

## 'You know my steez': The effects of race, gender and Hip Hop cultural knowledge on the speech style of Black youth

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This paper presents the findings of an ethnographic and sociolinguistic study of styleshifting in a Black American speech community. In the study, I examine the language and linguistic practices of students at Haven High, an ethnically and linguistically diverse high school (multilingual and multilectal; 70% African American, 25% Latino, 5% Indian American and Pacific Islander), in the working-class suburb of Sunnyside. The study is based on approximately two years of fieldwork as a teacher-researcher and an additional year and a half of insights were gained beyond the teaching experience, as I made weekly visits to the community and became a regular participant in Sunnyside's most (in)famous barbershop. (My time in the field spans nearly four years of direct community engagement).

This paper focuses on a sociolinguistic analysis of Black Language (BL) in the US. Data consists of a corpus of 32 recorded conversations with 4 Sunnysidaz and 8 Stanfordian interlocutors (such that each Sunnysida is recorded in conversation with 8 different Stanfordians). The 32 conversations averaged 40 minutes per session for a total of approximately 1280 minutes of talk, or over 21 hours. All transcripts were transcribed verbatim, resulting in approximately 1300 pages. In addition, I have recorded the speakers' peer, in-group talk, which will serve as an additional point of comparison.

In particular, I examine the language of Black male and female Hip Hoppers (the "Sunnysidaz") and how they styleshift based on both internal linguistic constraints and external social constraints, namely the identity characteristics of their interlocutors. Results show that the Sunnysidaz demonstrate significant shifts in their speech style according to their interlocutor's race, gender, and Hip Hop cultural knowledge. Multiple levels of variation analysis reveal the details of individual variability within the group of Sunnysidaz in regards to their styleshifting abilities as measured by an analysis of the *copula*, 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *-s*, possessive *-s*, and plural *-s*, as well as a qualitative analysis of *invariant be* (with the introduction of *be<sub>3</sub>*, the *equative copula* in BL). For this paper, I will focus on the *copula* since it is particularly relevant to the "Creole origins" debate, and since stylistic variation results with regards to copula absence have been inconclusive to date. These data cast doubt on the oft-repeated mantra in some recent variationist studies that the *internal linguistic constraints* of a given variable are more critical to the historical reconstruction of the variety than either the *frequency* of that variable or the external social constraints (particularly the identity of the researcher).

The results in hand contribute to the development of more refined methodological approaches to the study of styleshifting and to our growing theoretical conceptualization of speech style. I view speech style not as a monologic entity, but rather, as a dialogic, co-constructed and continually-developing project. This view has led to an approach to speech style that considers both *sociolinguistic style* (using quantitative variationist analysis to examine the frequency and distribution of several morphosyntactic variables) and *interactional style* (using qualitative discourse analytic techniques to examine rules of interaction, i.e., a community's implicit and systematic understanding of conversational rules and roles). I argue for an approach to the study of speech style that integrates sociolinguistic variation, interactional analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork in order to get us closer to understanding how and when speakers shift their styles. This study proposes that the central question for analysts of speech style is:

*How and when did these interlocutors, interacting in these ways, co-construct speech styles on these occasions?*