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“Cash Me Ousside, How Bow Dah”: Cultural Appropriation of Language

Ashley Hyman, Saint Joseph’s University

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Abstract

There are over 6,000 different living languages spoken around the world today (Anderson, 2010). While each language presents a new set of positive qualities, such as cultural and national significance, it also exposes itself to negative connotation and misinterpretation. Language can be misunderstood when it is borrowed; this can be referred to as cultural appropriation through language. Cultural appropriation of language has been an ongoing phenomenon not only across the United States of America, but throughout the world. It is seen in the media – whether on our favorite TV show, in the latest rap song, or in our daily transactions. It is through these mediums cultural appropriation has infiltrated language in a variety of ways. To be able to steal another person’s way of speaking and use it as your own without commendation of that language’s origin slowly claims its aesthetic value. This study seeks to discover the various perceptions of the appropriation of language, African American Vernacular English in particular, and seeks to explore what influences this appropriation of language and why it is unfair to the originating cultures to do so. In order to collect these diverse perceptions, university students were interviewed on their thoughts regarding cultural appropriation of language. The findings indicated both positive and negative perceptions of cultural appropriation of language. This study also adds to the current discussion of the social influence of language use when appropriated by others.

Introduction

Cultural appropriation can be defined as the use or adoption of elements of one culture by individuals of another culture (Fragoso, 2016; Ziff, 1997). Although cultural appropriation is not, by definition, a negative phenomenon, its effects are often detrimental to the cultures of origin (Ziff, 1997). Cultural appropriation of language (CAOL) is seen when members of a dominant culture
copy language elements of minority cultures. It can be considered harmful when those elements of fashion, music, art, and, in this case, language, are used without mention or recognition of the intellectual property rights of the originating culture. A current example of cultural appropriation comes from the infamous phrase “Cash me ousside, how bow dah.” This phrase meaning “Meet me outside, how about that,” became instantly popular after a troubled white female teenager used it on the Dr. Phil show (McGraw, 2016), to express her anger towards the audience. The teenager was featured on the show for her questionable behavior displayed at home towards her mother. She became outwardly upset when Dr. Phil’s audience began to heckle her after she threatened her mother. She then proceeded to threaten the audience, stating that she would fight whomever would meet her outside. For many audience members and viewers, this language type was new and enticing. In African American culture, similar forms of morphological structure and semantic differences are used in everyday language, and are often used in rap and hip-hop music. This form of language also includes unique grammar and phonology structures such as assimilation, or the process of one sound becoming the same or similar to another sound in the word. For example, the phrase, “don’t be silly,” might be pronounced as “dombe silly.” Dissimilation, on the other hand, is another common phonology structure. It is the process when one sound becomes different from a neighboring sound, such as pronouncing “chimney” as “chimley.” Another commonly used phonology structure is elision it occurs when there is an omission of a vowel, consonant, or syllable in pronunciation. A common example of elision is when an individual drops the /b/ in “because” and, instead, “cause”. Instead of omitting a sound, metathesis, another phonological structure, is defined as the transportation of sounds or letters in a word, commonly seen in the pronunciation of “ask” as “aks.”

The phrase “Cash me ousside, how bow dah,” has a variety of these structures. Dissimilation and elision are both used in the pronunciation “ousside/outside,” since the /t/ sound is dropped and replaced with a /s/ sound. Assimilation is heard in the pronunciation of “bow/about” and “dah/that,” phonetic differences as such are unique to African American Vernacular English. Although this language seems to be enjoying an increase in popularity thanks to popular music, social media, etc., using AAVE is often looked down upon by other cultures and viewed as being an uneducated way of speaking. Given the contrasting views concerning CAOL, this study seeks to uncover the various perceptions of CAOL to bring awareness to its social impact. The research is based on an exploratory survey that focuses on the various perceptions of cultural appropriation of language.

Previous Research

Previous research has indicated that language, like any other cultural aspect such as food, fashion, or art, has been appropriated for years. According to one study, people unconsciously incorporate other dialects into their everyday speech; it almost becomes natural to do so (Gaudio, 2011). For example, they may add a British accent when ordering tea or switching “excellent” for “excelente” to add a Spanish flare. (Gaudio, 2011). These minor appropriations could be viewed as harmless or inoffensive at face value, but when used to mock the differences among people, they can be distasteful. Such practices of linguistic appropriation
also affect African American English (AAE) (Gaudio, 2011). In the United States, general cultural appropriation of African American culture is often met with speculation and criticism due to the long-standing history of racial discrimination against Black culture (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015). An example of racial discrimination against Black culture is during the Blackface era. Blackface began in the 1820s, a part of the minstrel shows era (Jones, 2016). These shows consisted of White actors wearing black make up on their face to portray African Americans as lazy, incompetent, and buffoonish (Jones, 2016). African Americans were neither entertained nor appreciative of the negative racial stereotypes created by White actors, who basically mocked what they viewed as Black culture.

When it comes to CAOL, there are various perceptions that influence individuals to appropriate language from another culture. According to Eberhardt and Freeman (2015), music, specifically hip-hop, is one outlet that influences the growth of linguistic appropriation. Researchers examined and transcribed the music of the White female rap artist Iggy Azalea to show how White privilege plays a role even in music that originates in Black culture. Eberhardt and Freeman focused on Azalea’s use of AAVE as their main linguistic variable. The researchers collected data on Azalea’s use of AAVE slang and terms that are not necessarily slang such as “girl” or “thick”, but are lexical terms used within AAVE discourse among AAVE speakers. Extensive use of AAVE is observed both in her syntax and in her phonology. In her music, Azalea often sounds like she has a Southern drawl, which is ostensibly different from her native Australian accent. After transcribing Azalea’s albums, the researchers noticed she never uses linguistic features that will mark her as a White Australian woman in her music; she fully embodies the AAVE language. Researchers also noted that Azalea never uses “the N word,” found predominantly in rap music. Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) concluded that Azalea’s white privilege allows her to benefit from appropriating Black culture and that she completely rejects the fact that it is important that hip-hop remains an African American cultural art.

Not only is CAOL found in music, but it is also displayed in everyday conversation. Bucholtz (1999) provides data on how AAVE is perceived and used among White male youth to demonstrate masculinity. Bucholtz’s study consists of narratives of racialized conflict told by White male students at a diverse high school in California. The study reports discourse of conflict between a White and Black student to show the variation between the cultures. Bucholtz observed that most of the students, especially the White students, use elements of AAE in their speech to represent their urban youth identity that is heavily influenced by African American youth culture. CRAAVE, or cross-racial AAVE, is a term Bucholtz (1999) uses to identify marked AAVE (African American Vernacular English) used by the White students. Bucholtz notes that CRAAVE varies among speakers and consists of different features of AAVE in terms of phonology, syntax, and morphology. The study concluded that there is a belief that AAVE is linked to blackness and masculinity. The students in the study see Black masculinity as superior to other forms of masculinity and use AAE to linguistically appropriate that culture.

AAVE is also used among Asian American students living in diverse areas. Reyes (2005) conducted a four-year ethnographic and discourse analytic
study of the use of slang and AAVE among Asian American teens in Philadelphia. The Asian American teens lived and went to school in predominantly African American neighborhoods, so they were more exposed to Black culture. The teens’ styles were heavily influenced by hip-hop culture; they wore hairstyles and clothes that were popular among Black teens. Their speech was also influenced by their Black peers; the Asian American teens used linguistic features of AAVE, such as the slang words “aite,” as a replacement for “alright”, and “na mean,” for “you know what I mean?” Reyes mentions that the appropriation of speech of African Americans, a group that has been discriminated against in the United States, is a topic that deserves more attention from linguists.

Other studies have shown that one’s environment influences his/her speech. Aukrust (2001) conducted an analysis on the Bakhtinian dialogical theory and the concepts of “otherness” and “owners.” Aukrust found that children appropriated utterances that they overheard from different individuals. One mother that was interviewed used the concept of “taste” to describe the selectivity of others’ words. The “taste” of a word is what draws people to use it. Perhaps this influences appropriation of language among different cultures. The phenomenon of linguistic appropriation is not always negative; it can potentially be seen in a positive light. For example, Gaudio (2011) studied the appropriation of the stigmatized language of Nigerian Pidgin, analyzing three Nigerian singers and their music. When acts of linguistic appropriation of Nigerian Pidgin occur, they are genuinely “aesthetically engaging” (Gaudio, 2011) and found to be used in a non-racist manner. People who appreciate the art of Nigerian music and the use of Nigerian pidgin often give credit to the culture and its accomplishments, by acknowledging the country of origin. Another study by Rampton (1998) included a discourse analysis of groups of multiethnic adolescents code-switching among language varieties. Rampton found that, although students code-switch to their friends’ cultural language, they do not necessarily want to claim ownership of that language. The students showed appreciation by code-switching between their friends’ language and their own because they admired the cultural beauty of the foreign languages of African-Creole and Punjabi. The current research project seeks to discover the various perceptions behind the appropriation of one language, African American Vernacular English, in order to explore the influences of this appropriation of language and why it is occurring.

Context

To answer this question, a small group of students who attend a liberal arts university on the east coast of the United States were surveyed.

Participants

The ten students surveyed ranged in age from 18-22 and varied in gender, graduating class year, and ethnicity. The sample was split by gender, consisting of five males and five females. The sample was ethnically diverse, as the students surveyed identified as African American, White, Asian, and Hispanic. The table below illustrates the demographics of the participants.
Table 1 *Participant demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grad. Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>African American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
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<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2019</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2018</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Method of Data Collection**

After an explanation of cultural appropriation of language (see Appendix A), the students were asked five questions concerning their viewpoint on CAOL.

- Have you ever noticed cultural appropriation of language? If so, in which ways have you noticed it?
- What do you think influences this appropriation?
- What are some examples of cultural appropriation of language?
- What is your opinion about cultural appropriation of language?
- Do you think it has a positive, neutral, or negative effect on the originating cultures?

Each student was asked all five questions orally and in person. With the students’ permission, audio recordings were completed for each student’s response using a voice-recording device. The audio recordings were then transcribed for analysis.

**Data Types**

Data consisted of participants’ natural responses to the questions above.

**Method of Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed by combing the participants’ responses for unifying themes and patterns.

**Findings**
The results of this study indicated diverse and contrasting views and perceptions about what influences CAOL. Each section below includes a survey question and participant responses. Students’ real names are omitted to ensure confidentiality.

Question 1 asks, “Have you ever noticed cultural appropriation of language? If so in which ways have you noticed it?” When asked this question, a few of the participants responded that they have noticed it through slang usage.

(a) “Yes, I have noticed its influence on certain people use of slang, especially Black slang. Also, the use of the n-word, which isn’t ok.”
   Participant 3, Hispanic female, 20

(b) “I have noticed it through the use of other cultures slang and dialect. But who says one type of slang has to belong to a specific culture”
   Participant 1, African American female, 21

Noticing slang as a form of cultural appropriation of language was the most popular response, as seen in examples (a) and (b). The participants noticed how slang, especially Black slang, was being used among other cultures. Some participants, like Participant 6, went on to say that the slang of the originating culture should be used only among members of that culture, while others, like Participant 1, believe that slang can be shared among diverse cultures. Some of the participants said they noticed use of Black slang is more popular among non-Black cultures. Bucholtz (1999) and Reyes (2005) both found that AAVE is popular among other races, including Whites and Asian Americans for various reasons. Participant 3 contradicted Eberhardt and Freeman’s (2015) findings by mentioning how the N-word, which is prominent in AAVE, is also being appropriated among non-African American cultures because of its use in rap music. Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) made note that the popular rapper Iggy Azalea never used the N-word in her music, although it is a popular phrase in rap and hip-hop. Some students had difficulty noticing CAOL. One student noticed cultural appropriation more through non-verbal body language.

(c) “I noticed other people dapping each other up. A few years ago, I only seen Black people dap each other up but since I came here I noticed other students dapping each other up, I’m like no don’t do that ((laughs))”
   Participant 2, African American male, 20

Although this student did not provide a word or phrase that he noticed being appropriated, he does observe a non-verbal interaction similarly appropriated. He discusses how non-Black students were dapping each other up; a greeting that is considered culturally Black, which consists of knocking fists as a form of respect and brotherly love. Most of the previous research included descriptions of how Black culture influences people of other cultures in music, style, and language (Reyes, 2005 & Bucholtz, 1999). Example (c) supports Reyes’ (2005) analysis of how Asian American students living in the Black communities became accustomed to the Black culture and began to emulate the actions of the Black students.
Question 2 asks “What do you think influences this appropriation?” The anticipated response to this question was either music influence or some sort of media outlet. Many students did refer to how the media influences CAOL, as we see in (d) and (e) below:

(d) “Celebrities in general have a strong effect and influence on it.”
Participant 4, White male, 21
(e) “Media absolutely has an influence, both positive and negative.”
Participant 5, Asian American male, 18

Media outlets such as music, movies, TV shows, social media, etc. have the power to influence individuals in anything. Students mentioned how celebrities of one culture can influence their fans to appropriate another culture, as seen in example (d). The students suggest that the celebrities sometimes, but not always, use their fame to promote appreciation of cultures and recognize the originating cultures for their craft. Previous research has also explored the media’s role in influencing CAOL. Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) and Reyes (2005) both mention how music, especially rap and hip-hop music, influences other cultures’ use of Black slang and AAVE. This genre of music is popular across cultures, meaning that people from different backgrounds are exposed to the AAE that is used in rap and hip-hop. Aukrust (2001) would likely attribute the use of AAVE among other cultures to the concept of “taste,” as it is what draws people to select and then use such language. Participant 5 made a point that media has both a negative and positive effect on how it influences CAOL. Media can either appreciate other cultures or degrade them.

Three of the ten students who were surveyed mentioned how envy/jealousy also influences CAOL.

(f) “Envy influences cultural appropriation. People hear something that sounds catchy and begin to use it. Adopting it without knowing the history” Participant 10 African American female, 21
(g) “Envy, People are appealed to other cultures language and way of life”
Participant 6, African American female, 22
(h) “Jealousy, suddenly this “incorrect” way a speech is now cool.”
Participant 2, African American male, 20

This theme of envy as an influence on why CAOL occurs was not found in previous research. Rampton (1998) observed that although students code-switch to their friends’ cultural language, it does not necessarily mean that the student wants to claim ownership of that language. Examples (f), (g), and (h) suggest perceptions toward CAOL that are quite different from Rampton’s (1998) findings, but these students believe that it is a reason why CAOL occurs.

Question 3 asks, “What are some examples of cultural appropriation of language?” When asked this question, most students could not think of a specific phrase or any examples of CAOL. If the student was confused, an example of a current phrase was given. After discussing the phrase “Cash me ousside, how bow dah”, the students referred to other examples, as we see in (i) and (j):

(i) “Envy influences cultural appropriation. People hear something that sounds catchy and begin to use it. Adopting it without knowing the history” Participant 10 African American female, 21
(j) “Envy, People are appealed to other cultures language and way of life”
Participant 6, African American female, 22
(k) “Jealousy, suddenly this “incorrect” way a speech is now cool.”
Participant 2, African American male, 20
These are a few of the current phrases that have been appropriated from one culture and used widely among another culture. The phrase “Bye Felicia” is now used among many cultures as a way of saying “Bye girl/boy” or simply used as another way to say “whatever.” Most people are not aware that the phrase came from a popular African American movie, “Friday” (Charbonnet, 1995). The phrase has grown in popularity so much that it now has its own Bitmoji, a personalized emoji. The term “slay” has also grown in popularity after Beyoncé created new meanings for the already existing word. “Slay,” in its original use, means to kill in a violent way. Today, “slay”, which is often spelled with multiple Y’s, so it reads “slayyy”, is often used as a compliment. “Slay” could mean to dominate, to “kill” with success, or to tell someone they look good; i.e. “That dress is beautiful girl, you better slayyy.” Aukrust (2001) might argue that these phrases have a linguistic appeal that draws individuals to use it. The phrases “Bye Felicia” and “Slayyy” have linguistic appeal that attracts many speakers to use them. These phrases are catchy and are popular to use among today’s youth and young adults. Besides the linguistic appeal, it is also important to be aware of where these phrases or sayings originated before using them.

Questions 4 and 5 were combined: “What is your opinion about cultural appropriation of language?” and “Do you think it has a positive, neutral, or negative effect on the originating cultures?” Most students did not condone cultural appropriation and believed that it had a negative effect on the originating cultures, as we see in examples (k) and (l):

(k) “Cultural appropriation isn’t right at all. Be respectful. It’s ok to embrace and celebrate other cultures, but it becomes problematic when you try to take it for yourself.” Participant 9, Hispanic male, 18

(l) “If people took the time to appreciate other languages and understand how it is developed, it would have a less negative effect on the originating cultures.” Participant 10, African American female, 21

The way in which cultural appropriation is used in our society today does tend to have a more negative effect. In movies or TV shows, when a White character uses AAVE, they are often portrayed as cool and respected among their peers. When an African American character speaks AAVE, they tend to be portrayed as uneducated or foolish. What is shown in the media heavily influences reality, and those who speak AAVE sometimes have the stigma of being uneducated due to faulty representation. However, Gaudio (2011) offers an alternative motivation for CAOL, suggesting that the use of music generates “aesthetically engaging” and non-racist acts of linguistic appropriation. It seems as though the use of CAOL could function either way, either positively or negatively, depending on the individual’s awareness of the effects of cultural appropriation.
The findings provided both positive and negative perceptions of CAOL. Most of the students believe that CAOL was problematic because of the lack of appreciation and the lack of credit attributed to the originating cultures. Envy was also noted as a negative cause of CAOL. Other students believed that slang could be used among all cultures. Some sub-themes that emerged were the different ways in which CAOL was perceived, through verbal and nonverbal instances, non-African Americans use of AAVE and culturally Black greetings known as the dap. The findings both align with and contradict previous research findings. For example, the students’ responses aligned with Bucholtz (1999) and Reyes (2005) observation of how AAVE is popular among other races. Other responses contradicted Gaudio’s (2011) positive view of CAOL as potentially obtaining “non-racist acts of linguistic appropriation.”

Discussion and Conclusion
Overall, the students had contrasting views of how and why CAOL occurs. Most of the students thought that it had a negative effect on the originating cultures because of the lack of representation and credit attributed to the originating cultures. Some of the students suggested to give credit to the originating cultures it is important to appreciate that culture by making a disclaimer noting that this language or cultural aspect is not their own. Ways to accomplish this varies and is unique across cultures. Language is one aspect of cultural appropriation explored in this study, and many of the students also mentioned forms of cultural appropriation of music and fashion. Language is just another component of African American culture that is now being transformed and popularized today.

While many responses aligned with previous research on CAOL, it is impossible to generalize the findings due to the small sample that included students from one university. A future research study should question more specific questions about CAOL in pop culture. Future samples should consist of people from various art worlds, whose activities are needed for a particular kind of art or culture to exist (Grazian, 2017). Individuals such as celebrities, producers, and magazine editors should be included and their response towards CAOL heard.

Implications of Study/Areas for Future Research
This study can contribute to the broader field of sociolinguistics by beginning a discussion regarding the importance of acknowledgment of other cultures’ language before utilizing it within one’s own speech. Reyes (2005) said it best, saying that the appropriation of speech of African Americans is a topic that deserves more attention from linguists. Reyes continues to argue that a sociopolitical position toward language use challenges decision-making actors to promote appreciation over appropriation of cultures in language, and in general, by educating others of this difference and acknowledging and give credit to the originating cultures. This is important to keep in mind because if one fails to be aware of the negative effects of CAOL it could possibly lead to cultural confusion (Otteson, 2010), in cultures are ignorant of their originality and uniqueness. This could result in entire histories being erased from future generations, and total eradication of cultural identity. Without accreditation of another’s culture, there can be no proper appreciation, which eventually leads to appropriation.
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Appendix A:

Explanation of Cultural Appropriation of Language

Cultural appropriation is known as the use or adoption of elements of one culture by members of a dominating culture. Although by definition cultural appropriation is a neutral term, it is often viewed negatively when no recognition is issued to originating cultures. All forms of culture can be appropriated, fashion, music, and art. For the purpose of this research, we will focus on how language can be culturally appropriated, specifically, how African American Vernacular English is overly appropriated throughout the United States.
Individual Variation: Markedness and Frequency Effects in L1 Onset Cluster Acquisition

Uma Payne, George Mason University

_Uma Payne_ is a recent graduate of George Mason University, where she studied Russian Literature and Linguistics. She is currently working as an intern at the Library of Congress and applying to graduate programs in Slavic Languages and Literatures.

Abstract

One proposal about variation in phonological development is that different children find different aspects of language more or less useful in the course of acquisition. Stites, Demuth, and Kirk (2004) found that children’s phonologies aligned with either frequency or markedness characteristics of their language. This observation suggested that certain children understand the more frequent phonological elements better than unmarked elements, while other children acquire the unmarked elements more easily than frequent elements. This paper scrutinizes this finding by studying onset consonant cluster attempts in the speech of three children between the ages of 3 and 4 through the lens of each cluster’s relative markedness and frequency features. Children’s rates of success with particular clusters as well as the type and frequency of their cluster reductions were considered in terms of relative markedness and frequency categories. The results from these areas lend new support to the markedness vs. frequency distinction presented by Stites et al. (2004).

Introduction

The present study aims to investigate this markedness vs. frequency proposal in the context of word-initial onset clusters. In phonology, the concept of markedness is used to describe an underlying linguistic system in which certain sound features are thought to be of a baseline or default nature, while others are not. The former mentioned are referred to as unmarked and the latter marked. In other words, if a given marked sound is part of a language, then its unmarked counterpart must also be part of that language. The reverse is not true. Phonological frequency refers to the rate at which a given sound or combination of sounds occurs in a particular language. If this dichotomy is valid in the case of varying acquisition of codas, being the part of a syllable that follows that syllable’s vowel, then it should also hold true that some children more quickly learn less marked onsets, or part of a syllable that precedes its vowel, over more...
highly marked frequent onsets, while other children more quickly learn higher marked frequent onsets over less marked onsets. If this proves to be the case, it would also be reasonable to expect that onset clusters that are both less marked and highly frequent would be equally difficult to children of either type, and thus would be acquired similarly regardless of an individual child’s markedness or frequency preferences.

**Previous Research**

Individual variation in linguistic development, specifically phonological development, has long been noted in first language acquisition literature. Stoel-Gammon and Cooper followed the lexical and phonological development of 3 different children, beginning with their first word and ending when they had acquired a 50-word inventory. Stoel-Gammon and Cooper concluded that a number of so-called “universal” ideas about acquisition, including the notion that all children acquired phonemes in the same order, failed to account for the individual differences that they uncovered. (1984) A few years later, Vihman and Greenlee, in evaluating the phonology of 10 typical English-speaking children at age 1 and 3, found that there was significant individual variation in cluster reduction type, proportion of prosodic errors, and consistency of segmental errors (1987, p. 503). They proposed that these differences between individual children’s phonological systems may be the result of different approaches or ‘styles’ of language acquisition; some children might be more “systematic” and others more “exploratory” (Vihman & Greenlee, 1987, p. 519). In 2004, Stites, Demuth, and Kirk proposed an explanation for varying phonological acquisition that similarly hinged on individual children taking different approaches to learning phonology. Studying longitudinal naturalistic speech data from two children, one from age 1;1.10 to 1;4.25 and another from age 1;4.10 to 1;11.14. Stites et al. found that one child acquired less marked elements of English at a sufficient pace, whereas the other acquired high frequency elements more quickly, suggesting that variation might be accounted for by competing individual preferences for markedness or frequency (2004).

**Participants and Context**

This project uses transcripts from the three children who were recorded from age 3 to 4, named Lily, Naima, and Violet. There were 29 transcripts in all; transcripts came from 11 recording sessions with Lily, 8 recording sessions with Naima, and 10 recording sessions with Violet (Demuth, Culbertson, & Alter, 2006).

**Data Types**

This study uses longitudinal, naturalistic child speech data drawn from corpora available on CHILDES, an online repository of first language acquisition data (MacWhinney, 2000). It also relies on Phon, a piece of software designed to process phonetically transcribed speech (Rose & MacWhinney, 2004) in order to extract relevant onset cluster data.

*The Providence Corpus*

Katherine Demuth and her research assistants at Brown University assembled the Providence Corpus between 2002 and 2005. Data were collected in
a naturalistic style; children were recorded during spontaneous interactions at home with their parents. All data were transcribed phonetically in a software readable format.

**Phon**
The software used to process the transcripts for this study is called Phon. Phon was designed for application in phonological work and allows researchers to query large volumes of transcript-based data for specific pieces of information. In this case, the query used was: 

```
.:o[\c\c]
```

Here the ‘.:o’ specifies onset position, while ‘[\c\c]’ indicates a consonant cluster. Using this command in tandem with an option specifying word-initial syllable position extracts potential word-initial onset clusters within the dataset. Because this transcription format specifies both ‘target’ and ‘actual’ productions, the query returns all instances of attempted initial onset clusters as well as the actual results, accurate or otherwise, of those attempts.

**Methods of Data Collection**
In order to make judgments regarding markedness and frequency effects in onset cluster production, a system for categorizing onsets as more or less marked and more or less frequent was necessary.

**Markedness and Frequency Criteria**
Because the markedness frequency systems used for Stites et al. (2004) dealt specifically with singleton codas (non-cluster syllable final sounds), they were not directly transferrable to onset cluster data. The systems used here are analogous, however, both Stites et al. (2004) and the present study use a markedness scale graded on sonority, as well a frequency scale based on analysis of large pronunciation dictionaries.

**Markedness Scale**
Relative markedness was categorized as either higher markedness (HM) or lower markedness (LM) based on the idea of minimal sonority distance (MSD) (Steriade, 1982) and a typical sonority scale (Parker 2012). Minimal sonority distance suggests that relatively unmarked clusters will have a greater difference in sonority while more marked clusters will have a smaller one. This ‘difference’ can be calculated using the following sonority scale:

- vowel (5) > glide (4) > liquid (3) > nasal (2) > obstruent (1)

In this scheme, obstruent-glide (OG) clusters have a sonority distance of 3, while obstruent-liquid (OL) clusters have a sonority distance of 2. Thus this study regards OG clusters as LM and OL clusters as HM. More fine-grained iterations of this scale that distinguish sonority within these categories (e.g. fricatives are more sonorant than stops) also exist, but would have made data interpretation significantly more complicated and were considered unmanageable for the purposes of the present study.

**Frequency Scale**
Frequency was determined using the Phonotactic Probability Calculator (Vitevitch & Luce, 2004) to find the relative probability, and thus frequency of occurrence for each initial onset cluster attested in the data. The calculator measures frequencies using a database of phonetically transcribed pronunciations derived from a Merriam Webster dictionary by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Vitevitch & Luce, 2004, p.482). The median probability for the initial onset clusters attested in the data was 0.0049. This number represents the overall frequency of word initial onset clusters as a whole, and provides a baseline value against which to judge the frequency of specific world initial onset clusters. Clusters with a probability value over 0.0049 were therefore classed as higher frequency (HF) while clusters with a probability value below 0.0049 were classed as lower frequency (LF). A table of the attested clusters and their probability values can be found in the appendix.

**Method of Data Analysis**

With these markedness-frequency categories, individual clusters were categorized in terms of both their relative markedness and their frequency characteristics as high markedness high frequency (HMHF), high markedness low frequency (HMLF), low markedness high frequency (LMHF), or low markedness low frequency (LMLF). Each participant’s rate of success within these categories could then be measured as:

\[
\frac{\text{\# of accurate realizations within a category}}{\text{\# of attempts in that category}}
\]

Similarly, the relative frequency of specific types of cluster reductions used by each child could be viewed as:

\[
\frac{\text{\# of instances of a cluster reduction type within a category}}{\text{total \# of cluster reductions in that category}}
\]

**Exclusions**

Clusters and cluster reductions that appeared in the data only once, as well as clusters that appeared to be the result of transcription errors, were excluded from analysis. All /s/-clusters were excluded on the basis of their apparently unique sonority status (Kirk & Demuth, 2003, p. 713).

**Findings**

One of the most immediately striking characteristics of the findings became clear as data were being coded for analysis: there were no LMHF clusters attested in the data. Otherwise, data appeared mostly to be in line with expectations that follow from the markedness vs. frequency proposal posited by Stites et al. (2004), which posits that individual variation might be explained by a given child’s inclination towards either less marked or more frequent phonological structures.

**Accuracy Rates**

Percent of Accurate HMHF Onset Clusters:
- Lily: 77.1% (449/582)
- Naima: 36.9% (178/482)
Violet: 50.9% (110/216)

Percent of Accurate HMLF Onset Clusters:
- Lily: 24.7% (18/73)
- Naima: 21.1% (12/57)
- Violet: 56.7% (38/67)

Percent of Accurate LMLF Onset Clusters:
- Lily: 63.1% (53/84)
- Naima: 83.3% (20/24)
- Violet: 77.8% (14/18)

Lily showed a high rate of accurate production (77.1%) in HMHF onset clusters, contrasting with a low rate of accuracy (24.7%) in HMLF contexts and a more moderate rate of accuracy (63.1%) in LMLF contexts. Naima produced HMHF onset clusters accurately only 36.9% of the time and HMLF at an even lower rate of only 21.1%. Her LMLF attempts, on the other hand, were accurate 83.3% of the time. Violet’s production was more consistent in all categories; with moderate rates of accuracy in both HMHF and HMLF contexts (50.9% and 56.7% respectively). She was slightly more successful in LMLF onset clusters, with 77.8% of her attempts being accurate. Still, the relatively low overall number of LMLF cluster attempts for Naima and Violet makes it somewhat difficult to ascertain if their apparent accuracy within that category would bear out given more data.

Error Type Rates

Lily’s cluster reductions were distinctively diverse compared to those of Naima and Violet. The latter two relied primarily on gliding in both HM onset cluster categories. 83.3% of Naima’s HMHF reductions and 83.0% of her HMLF reductions were by gliding; 94.2% of Violet’s HMHF reductions and 80% of her HMLF reductions were also gliding. Lily, on the other hand, used gliding in 64.4% of her HMHF reductions and only 24.4% of the time when reducing HMLF clusters. In HMLF reductions, Lily’s most common reduction was substitution (which she used 51.3% of the time), crucially switching out less frequent elements, like /θf/, for HF elements like /f/. Relative to Naima and Violet, Lily exhibited both a higher proportion and a greater diversity of cluster reductions in LMLF onsets. Unfortunately, the low number of overall attempts of LMLF clusters from Naima and Violet makes it more difficult to see these comparisons as conclusive.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
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<th>Proportion</th>
<th>LMLF</th>
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### Discussion and Conclusion

In analyzing the results from Lily and Naima, there seems to be a notable classification along the markedness vs. frequency preference dichotomy. In terms of accuracy, Lily performed best with HMHF clusters, which she produced accurate to target 449 times out of 582 (77.1%) attempts. By contrast, with HMLF clusters, Lily’s attempts were accurate in only 18 of 73 (24.7%) instances. This gap in accuracy may be attributable to a preference for more frequent clusters over less frequent ones. Looking at Naima, we see a very different pattern, with accuracy at 36.9% in HMHF clusters and 21.1% for HMLF clusters. Frequency does seem to Naima to a degree; she is markedly more accurate in the HF category than in the LF category. However, the increase in Naima’s accuracy associated with the change from LF to HF is only 15.8%, whereas the same change shifts accuracy for Lily by 52.4%. With LMLF onset clusters, Naima was much more accurate and produced 20 of her 24 attempts (83.3%) accurately. In

<table>
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comparison to her relatively low accuracy in both HMHF and HMLF contexts, it seems that low markedness onset clusters are significantly easier for Naima to produce accurately. This suggests that while Lily appears to depend on high frequency, Naima appears to depend more on low markedness. Nonetheless, in LMLF onsets Lily is much more accurate (53 out of 84 attempts, or 63.1%) than in HMLF onsets, suggesting that just as HF increased Naima’s accuracy in HMHF clusters as opposed to HMLF clusters, LM may be helpful to Lily in spite of the her apparently stronger sensitivity to frequency. Markedness frequency preferences may manifest more as a continuum than a binary, and this idea seems to be supported by Violet’s accuracy scores, which were relatively consistent, and may indicate a more balanced approach than those of Naima and Lily.

Error type frequency data read along similar lines. Naima shows a very strong tendency to glide in HM environments. Gliding represents 259 out of 311 (83.3%) of her reductions in HMHF clusters and 39 of her 47 (83.0%) reductions in HMLF clusters. She regularly reduced clusters like /pl/, /kl/, and /fɹ/ to LM counterparts /pw/, kw/, and /fw/. She is evidently attempting to lower the markedness she encounters in these HM contexts by switching out liquids in C2 position for glides, effectively changing a HM OL cluster into an LM OG cluster. Lily, on the other hand, uses gliding occasionally (24.4% of reductions) in HMLF onsets, but relies much more heavily on substitution, which made up a full 40 of her 78 reductions (51.3%) in such clusters. Rather than removing C2 consonants to create a higher, less marked sonority distance, Lily substitutes LF structures like /θɹ/ for more frequent structures like /fɹ/. Such substitutions reinforce the frequency preference that seems evident in her accuracy data. Lily appears to find LF clusters more difficult and attempts to manage them by exchanging them for HF clusters; Naima struggles more with highly marked clusters and facilitates them mainly by turning them into LM clusters through gliding. Violet appears to make proportionally fewer errors in HM contexts than Naima, but when she does reduce an HM cluster she almost always (94.2% of the time in HMHF and 83.0% in HMLF) does so via gliding. Violet’s errors may point towards a milder preference for LM than that which Naima exhibits. The emergence of ‘degrees’ of preference would be in step with the notion of a spectrum or continuum between favoring HF or LM.

It is also important to note that overall, Lily demonstrates a greater variety of cluster reduction types than either of Naima or Violet. This may simply be the result of the greater number of recording sessions available from Lily; it may also relate to the fact that, when her recordings began and ended, she was very slightly older than the other participants. These factors may also have contributed to the lower number of LMLF onset clusters attempted by Naima and Violet compared to Lily.

**Implications of Study**

Findings from both accuracy and error type frequency data ultimately align with the markedness vs. frequency explanation for varying child phonology proposed in Stites et al. (2004). This study further suggests that this markedness/frequency preference breakdown may function more as a spectrum than a concrete dichotomy. Future work might investigate the validity of these conclusions with different participants. It would be particularly useful if more
data explaining how children like Naima and Violet handle LMLF onset clusters could be furnished. The scope of this study was limited and focused on only a few children from the Providence area. A broader investigation with a larger and more diverse group of participants might lend more serious weight to the findings presented here. Given that Stites et al. (2004) focused on singleton codas, coda clusters might also prove to be a useful venue for testing this markedness vs. frequency proposal. Such research could help linguists better understand the underlying systems that drive individual variation in first language acquisition as a whole and will allow us to name and recognize specific linguistic tendencies in phenomena that previously seemed arbitrary or otherwise unsystematic.
References


### Appendix A: Cluster Frequency and Sonority Distance Values

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### Appendix B: Accuracy Table with Categories and Individual Clusters

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Penned Progress: Poetry as a Potential Combatant of Linguistic Inequality among English Dialects

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American English demonstrates robust flexibility in its capacity to describe the various lifestyles and technologies that constitute American society (MacNeil & Cran, 2005, p.29). With this dynamic integration of new words and sounds, American English finds itself in a constant state of linguistic expansion. While a prescriptivist perspective might consider these changes to signal the doom of the English language, a descriptivist perspective might view this integration as an indication of a thriving language. Poetry, artistic language, presents evidence in favor of the latter. This paper will look at two works of poetry “To Live in the Borderlands Means You”, by Gloria Anzaldúa, and “On the Pulse of the Morning”, by Maya Angelou, in order to argue that poetry adds value to American English by countering the notion of linguistic inferiority among nonstandard English dialects and validating the strength of divergent evolution within American English communication.

Angelou’s “On the Pulse of the Morning” centers on ideas of inclusivity within a Standard dialect. Because this poem was first spoken at the presidential inauguration of Bill Clinton, it can be assumed that the targeted audience is the American public. Written for all to hear and read, the poem pleads for peace in the world using Standard American English (SAE). “On the Pulse of the Morning” does not challenge the boundaries of SAE as a whole, but rather tests its flexibility. Angelou uses elements within the dialectical expectations of SAE to demonstrate its inherent national inclusivity. Employing vague terms throughout such as unspecified “you” and widely applicable phrases such as “Each of you, descendant of some passed / On Traveller,” Angelou uses the standard dialect to unify the diverse histories of the American nation (1993). She goes further, layering this inclusivity into the poem’s structure. As she lists types of people: “So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew / The African and Native American, the Sioux” (1993), she utilizes multiple rhyming couplets. While the content of the list communicates inclusivity, the rhythm-and-couplet-style structure emphasizes the inherent link between communities that Angelou highlights. Angelou’s use of generality and structure accentuates the often-ignored commonalities between the many identities present in the US today, and attacks the racial and class boundaries surrounding SAE.

Exploring linguistic diversity further, Anzaldúa’s “To Live in the Borderlands Means You” asserts the validity of linguistic diversity and
multilingualism through structure that draws on both English and Spanish. The poem uses a hybrid style of English and Spanish by staying within grammatical rules, such as word order, but breaking lexical expectations in its word choice. Initially, it appears that the poem only intends to speak to a multilingual audience. This intention is most apparent by the lack of discernible pattern used when switching between Spanish and English. While in the beginning Spanish is only used for nouns describing her heritage such as “hispana,” “india,” “mestiza,” or “mulata,” in the third stanza, Spanish takes over the entire first line, stating, “Cuando vives en la frontera” (1987). However, this intention is challenged by the fact that in the three phrases before the final stanza, Anzaldúa uses only English. Anzaldúa’s use of one language variety, English, might suggest an appeal to a monolingual audience, given her use of both English and Spanish earlier in her poem. Consequently, Anzaldúa sacrifices expression of cultural pride for communicative clarity in relinquishing some of the rebellion present earlier in the poem. By using verbs such as “shred” and “shattered,” she utilizes the semantic power of the words’ painful connotations in SAE to precisely convey her message to the monolingual speech community (1987). Anzaldúa uses a personal dialect drawing on both English and Spanish alongside the dialect of SAE to communicate her message clearly. This linguistic symbiosis challenges the accepted stereotype of the standard dialect as a superior communicative medium.

Poetry can be a tool to validate different dialects and challenge the perceived inequity among speech communities and language varieties. This paper has shown how two poems, Angelou’s “On the Pulse of the Morning” and Anzaldúa’s “To Live in the Borderlands Means You,” strengthen the communicative capacity both within and, more importantly, between different dialects and different languages, ultimately strengthening the descriptivist notion that linguistic variety is a positive facet of linguistic development.

References


