Entering the Mainstream on "Throwing Shade"

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Abstract

In February 2017,"shade" (in its extended reference "throwing shade") officially entered the Merriam-Webster dictionary. This accomplished multiple things. First, it marked the term as mainstream. This phrase has appeared in public media sources as varied as reality television series "Real Housewives of Atlanta" (2008-present) to political commentary in the Washington Post ("Did Michelle Obama throw shade at Hillary Clinton?" 2016) and more. Second, the tweet used to announce the dictionary entry featured the gif of a scene from the 1991 Jennie Livingston documentary "Paris is Burning". The film follows the lives of Black gay men in the competitive ballroom subculture of 1980s New York City. These major media events evidence the term's trajectory. How this occurred seems less explicit. I am employing Google frequency data as a corpus from which to analyze this phenomenon. These are the original community of practice (Black gay men), an adjacent community (Black heterosexual women) and a mainstream community (those not directly associated with either previously mentioned group). These users were selected at the exclusion of "verified" users in order to avoid an explicit imbalance in influence. Preliminary data suggest the proximity between Black gay men and Black hetersoexual women may have led to transmission. In turn the demonstration of this interaction through popular media events (i.e., reality TV) and social media, may have resulted in widespread diffusion. Further investigation will explore if this transmission/diffusion event may indicate a larger norm, cultural appropriation and shifts in the stigmatization of Black gay men.
Keywords: Linguistics, African American Vernacular English, LGBT, Social Media

Introduction

In February 2017, the Merriam-Webster dictionary officially acknowledged the phrase "throw shade" as part of the lexicon of American English. The event marked the term as having become mainstream. While many American English speakers may have dismissed this as slang popularized for mass appeal; it can take on greater significance when an intersectional lens is applied to the phenomenon. The cultures, mechanisms and instances of its usage create a more complex picture. Specifically, the term "throw shade" (an extended usage of the slang phrase "shade") means "to express contempt or disrespect for someone publicly especially by subtle or indirect insults or criticisms" (Shade). The manner in which it was announced, by a post on Twitter, situates the origins of the phrase within a larger historical context.

Figure 1. Merriam-Webster tweet including "Paris is Burning" scene

Initially, the announcement tweet featured a gif (see fig.1) of a scene from the documentary "Paris is Burning" (Livingston, 1991). The scene features drag performer Dorian Corey explaining the concept of "shade" in a testimonial format. Famously she notes, "Shade is, I don't have to tell you you're ugly, because you know you're ugly" (Livingston, 1991). This displays the meaning, usage and community of practice that created the term. The act of incorporating this scene in the announcement created a direct reference to both the past and present status of the term within the context of American English lexicon. A direct correlation is made between the minority culture featured in "Paris" and American culture writ large of today. Similarly, increasing usage of the term in both reality TV and popular media show the term used to contextualize the behavior of Black women. Of note are instances such as "Did Michelle Obama throw shade at Hillary Clinton?" (Washington Post, 2016) in which the former First Lady

of the United States had a grimace at a public event described using the term within an article intended for a broad general audience. This prompts the notion that the term is clearly identifiable to a broad demographic and that it may also have unique descriptive power. The pattern of attaching the term to Black heterosexual identified women (either through their own usage or external description) provides another level of texture to evolving usage of "shade".

Consequently, this has led me to an investigation triggered by intuition as a member of the community of practice (Black gay identified men) and confirmed by means public media events (i.e., the Merriam-Webster dictionary announcement tweet, articles describing Black women). This intimates transmission and diffusion of the phrase which involves the interplay of popular media, Black gay identified men, Black heterosexual identified women and social media.

Literature Review

Gay Language

The community of practice documented in Livingston's "Paris" is a subset of the LGBT moniker. The cast of the film was highly specific by featuring the lives of Black (and Latino) gay identified men and transgender women within the competitive Ballroom subculture of New York City in the 1980s. However, even non-competing members of the community were highlighted in the film and a historical lens was provided for the larger linguistic characteristics of their community. Simply put, this described a vernacular usage of American English unique to this community of practice. Thus, even as a niched microcom this provides evidence for what has been termed 'gay language'. How this larger topic has been investigated naturally becomes the next point of inquiry.

Historically, considering language in the context of LGBT communities of practice began in earnest in the 1980s. While arguing for a departure from identifying a specific gay (by extension, separate lesbian) lexicon anthropologist Dan Kulick (2000) has provided a comprehensive overview of what is now termed 'queer linguistics'. Queer theorists Livia & Hall create work which was incorporated in the lens for how American English vernacular operates. This work has tended to be narrow in scope. In terms of sample population it focused on gay identified men. On a technical level the work focused on speech patterns, intonation and language attitudes.

Similarly, the studies featured White language users. As the field emerged, queer linguistics drew on a lens involving anthropology and would progress to using discourse analysis to draw connections between camp (Sontag, "Notes on Camp") and trends influenced by Black English (also known as African American Vernacular English or AAVE).

Decidedly, much ground remains to be covered solely in terms of how American society labels 'gay' in terms of language. In work that focuses attention on transgender men, linguist Lal Zimman presents research on a community historically omitted from language research. This

work also interrogates the paradigms which mark transgender men as either normalized (i.e., those automatically perceived as assigned male at birth or 'cisgender') or othered. Interrogating this intersection calls into question the norms established for men in American society and the identities created from personal performance of gender and sexual orientation. These commonly accepted norms continue to be taken for granted often but rarely critically interrogated.

One of Zimman's most notable studies accomplishes this interrogation of the perception of genuine male performance by engaging the question through a sociophonetic lens. The study explores whether or not evidence supports how listeners of American English perceive a man's voice to sound 'gay' or not. This specific approach dismantles commonly held view by identifying that 'gay' is a label often treated synonymous with 'other' and in turn is subjective to other phenotype based characteristics which listeners use as a rubric for how the speaker aligns with expected norms of being a man. The work also sheds light on a diverse community (transgender men) which within itself features members with a wide range of physical presentation and at times liminal identities due to the ways they may be perceived by the general public.

Conclusively, Kulicks argument calls attention to Barrett's concurrent argument against the existence of a distinct 'gay-speak' or gay men's language as the factors of race, socioeconomic class and open inclusion in community (i.e., being closeted or being 'out') show them to be diverse. Simply put, gay language doesn't exist because the community is too diverse to allow for a sole dialect. Both arguments progress the conversation and foreground current research in evidencing the strong need for an intersectional lens. The analysis also foregrounds the dearth of literature exploring the lexicon of Black gay men.

African American Vernacular English

Additionally, the impact of cultural exchange between Black cisgender heterosexual women and Black gay identified men is a major facet of the moment found in reality TV. As commented by sociologist Joshua Gamson (2013), a shift has occurred in society regarding attitudes associated with gay men. While previous the group was mostly stigmatized and othered, a variety of behavioral presentations (ranging from more masculine to more feminine) are at the core of reality TV. Not only are they prized characters, serving as points of expertise for culture, they also are an expectation in series focusing on the glamorous scripted reality of Black cisgender women such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Throwing Shade, 2009). Gamson specifically calls attention to the relationship between Sheree Whitfield and her hairstylist Lawrence Washington (2013). These women become conduits for lexicon introduced by the Black gay men in their inner circle and America witnesses this on a weekly basis.

Methods
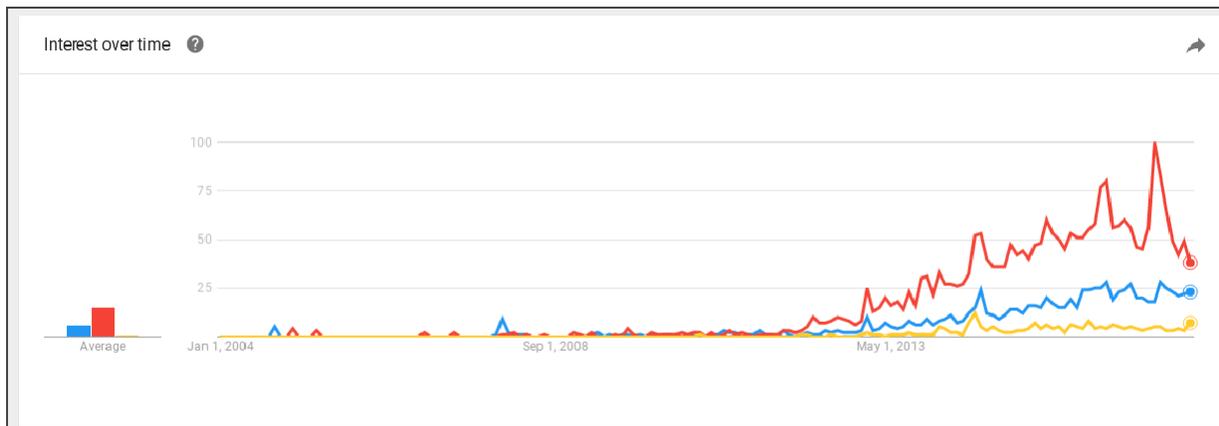
Figure 2. Frequency Data January 2004 through May 2017 - Google.com

A third party data analytic service was used to access data on Google queries. Initially, Google Books N-gram was attempted. However, this yielded insignificant results and solely relied on keywords sourced from scanned texts. This failed to isolate strings of words, for which this research depends. Google Books N-gram relies on a corpus of data scanned from physical books that in turn is searchable by single lexical item only. It became possible to search for "throw" and "shade" separately. At times they occur within the same text, however not in tandem as a phrase.

Next, specific lexical items derived from the phrase have been identified as tokens. These are "throw shade", "throws shade" and "throwing shade". These items demonstrate three common instances of the terms usage in ways that avoid semantic ambiguity. As this data often pulls from major media sources (i.e., journalism, broadcast television, etc) the present tense conjugation of the verb part of the phrase constitute a quasi-norm in terms of the AP style and journalistic voice which makes substantial use of the present tense within these contexts. Finally, specific upticks in query frequency were identified and cross referenced by individual Google search. This combined the identified date of the high frequency of query with the lexical items itself. In three distinct occurences there is a direct correlation between a significant increase in queries of the lexical item and specific media events. Namely, an article by Saeed Jones in Buzzfeed ("When Did Everyone Start Throwing Shade?", May 2013) , a popular social media based meme regarding Destiny's Child ("Beyonce Throws Shade", February 2014) and the announcement of "shade" being added to the dictionary (Merriam Webster, February 2017). This does not preclude other usages of the term as significant. Yet, it signals three of the largest surges in attention from a general English speaking audience for the phrase.

Discussion

Interestingly, the search for a historical trajectory leading to the mainstreaming of "throw shade" uncovered clues in a transmission/diffusion narrative. This narrative takes place within

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the context of American English and appears to be driven by multiple touch points. At its origins the documentary "Paris is Burning" displays the phrase in its original community of practice, Black queer men. Later, by virtue of changing attitudes surrounding queer identified men in media, evidence indicates that this community of practice found another outlet to mainstream American society at large by means of reality television casting. This outlet, though, doesn't place said community in a vacuum.

Notably, reality television places the Black queer men in direct contact with Black heterosexual identified women in the world of reality TV as the entertainment genre amplifies certain actual realities within scripted environments. For as much as these new versions of soap operas require theatrical performance and presentation of the women in their casts; they similarly require a reimagined role of queer men as a supporting sidekick role. While doing this place the historic proximity of Black queer men and Black straight women on display for a general audience. Mannerisms, behaviors and of course distinct forms of speech are highlighted in the pseudo-intimacy that plays out amongst cast members on camera. Linguistically, this creates transmission both through the proximity of both communities and prompts diffusion to a general audience of persons who belong to neither of the aforementioned communities.

Similarly, social media and internet based journalism play a large role in propelling forward the momentum of diffusion as is displayed in the Google based data. Once a reality TV show becomes a topic of general conversation, the use of a hashtag on Twitter or posting on any one of various microblogging sites (i.e., Facebook) generate a diffusive effective amplifying the magnitude of touch points for all subject matter involved. This serves to propel any and all novel lexical items in a way that their relatively small minority communities of usage may have been unable to do by themselves. It seems apparent that the concert of changing views on queer men in media, reality tv and social media colluded in the case of the term "throw shade" to drive the term into mainstream recognition by American English speakers.

Future Directions

An understanding of the impact of social media as a force for transmission and diffusion prompts inquiry to how this may occur on a more individual level. Decidedly, the data and analysis presented in this paper have focused on macro level interpretation of Google as a corpus. This is due to Google being one of the most widely used search engines for speakers of American English.

However, on an individual level Twitter also proves itself to be exceedingly relevant as a live corpus for exploring how lexical items function within minority communities. Further analysis will employ experimental methods which use semantic framing to identify three relevant groups (i.e., a community of practice, a community of nexus and a general community excluding for the previous two). This will look at how these groups behave when solely operating in

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conversations they initiate and what effects popular media may have on this. Similarly it will provide insight into any shifts in usage by the original community of practice that may indicate a response to the mainstreaming of the term. This will include, but are not limited to, morphological, syntax and pragmatic changes.

Finally, patterns identified within this subset of American English lexical items will be dissected in order to ascertain whether or not they represent a larger linguistic norm. The notion of this possibly indicating transmission/diffusion from minority communities into mainstream lexicon by means of social media is of great interest. Also, how this may speak to any shifts in stigma towards Black queer men will be explored as well.

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