts sharply with her very deliberate use of AAE, and represents an upward divergence away from the community she aligns herself with in her music. Iggy diverges upward in all public speech, notably in interviews and other formal contexts, to assert her position of power and prestige as a white speaker of a less-stigmatized variety of English over the very community she profits off of her borrowing from, the largely black community of speakers of AAE. This divergence in her public, non-musical speech not only creates distance between her and the AAE community, but it serves as a convergence toward more standard forms of English, aligning her instead with her white fans, as well as white members of the music industry. By aligning herself with these communities, she is aligning herself with power.

The concept of white privilege has been part of racial discourse since the mid-20th century (Bennett 2012). Iggy's assertion of power and the ease with which she uses these techniques to her social advantage is an example of white privilege. As a white person, Iggy uses a highly-stigmatized register and is rewarded with social capital. Her whiteness allows her to choose when this is beneficial to her—in her music—and when it is not—in her public speech. Meanwhile, black, native speakers of AAE do not benefit from the same privilege. While they may switch registers and converge to higher-prestige dialects, black AAE speakers are often unable to shed the negative connotations associated with AAE. This is because negative perceptions of AAE are inherently tied up with negative perceptions of black Americans perpetuated in the United States through institutional racism (Jones 1974). White people in the U.S. may access and appropriate AAE to fit their needs, but they do so without carrying the associated stigmas that black Americans carry.

Iggy's use of AAE might also be considered in terms of overaccommodation. Many of her strongest critics are native AAE speakers or members of the black community. Brittney Cooper, professor at Rutgers University and columnist for Salon.com, wrote a highly critical article about Iggy Azalea's language use. Many black rappers have been critical of her as well, including rapper Q-Tip, Azalia Banks (as mentioned above), and even Iggy's old mentor, T.I., who cut ties with her after she refused to heed criticism directed at her for her disrespect toward black culture (Bueno, 2015). These public black scholars and musicians are all members of the AAE ingroup, but their reactions to Iggy's use of AAE indicate her failure to successfully converge. Instead, she overaccommodates, increasing the social distance between herself and many AAE ingroup members.

3.2 University of Montana Student Survey

To gather information about students' perceptions of AAE when used by black rappers compared with white rappers, I administered a short survey to 27 University of Montana students using qualtrics.com. The survey was intended to detect any negative perceptions University of Montana students might have regarding AAE, with specific regard to its usage by both black and white rappers.

3.2.1 Methods

The survey began with a short demographics questionnaire which included questions about participants' age, gender, hometown, ethnicity, and musical preferences. Data collected from these questions was not necessarily intended to be included in the overall analysis—that would be beyond the scope of the study—but this information was acquired in case they happened to influence the analysis in any unforeseen way.

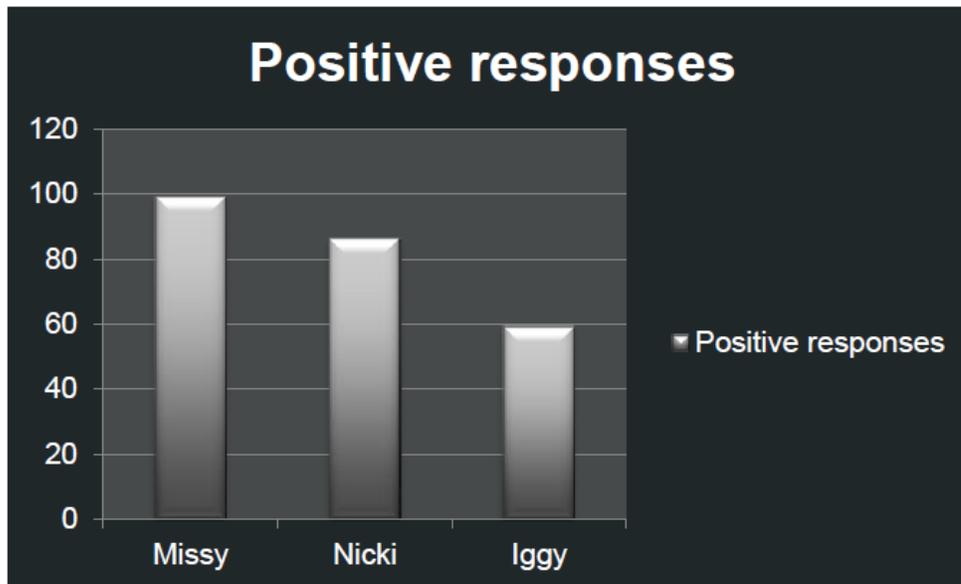
Following this, participants were shown three music videos. The first video was of black female rapper Nicki Minaj, the second of Iggy Azalea, and the third of Missy Elliott, also a black female rapper. Participants were asked a short series of questions following each one. These questions included asking participants to choose from a list of positive adjectives which ones they would choose to describe the rapper. The following adjectives were included: intelligent, attractive, powerful, classy, articulate, strong, eloquent, and cool. Positive adjectives were chosen so as to avoid alerting participants of the purpose of the study. Participants were also allowed to indicate adjectives not on the list. These questions were intended to garner participants' overall positive or negative impressions of each rapper, and to be analyzed comparatively between rappers.

The final question asked participants specifically for their impressions of each rapper's language use. These responses were analyzed qualitatively to gain insight into University of Montana students' perceptions of AAE as used by both black and white rappers.

3.2.2. Results and Discussion

I originally predicted that the University of Montana participants—none of whom identified as black—might feel more positively about Iggy Azalea and her use of AAE than the other two artists due to her privilege and status as a white woman. The results of the survey, however, showed otherwise. Students indicated more positive adjectives to describe the two black artists, Elliott and Minaj, than they did to describe Iggy as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Positive responses to all three artists



The most interesting results came from a qualitative examination of student responses to the questions in which they could volunteer their own descriptive adjectives or discuss their perceptions of the language used by each rapper. One student described Nicki Minaj's language as "Ebonics," a commonly used term referring to AAE. This same student described Iggy as "fake" and described her language as "artificial." This could also be considered evidence of Iggy Azalea's overaccommodation. While the student indicated her ethnicity as "white," which does not necessarily preclude her from being a native AAE speaker, she also cited her place of origin as "southeast united states." Iggy Azalea's particular dialect of AAE has southern origins (Cooper 2014). In fact, her mentor, T.I., is from Atlanta, Georgia, which is the first place she settled when she came to the United States. Although we cannot say for sure whether or not this participant is a native speaker of AAE, and might be inclined to assume that she, a white female, is not, she does indicate awareness of AAE as a dialect and furthermore may be considered, as a Southerner, to have close ties to Iggy's particular dialect of AAE. Therefore, her impression of

Iggy as "fake" and of Iggy's language as "artificial" could be analyzed as indicative of overaccommodation. She perceives Iggy's attempt to converge but also perceives it as unsuccessful. Instead of aligning with the AAE community, this participant viewed Iggy's attempt at convergence as "artificial" and thus unsuccessful.

Another participant chose to describe Iggy as "privileged," perhaps a reference to her white privilege in the context of the black-dominated hip-hop sphere. Yet another participant noted Iggy is a "white girl rapping [in] a black field." Although it must be noted that the survey did not control for less positive responses to Iggy resulting from mere musical preference, these comments suggest that the overall less positive responses to Iggy compared with the other two rappers might reveal negative attitudes due to overaccommodation, misuse of her privilege as a white female in the hip-hop sphere, or both.

4. Conclusion

Iggy Azalea's speech choices are clear indicators of her social status as well as her social goals. Inherent to her choices is her privilege in the United States as a white woman, a non-native AAE speaker, and a speaker of a higher-prestige dialect. Through those privileges, she is able to use Communication Accommodation Theory to her supreme advantage, navigating social hierarchies by appealing to various groups through her language use. She uses AAE in her music to align herself with the predominantly black, AAE-speaking hip-hop community, while at the same time pointedly using Australian English in her public speech to disassociate herself with stigmatized aspects of black culture in contexts she deems appropriate. Her privilege as a white person makes this a prime example of linguistic appropriation: she uses her privilege to take

elements of her choosing from a low-prestige language variety, AAE, in order to craft her hip-hop persona which she uses to her social and financial benefit. Simultaneously she is able to escape negative associations with AAE simply through her own whiteness, rejecting the aspects of black culture that are not beneficial to her, illustrated by her refusal to engage with black sociopolitical issues.

As this examination of Iggy's speech patterns demonstrates, our language use has very real racial and societal implications. The way we use language can reinforce systems of oppression, just as Iggy's speech allows her to benefit from the continued stigmatization of black Americans. As racial tensions rise in the United States in the wake of issues such as police brutality and highly controversial political figures, we would be well-advised to use this knowledge when we engage in conversations about power, privilege and race.

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