

"BLACK IS KING": LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN BEYONCÉ'S USE OF AAVE

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"BLACK IS KING": LENGUAJE E IDENTIDAD EN EL USO DE AAVE POR BEYONCÉ

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to understand the correlation between language and discourse identity for Black women through an analysis of Beyoncé's lyrics across time. Its specific goal is to investigate the occurrence of code-switching between Standard English (SE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the singer's lyrics within different music domains. So, we analyzed the frequency of five AAVE syntactic structures in different music genres – pop and hip hop/rap - in distinct phases of her career. The results show an overall decrease of SE forms and an increase in the use of AAVE forms, though the singer continues to practice code-switching in her songwriting. This represents a transition in Beyoncé's language use, indicating a correlation between language choice and Black Women's discourse identity.

KEYWORDS: Identity. AAVE. Beyoncé.

RESUMO: Este artigo tem como objetivo compreender a correlação entre língua e discurso identitário para mulheres negras a partir da análise das letras de música de Beyoncé ao longo do tempo. Seu objetivo específico é investigar a ocorrência de *code-switching* entre inglês padrão (SE) e inglês vernacular afroamericano (AAVE) nas letras da cantora dentro de diferentes domínios musicais. Então, analisamos a frequência de cinco estruturas sintáticas do AAVE em diferentes gêneros musicais – pop, hip hop/rap - em distintas fases de sua carreira. Os resultados mostram um declínio geral das formas do SE e um aumento do uso de formas do AAVE, embora a cantora continue a praticar *code-switching* na sua composição musical. Isso representa uma transição no uso da linguagem de Beyoncé, indicando uma correlação entre escolha da língua e identidade discursiva da mulher negra.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Identidade. AAVE. Beyoncé.

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RESUMEN: Este artigo tem como objetivo compreender a correlação entre língua e discurso identitário para mulheres negras a partir da análise das letras de música de Beyoncé ao longo do tempo. Seu objetivo específico é investigar a ocorrência de *code-switching* entre inglês padrão (SE) e inglês vernacular afroamericano (AAVE) nas letras da cantora dentro de diferentes domínios musicais. Então, analisamos a frequência de cinco estruturas sintáticas do AAVE em diferentes gêneros musicais – pop, hip hop/rap – em distintas fases de sua carreira. Os resultados mostram um declínio geral das formas do SE e um aumento do uso de formas do AAVE, embora a cantora continue a praticar *code-switching* na sua composição musical. Isso representa uma transição no uso da linguagem de Beyoncé, indicando uma correlação entre escolha da língua e identidade discursiva da mulher negra.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

1 INTRODUCTION

The correlation between language and identity has been the main subject of study for many linguists, especially in linguistic anthropology, which is the field that focuses on “linguistic production of culture” (Bucholtz; Hall, 2006, p. 369). When it comes to bilinguals, the focus of the present article, many factors, such as domains of language behavior, topic of conversation, situational setting, and historical phase might determine their language choices, directly impacting their ethnic and racial identity in society.

The concern with identities as broader characteristics comes from Fishman’s sociology of language, invoking “a broader, critical and interdisciplinary attitude towards the relation between language and society” (Severo; Görski, 2017, p.122). For minority groups, the idea that language can be an instrument of molding individual identity is pivotal, as Peterson (2020) states, since the language “is often the single most enduring symbol of their uniqueness and the bond within the community”, something that can be observed through the speech of Black people, a linguistic variation known as AAVE (African American Vernacular English). For individuals of intersectional minority groups, such as Black women, this sense of identity found through language can be even more important.

Despite suffering from both racial and gender discrimination, Black women are rarely remembered for either one of them. Studies of AAVE tend to focus on males, making the research of Black women’s speech much more challenging and as a consequence, making them susceptible to negative stereotypes regarding their speech in ways Black men are not.

With that in mind, it is necessary to shed light on women’s discourse when studying AAVE’s phenomena, hence the reason why Beyoncé is the main target of this research. One of the most influential and famous artists from the XXI century, Beyoncé is known for her musical and visual work highlighting and praising Black history, culture, and womanhood, like her 2013 album, *Beyoncé*; her 2016 album/movie *Lemonade*; and her 2019/2020 albums/movies *Homecoming* and *Black Is King*. In spite of this, her previous works were not so focused on Blackness.

Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to understand the correlation between language and discourse identity for Black women through an analysis of Beyoncé’s lyrics across time, while the specific goal is: to investigate the occurrence of code-switching between Standard English and African American Vernacular English in Beyoncé’s lyrics within different music domains. The main hypothesis is that language serves as a statement of identity for a Black woman through the frequency of code-switching between SE and AAVE and the increase of AAVE features in the singer’s lyrics over the years of her career, as she addresses Black issues more incisively and delves into music genres traditionally explored by Black artists, such as rap and hip-hop, which could be considered another domain of language behavior in music. In order to do so, we analyzed the frequency of AAVE structures across the years in Beyoncé’s lyrics from different music genres – pop and hip hop/rap – in different phases of her career, searching for five AAVE features (double negatives, invariant *be*, absence of copula, associative plural and absence of third person singular –s). So, this paper aims to contribute to the study of how Black female musicians manifest their identity through language in hip-hop and rap-influenced songs.

2 AFRICAN-AMERICAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH (AAVE)

The language variety used by Black people in the United States is called by different names depending on the author. We will adopt the nomenclature “African American Vernacular English,” since ‘vernacular’ refers to “the nonstandard (or vernacular) forms of English used by African Americans in everyday conversation,” thereby being considered the most appropriate terminology to analyze speech in music lyrics, for being the broadest one and for referring to oral discourse (Rickford, 1999).

Although AAVE is commonly known for being spoken by Black people, it does not necessarily mean that only Black people speak this variety. For example, US Southern English shares many features with AAVE, something that Peterson (2020, p. 101) explains is due to the fact that a large portion of slaves lived in the south of the US and poor white workers, usually of Scots-Irish descent, were often put to work closely with slaves.

Throughout the years, with the advance of the internet and with pop culture itself, white people in the US slowly became more familiar with AAVE. The participation of white rappers in the hip-hop music scene can also be considered relevant, since AAVE is the language most used by rappers whether they are Black or not, like Eminem and Iggy Azalea (LAING, 2021). With this, some of the AAVE’s features started to be more accepted and less associated with variety, such as the main negative form of the AAVE, which is *ain’t*. Even though it is still an informal negative marker, there is a growing usage of it by white or non-black people, especially in music.

For this reason, *ain’t* was not considered as one of the AAVE features for the analysis of this paper since the goal is to investigate how language represents a sense of identity for Black women and it could not be as objective for the research considering it has been widely used by other white singers as well. So, five AAVE features were analyzed: double negatives, invariant *be*, absence of copula, associative plural, and absence of third person singular -s.

2.1. DOUBLE NEGATIVES

Although some languages do accept double negatives in their Standard varieties, like Portuguese or Spanish, in English, however, this feature is used mainly in non-standard varieties, such as the AAVE. It consists of the use of two or more negative forms in a sentence, as in “I **don’t** need **no** beat, I can sing it with piano” (Beyoncé, 2009) or “I **ain’t** fucking with **nobody**” (Beyoncé, 2016a).

2.2. ABSENCE OF COPULA

This feature consists of the deletion of the auxiliary verbs *is* and *are* in present tense sentences, regarding states or actions (Rickford, 1999, p. 6). What goes unnoticed by many non-AAVE speakers is that this feature does have its own grammatical rules. Peterson (2020) mentions that it is not grammatical in AAVE to delete the copula in the first person singular, so there are no occurrences of sentences such as “I going” and there can be no copula deletion in past tense sentences because the past tense marker goes in the copula. Depictions of this feature can be seen in “If you \emptyset scared, call that reverend” (Beyoncé, 2013) and “He \emptyset trying to roll me up” (Beyoncé, 2016a).

2.3 INVARIANT BE

Peterson (2020, p. 106) affirms that the invariant *be* is one of the most stereotyped markers of AAVE, since many non-speakers of this variety tend to imitate it in order to make fun of the language, being one of the most marginalized features. The invariant *be* feature, also known as aspectual *be* or habitual *be*, consists of using the unconjugated form of the verb “to be” in order to express an action that happens on a frequent basis (Peterson, 2020, p. 106).

There is another use of the invariant *be*, according to McGee (2019, p. 11), when talking about permanent or long-term attributes. It is used when the predicative is expressed by a noun in a sentence. Known as the “equative copula”, this form of invariant *be* is more common in rap lyrics, in sentences such as “we **be** the best ones”, for example.

Non-speakers of AAVE tend to confuse this feature with the absence of copula and assume it does not have its own grammatical rules. As a matter of fact, these linguistic phenomena express different aspectual meanings. While copula deletion refers to ongoing and habitual situations, the invariant *be* specifically refers to habitual actions or factual information. For example, in sentences like “She singing” and “She be singing”, the first one (an example of copula deletion) might express an action that is happening right at this moment and the second one expresses an action that happens regularly. Examples of these features are also noted in “**We be** all night, and everything Ø all right” (Beyoncé, 2013), in which both features express the idea of an action that happens on a frequent basis, and in “Pigment like the earth, **you be** giving birth to everything alive, baby, know your worth” (Beyoncé, 2019), representing a permanent attribute.

2.4 ASSOCIATIVE PLURAL

The associative plural is a feature that “AAVE shares with English creoles, rather than with other varieties of English” (MUFWENE et al, 1998, p. 73). It can happen in two forms: “an dem”, after definite nouns referring to the name of a person, or “dem/them”, before the plural form of the noun (Mufwene et al., 1998). The first form is usually used to comprise multiple individuals in a general way, something that Mufwene (1998) exemplifies with the sentence “Felicia **an dem** done gone”, which in SE would be translated roughly to “Felicia and her friends/family/associates have/had gone (already)”. The second one, though, is used with the personal pronoun *them* taking the place of the article *the* or the demonstrative pronouns *these* or *those*, as in “He likes **them** hot girls with **them** hips” (Beyoncé, 2020) and “He always got **them** fucking excuses” (Beyoncé, 2016a).

2.5. ABSENCE OF THIRD PERSON SINGULAR -S

This is one of the morphosyntactic features of AAVE and it happens because the third person singular -s is remnant of a time when English had different case endings for first, second and third person plural and singular, being the only ancient verb conjugation remaining until today (Peterson, 2020, p. 108), so in order to facilitate comprehension with a uniform conjugation, there is no occurrence of this morpheme. It should be noted that this feature not only applies to the morpheme at the end of infinitive regular verbs but also to the auxiliary verbs *does/doesn't* and *has/hasn't*, which assumes the forms *do/don't* and *have/haven't* in AAVE (Rickford, 1999, p. 7), as in the sentences “Something **don't** feel right because it ain't right” (Beyoncé, 2016b) and “Louis sheets, he **sweat** it out/Like washrags, he **wet** it up” (Beyoncé, 2013).

3 CODE-SWITCHING

One important factor to address when talking about AAVE is code-switching, which is “an individual’s use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or exchange” (Woolard, 2006, p. 73). Over the years, many researchers have written about code-switching as a phenomenon that happens in an exchange of multiple languages in the bilingualism setting, while embracing the exchanges between language varieties too. As Woolard (2006, p. 74) states: “the topic of code-switching is relevant to all speech communities that have linguistic repertoires comprising more than one ‘way of speaking.’”

As Briceño, Muñoz-Muñoz, and Rodríguez-Mojica (2019, p. 58) explain: the white discourse is what is taken into consideration as the Standard English, which is idealized as the “right way to speak”. According to Rosa (2016, p. 163), this generated the hegemonic belief that the natural state of being is the monolingual one: a “monolingual political imaginary.” However, it is necessary to look through the racial context to what is considered the Standard or Non-Standard since the standardization of language is built to exclude those who are speakers of a racialized nonstandard variety and to create the idea that they are not capable to produce any sort of comprehensible use of language.

Non-white speakers are the most affected by linguistic hegemony. So, discussing linguistic hegemony and the idealistic scenario of a monolingual society does refer to the unbalanced power of English compared to other languages. One particular way Black people may demonstrate their feelings towards language as their identity is by adjusting the way they speak depending on the environment they are in, that is, through code-switching.

Although standard varieties are well received in many environments, especially professional ones, and code-switching is usually understood as the shift from a natural vernacular discourse to a standard one, bilinguals' language choices differ in different domains of language behavior, which are not always easy to be academically determined. According to Fishman (2000, p.86), "the appropriate designation and definition of domains of language behavior obviously calls for considerable insight into the socio-cultural dynamics of particular multilingual settings at particular periods in their history." This means that the switch can also happen from standard to vernacular discourse according to the type of interaction, a phenomenon referred to as covert prestige, in Linguistics. According to Peterson (2020, p. 71), covert prestige can be local or in-group, in situations where a non-standard variety or minority language is considered the norm instead of the main variety spoken by the large population at that place, as we will better analyze in section 4.1.

4 LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

As stated by Edwards (2009, p. 54), the term "identity" refers to "the way we conceive ourselves as individuals or as members of groups — or, indeed, the way others perceive and categorize us", while "language" requires a complex definition, that the author summarizes as two aspects: the communicative, which refers to the instrumental uses of the language; and the symbolic, which refers to the emblematic functions of the language as "an expression and encapsulation of culture."

For the purpose of this paper, the meaning of "identity" taken into consideration is the one by Edwards (2009) and Bucholtz and Hall (2006), which follows the word's origin, which is the Latin word *idem*, and defines identity based on similarity and sameness, allowing people to identify themselves with groups and belonging to them. However, it should not be narrowed down exclusively to similarity, otherwise, it would reinforce a harmful essentialist statement for minority groups, erasing the individuality of members of a group in order to stereotype and diminish them.

Within linguistic studies, language and identity are "ultimately inseparable", to the point that any research on identity would have to take language into consideration, in any capacity. O'Regan and Zotzmann (2016, p. 113) argue that identity links the individual and the social aspects of a person and helps to comprehend why they would want to be associated or separated from a specific community, showing which pieces of information about themselves are interesting to display to others and language is the tool used to achieve this goal. This concept goes to show that "language use is not only a cognitive endeavor but likewise an immanently social one" and that identity is a discursive phenomenon (O'regan; Zotzmann, 2016).

Therefore, the intricacies of belonging to a linguistic community and being able to use and comprehend its symbolic functions demonstrate how language plays a part in the social dynamics of the formation of an identity, though it might not be as noticeable to speakers of a majority-speech community. Given the importance of the symbolic function of the language and the ability to read between the lines, Bucholtz and Hall (2006) affirm that semiotics, or the study of systems of meaning, provide an interesting perspective to the study of language and identity for analyzing the correlation between social or natural objects and their meanings. In order to see how this field of Linguistics is relevant to this paper, I considered three processes, addressed by the authors, which have been used for the research of language and identity: practice, ideology, and performance.

First, there is practice, representing the idea that language constitutes a social practice, shaping the way the speaker presents themselves to the world, which is their *habitus*. Gender, class, race, and sexual orientation are among the factors that can help develop someone's *habitus*. This process of finding and relating to communities of practice, i.e. groups with the same habitual practice, is an ever-changing one as this group identification can be modified throughout life depending on the person's social status at the time.

Then, there is ideology, a process that “organizes and enables all cultural beliefs and practices as well as the power relations that result from these” (Bucholtz; Hall, 2006, p. 379). Considering how language relates to power as a social phenomenon, ideology basically consists of two other processes: erasure, which is the elimination of elements that are consistent with a particular ideological order; and iconization, the representation of a linguistic marker or variety with a specific group.

Finally, there is performance, a process that differs from practice - which is habitual and non-intentional - for being deliberate and self-aware. Despite the common definition of “performance” being associated with stages, this linguistic process actually happens in everyday speech interactions. It is intended to challenge or subvert oppressive ideologies, becoming the interest of minorities as women and African Americans.

4.1 AAVE AND IDENTITY

Language plays an essential role in the formation of an identity for several minority groups in society. The more understood AAVE was by linguists, the more its link to its speakers’ identity called the attention of scholars, which is constructed intersubjectively and context-contingently. As Joseph (2016, p. 22) states, “constructed” stands for the fact that an individual’s identity is not unchangeable; it is actually fluid. This means performance depends on the people who are engaging in a specific interaction. On the other hand, “context-contingently” means that someone will adapt their speech and identity based on the circumstance and environment they are in. In the words of Edwards (2009, p. 32), “[...] speech accommodations can thus be seen as identity adjustments made to increase group status and favourability”.

One way of observing covert prestige is by investigating the manifestation of language through hip-hop, thus reaching one of the main topics of this paper. Laing (2021, p. 13) affirms that the language used by the majority of hip-hop and rap artists is AAVE, considering the significant relatability of the Black community experience of oppression and prejudice with the main topics depicted in this genre’s lyrics, and Alim (2011, p. 122) acknowledges that the practice of hip-hop culture subvert ideas of correctness and associate them to hip-hop priorities instead of institutional norms, as this music genre uses coded language to criticize dominant discourses.

Actually, hip-hop is not only a music genre but a lifestyle for African Americans who live in urban areas of the United States and, for being a whole cultural universe, it has its own verbal and non-verbal language, such as MC’ing (rapping) and breakdancing (Helgotsson, 2019, p.12). However, language is considered the biggest element of this culture, since rappers use it not only to perform songs and talk about their views of the world but also their experiences.

Being so, the use of AAVE structures characterizes a defiance of the “Euro-American cultural, racial and linguistic domination,” which would explain the critics of rappers who soften the frequency of AAVE features in their lyrics when they start to attend to a bigger, white audience (Smitherman, 1997, p. 11). Thus, the performative element of AAVE usage could be considered fundamental to hip-hop culture and its link to the African American community and identity.

Besides performance, authenticity is another main factor in the construction of identity in hip-hop culture. As Cutler (2007, p. 529) explains, the hip-hop scene is built upon the urban African American community. Therefore, the cultural and socioeconomic proximity to such a community, including language, plays a part in constituting identity, which means a large group of artists, especially Black artists, chooses to portray authenticity by using AAVE in their lyrics.

Still, while there is a large field of research on the relevance of hip-hop culture to the formation of identity, the majority of the data found for this paper highlighted only male rappers, such as Jay-Z, Dr. Dre, and Eminem. This state-of-the-art indicates the need for a closer look at the gender factor in the Black community and to how Black women demonstrate their relation with language and their identities.

4.2 AAVE AND THE IDENTITY OF BLACK WOMEN

The overlook of Black women is not an issue solely of the Linguistics field of research, although it most definitely plays a part in this field as well. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008, p. 377) explain that the phenomenon that affects Black women is called *intersectional invisibility*, which is what happens when people belong to multiple minority group identities: they do not fit the prototypes (what comes to someone's mind as the definition of a group identity) of any of the groups they are a part of and end up not being seen as none of them. In the words of Coles and Pasek (2020, p. 2), "intersectional invisibility occurs because the prototypical woman is a white woman and the prototypical Black person is a Black man," something that the authors argue that led to the needs of Black women being ignored both by feminist and antiracist movements, making this focus on Black womanhood much more necessary.

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008, p. 383) point out that some of the ways intersectional invisibility affects individuals with multiple minority identities is through misrepresentation, marginalization, and disempowerment, leading to their erasure in historical studies and even their cultural understanding. Such erasure also happens in the linguistic field, as Lanehart (2009, p. 3) comments on the fact that there are very few works on the particularities of Black women's discourse.

Returning to the previous discussion on hip-hop, now to address the role of female artists in this culture, Cutler (2007, p. 519) states that there are not many studies regarding gender in hip-hop culture and gender, since there is a larger focus on male artists in this music scene, and that there are possibilities to research on how female rap/hip-hop artists use language to project their gender identities. Cutler (2007) also comments on the concept of gender being a "performed identity," similar to race, and both identities can be adaptable and performed by anyone. Thus, it is possible that these two performances of identity could intersect throughout language in hip-hop as well.

Regarding the formation of an identity, DeCuir-Gunby and Dixson (2009) argue that adolescence is a crucial period for an individual's identity development and it is even more remarkable to Black women, who begin to associate themselves with race and gender identities since they are teenagers. Firstly, Black identity is characterized by the ways someone perceives themselves as belonging to the Black race individually, collectively, and then their perceptions of other races. Secondly, gender identity is constituted of a self-definition of gender, one that associates someone's own gender as a positive attribute, and this individual's understanding of gender schemes, that is, the visual construction of gender in media. According to DeCuir-Gunby and Dixson (2009, p. 21), these two factors are the most important for the development of Black women's own construction of identity and that is why studying Beyoncé's lyrics might be an important academic asset.

5 BEYONCÉ'S CAREER: LYRIC THEMES AND USE OF LANGUAGE

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter, popularly known as Beyoncé, is one of the most famous and influential singers of all time. Rising to the spotlight during the 1990s with the girl group Destiny's Child, she achieved an even higher status when she started her solo career in 2003. Since then, Beyoncé has gathered major accolades, being one of the most renowned Black singers in history. So, to discuss Beyoncé's career and influence also means discussing Blackness.

Before heading to a broad analysis of Beyoncé's career and the linguistic elements in her lyrics, it should be mentioned that she has always spoken AAVE. The most noticeable change in this regard was the fact that she started to address Blackness in a political manner, which in turn was reflected in different uses of AAVE – a topic for discussion later in this paper. Thereby, the goal of this section is to analyze how Beyoncé's career evolved to the point where Blackness is a central theme, how this change was noticed, and how language takes a main role in this change.

After her career with Destiny's Child, Beyoncé started her solo career in 2003 with the album *Dangerously In Love*, which helped cement her name as an important figure in pop culture, apart from a group. This solo endeavor allowed her to show more of her personality and artistry individually, considering that "since her solo career began in 2003, Beyoncé has moved far beyond the

familiar boundaries of Destiny's Child to reinvent herself again and again through record setting albums, transformative songs and videos, and visionary marketing strategies" (LI, 2017 *apud* Rebechi; Sidoruk, 2020). However, even though Beyoncé had more opportunities to show more of herself as a solo artist and depicted elements of Black culture in her music videos, such as *Crazy In Love*, she still presented herself in the 2000s as a pop singer and generally wrote about feminism and female empowerment more often, in the way she did with Destiny's Child.

The apolitical positioning Beyoncé depicted during the first decade of her solo career has garnered some criticism. Cashmore (2010) describes Beyoncé as a brand, explaining the singer surfaced in a post-9/11 era, when Americans looked for equality instead of differences between each other in order to feel closer as a society, representing "a culture in which race is a remnant of history and limitless consumer choice has become a substitute for equality" (p. 135). The author explains that Beyoncé is part of a larger picture of Black celebrities from the 2000s who complied with this scenario in which their ethnic background is not explicitly addressed in order for them to be seen as equals to a broad audience, like Halle Berry and Tiger Woods.

Cashmore (2010, p. 137) defines Beyoncé as "[...] prudent, unadventurous and not prone to commenting on issues other than her own products or endorsements" during the 2000s and states that even though the fact that she was part of an all-Black group in the 1990s and that it helped the American population accept more Black singers, Beyoncé was still someone seen as acceptable and unacceptable, that is, although she was unacceptable for being a Black woman, she was acceptable for not showing her true identity. Such a statement mirrors the content of her 2008 album, *I Am... Sasha Fierce*, which, with the influence of Beyoncé's father, Matthew Knowles, became one of the most commercial eras of her career.

Besides, the historical background of the 2000s might not be the only factor that influenced Beyoncé into this positioning. Rebechi and Sidoruk (2020) analyze Beyoncé's lyrics and the aspects of her career that led her to *Lemonade*, including her involvement with the production of each of her studio albums. The authors found that her first three albums released during the 2000s, were all produced by both Beyoncé and her father, Matthew Knowles, while her latest three albums, released during the 2010s, were solely produced by Beyoncé herself, indicating more authority and freedom for her to express herself in an authentic manner.

The impact of rap and hip-hop influences in the album *BEYONCÉ*, in 2013, was so remarkable that led scholars to theorize about the role of this change in Beyoncé's career and for Black women in general as well. Larasati (2016) argues that since hip-hop is a male-dominated music genre, it is expected for female rap artists to depict Black womanhood in particular ways through this kind of music, and since *BEYONCÉ: The Platinum Edition* (the 2014 deluxe version of the 2013 self-titled album) is heavily inspired by this genre, it would be adequate for a study on how Black womanhood is portrayed in music. One of the themes analyzed by the author is aesthetic oppression, as depicted in the song ****Flawless*, in the lines "I woke up like this, I woke up like this/We flawless, ladies, tell 'em/Say 'I look so good tonight'" (Beyoncé, 2013), an important statement considering Larasati's (2016, p. 17) explanation of how society's beauty standards are focused on white beauty, therefore, Beyoncé shares a powerful message of self-love and acceptance for Black women. In 2014, Beyoncé continued to delve deeper into the hip-hop scene, being featured in Nicki Minaj's song *Feeling Myself*, a collaboration with a rapper in which Beyoncé delivered rap verses, blurring the lines of the roles of the singer and the rapper in a song, something unusual in her career.

Still, these releases represented only the initial steps of an even more drastic career change yet to come. In February 2016, Beyoncé released her new single *Formation*, which not only is a solo rap song but is also a Black empowerment anthem, with both its lyrics and music video heavily featuring elements of Black culture and messages of anti-racism, explicitly addressing these issues for the first time in her career. According to Arzumanova (2016), the release of this song and music video is not only an answer to previous critiques regarding Beyoncé's apolitical positioning, but also a profound statement of Black pride, as Beyoncé did not merely intend to speak directly to her Black friends and community, but to make herself unavailable for white audiences as well.

Immediately on the day after the song's release, Beyoncé went to perform it at the Super Bowl 50 Half-Time Show, the annual most-watched event on American television. In order to celebrate Black History Month and the 50th anniversary of the Black Panther Party, the singer formed an X with her dancers, all of them dressed in berets and afro-hair, and displayed the Black Power fist salute. This powerful statement initiated a huge backlash against Beyoncé, as Americans deemed her "anti-cop" and "anti-American" for

the performance. Gammage (2017, p. 2) explains that such a reaction happened because American culture prohibits Black artists from depicting their Blackness and pride in Black history. In comparison, the author mentions the Super Bowl Half-Time Show from 2013 in which Beyoncé was the headliner of the event and presented a show that was considered an exhibition of feminist activism, however that performance was celebrated, instead of criticized.

This reaction to the Super Bowl performance presents two important points of discussion as to why Beyoncé's homage to her Black cultural background was met with intense shock and was considered a major turning point for her career. First, as Ellithorpe *et al* (2018, p. 158) point out, Americans did seem to forget, somehow, that Beyoncé is Black, whether because of her lack of political statements earlier in her career or because the white audience is not used to being exposed to Black-oriented media. Thus, her statement of Black pride came as a surprise for part of the American audience. And second, according to Gammage (2017, p. 5) the United States has a history of condemning Black artists who speak out against racism and explicitly demonstrate their pride for being African Americans, such as Lena Horne, Billie Holiday, and Eartha Kitt, so it is expected that Beyoncé would face the same kind of reaction from Americans for delivering a similar message. In fact, knowing the history of the American treatment of Black activist celebrities and seeing the harsh critiques Beyoncé received for this performance and song release, it is possible to comprehend the reasons why she would not be able to publicly express her political views in earlier years of her career.

Still, the critiques did not prevent Beyoncé from going forward with the riskiest work of her career, and, two months later, she released *Lemonade*, not only her most critically acclaimed album so far, besting its predecessor, but also the one where she highlighted Black culture, especially Black womanhood, the most. Dealing with issues of infidelity as much as racism, *Lemonade* was highly praised for putting Black women at its center, something that Washington (2017, p. 6) describes as revolutionary for confronting the misogyny directed specifically to Black women, which originated the term Angry Black Woman. On *Lemonade*, Black rage is portrayed from their own point of view as an expression of dissatisfaction against injustice, questioning the stereotypical depictions of these women as unreasonable or uneducated. As a result, the album instigates a humane look at society's historical ignorance towards Black women's existence and feelings.

Beyoncé's recent political statements as an African American woman have caught the attention of linguistic scholars as well. McGee (2019, p. 2) argues that, in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé uses AAVE as a tool to address Black womanhood and "provides us with a roadmap for discussing the ways in which she navigates her fluid and evolving identity that is accessible and explicit by design", that is, through different uses of language Beyoncé showcases different aspects of herself, giving room for analysis on how the singer relates language to her identity.

For instance, McGee (2019, p. 5) analyzes Beyoncé's code-switching inside of *Lemonade* by comparing the songs *Sandcastles* and *Hold Up*: the former, a pop ballad (much in the likes of the ones she wrote earlier in her career, intended for a larger general audience) written entirely in SE; while the latter, a reggae-infused uptempo song with heavy Black culture influences, contains much more elements of AAVE. This comparison is understandable once we remember the concept of covert prestige: a pop ballad might infer a formal setting, thus requiring a standard approach despite being placed in a nonstandard setting as an album focused on Black culture, meanwhile a song in a Black genre such as reggae requires a nonstandard variety for it has more prestige in this scenario.

In fact, by analyzing Beyoncé's use of AAVE, McGee (2019, p. 3) points out that one of the distinctions in the way Black women express themselves with language is through code-switching. According to Higginbotham (1992), the use of code-switching by Black women, which the author calls "metalanguage of race", is pivotal to understanding what language represents to African American women, as they handle their multiple identities without ever separating them: they are not solely Black nor women, they are Black women.

While this comparison between two songs from *Lemonade* helps to understand the topics of code-switching by African American women and covert prestige in music genres, hereby considered different language domains, it illuminates only the phenomena happening in this specific album, leaving room to investigate Beyoncé's use of AAVE and code-switching through the course of her career and how it reflects her identity.

The detour of Beyoncé's political positioning during her career has been the subject of research by many scholars, also becoming a rich subject for Linguistics research. Eberhardt and Vdoviak-Markow (2020) argue that Beyoncé increased the use of AAVE features in her lyrics in her recent works, especially *Lemonade*, as a strategic resource to shift the way her audience sees her. They researched Beyoncé's use of the zero copula feature, finding that the singer significantly increased the use of such feature beginning with the album *BEYONCÉ*, reaching a peak with *Lemonade*. While also researching the zero copula feature, this paper is also going to analyze four other AAVE features in Beyoncé's songs: double negatives, invariant be, associative plural, and absence of third person -s.

6 METHODOLOGY

This research was motivated by the question: "is it possible to notice Beyoncé's music career shift to a Black-centric focus through the language in her lyrics?", with the general goal being understanding the correlation between language and identity in Black women's discourse. The specific goal was to investigate the occurrence of code-switching between Standard English and African American Vernacular English in Beyoncé's lyrics across time. To do so, it was analyzed the frequency of AAVE structures across the years in Beyoncé's lyrics within different music domains. So, this paper uses a qualitative research method, based on Rickford's (1999) work, to achieve a thorough interpretation of its results and how it relates to the songs' lyrical content.

6.1. CORPUS SELECTION

Eberhardt and Vdoviak-Markow (2020) argue that Beyoncé increased the use of AAVE features in her lyrics in her recent works, especially *Lemonade*, as a strategic resource to shift the way her audience sees her. Considering this, to narrow down the research corpus for a better analysis, two studio albums were selected: 2008's *I Am... Sasha Fierce*, representing Beyoncé's early years of her career for being her most pop-oriented album and also the one with the widest marketing strategy (Cashmore, 2010); and 2016's *Lemonade*, representing the singer's most recent stages of her discography. The album *Lemonade* is also known for its objective narrative of homage to Black culture and Black women (Washington, 2017), its exploring of Black-influenced music genres (MCGEE, 2019), the observation of higher frequency of AAVE in her lyrics (Eberhardt; Vdoviak-Markow, 2020), and the reception of wider audiences to the album, which demonstrated how drastic this shift was (Gammage, 2017).

As for the songs selected for the research, we analyzed the singles, i.e. songs chosen for promotion of both albums. Since *I Am... Sasha Fierce* has nine singles whereas *Lemonade* has only five, four songs from diverse projects from Beyoncé post-2010 were chosen, based on two main criteria of relevance for each: cultural impact and music genre. Similarly to the songs selected from *I Am... Sasha Fierce* and *Lemonade*, these four songs are all singles as well. Two of these singles were chosen for having rapped verses performed by Beyoncé (*Drunk in Love* and *Savage remix*) and the two others (*Brown-Skin Girl* and *Black Parade*), for their political lyrical content that pays homage to Black culture and African ancestry.

Drunk In Love, from 2013's *BEYONCÉ*, is one of Beyoncé's most successful songs of major cultural relevance and impact in her career and also a hip-hop song in which Beyoncé raps. *Brown-Skin Girl* and *Black Parade* are songs from 2019's *The Gift* and its 2020's extension *The Gift: Deluxe Edition*, a soundtrack album Beyoncé released for the live-action remake of *The Lion King*, which in turn generated the acclaimed visual project *Black Is King*. And finally, *Savage Remix*, a 2020 song from the female rapper Megan Thee Stallion featuring Beyoncé. Even though Beyoncé is only a featured artist in the song, she has multiple and long rap verses in it; therefore, it contains many relevant materials for the research, also considering the cultural impact of the song as it is one of the most successful songs of the year of 2020 (Billboard, 2020). However, it should be noted that only Beyoncé's verses are going to be examined, just the same as with any other selected songs in collaboration with other artists.

6.2 ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

For the data analysis, it was taken into consideration Nelson's (1990) method of translation of AAVE to SE or vice-versa to investigate code-switching in discourse and Fishman's (2000, p.91) summary table of language dominance configuration between

AAVE and SE. So, the songs' lyrics were analyzed to discover the five AAVE features mentioned earlier: double negatives, absence of copula, invariant be, associative plural, and absence of third person -s.

Before determining whether AAVE or SE forms of the features were used, we analyzed the lyrical content of the songs to identify semantic-syntactic possibilities, excluding unpropitious contexts. Taking double negatives as an example, in many songs of the post-2013 section, either there were no sentences including negative forms or, in some of them, the negative form did not have any possibility of duplication, therefore not serving the current analysis' purpose. The same occurred to the invariant be, since a few songs included: (a) sentences in which the verb to be was conjugated but did not consist with any of the characteristics of the invariant be (they neither represented a habitual action nor attributed a characteristic), (b) sentences with "be" in its infinitive form, thus being a SE form, though not one that could be converted to AAVE.

After that, the lyrics were examined in its SE excerpts to discover if there were any sentences in which there was the possibility of using AAVE but SE was chosen instead. For instance, in a sentence in which there was a single negative followed by a pronoun, such as "any," that opened the possibility of using the double negative, it was considered that the SE version of the double negative feature was used instead of the AAVE one. The same method is applied for the other phenomena: absence of copula (finding sentences in which there are auxiliary verbs, except for first person singular sentences); invariant be (for sentences in which the verb "to be" is conjugated); associative plural (for sentences in which the demonstrative pronouns "these" or "those," or the article "the" are used to refer to specific plurals); and absence of third person -s (for sentences where the conjugated verb in third person present contains the -s suffix).

This analysis resulted in two tables, in which we classified the potential occurrences of the selected linguistic features in each single. This way, if there was no syntactic context propitious to these phenomena, we used the symbol \emptyset . If there was a propitious context and AAVE was used, we classified it as AAVE. If both AAVE and SE were used, we also identified their co-occurrence. Finally, if AAVE was not used, we classified it as SE. So, we analyzed the type of occurrence and not the number of tokens, since the first type of information appeared to be sufficient to achieve the established goals of the present research.

By gathering these results, the goal is to analyze Beyoncé's historic code-switching as she consciously employed the AAVE version of the chosen features more often instead of the SE one. Following Fishman's (2000, p. 95) note on how "domain analysis may facilitate language use comparisons between settings (or between historical periods) of roughly similar domain structure", this paper seeks "to establish cross-cultural and diachronic language and culture files in order to investigate the relationship between changes in language behavior (including changes in language choice) and other processes of socio-cultural change."

In addition to that, the concern with the relative frequency of use seemed to be "particularly appropriate for the study of language maintenance or language shift" in multilingual contexts (Fishman, 2000, p.89). Therefore, the tables aim to highlight whether a lower, similar, or higher frequency of AAVE can be taken as evidence of relevant change in Beyoncé's language choice behavior across time and music domains.

7 DATA AND DISCUSSION

As previously mentioned, the data were organized in two tables chronologically, by life period: before and after 2010. We present the data for each set of songs followed by a discussion based on the analysis of frequency focused on: (a) linguistic features, classified as SE or AAVE; (b) songs, highlighting the ones in which a higher frequency of AAVE was noted and (c) language variety, with an overall analysis of the predominance of SE or AAVE in each life period and comparatively.

Table 1: Language choice behavior before 2010*I Am... Sasha Fierce (2008)*

Singles	Negative	Presence / Absence of copula	Variant / Invariant be	Plural	Third person
<i>If I Were a Boy</i>	Ø	SE	Ø	SE	SE
<i>Single Ladies</i>	SE	AAVE and SE	Ø	Ø	AAVE and SE
<i>Diva</i>	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE	AAVE
<i>Halo</i>	AAVE and SE	SE	SE	SE	AAVE
<i>Ego</i>	AAVE	AAVE and SE	SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE
<i>Sweet Dreams</i>	AAVE	SE	SE	SE	SE
<i>Broken-Hearted Girl</i>	AAVE and SE	SE	SE	SE	Ø
<i>Video Phone (featuring Lady Gaga)</i>	SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE	Ø
<i>Why Don't You Love Me?</i>	AAVE	SE	SE	AAVE and SE	Ø

Table 2: Language choice behavior after 2010***Lemonade* (2016) and diverse post-2013 singles**

Singles	Negative	Presence / Absence of copula	Variant / Invariant be	Plural	Third person
<i>Drunk In Love (featuring Jay-Z) (2013)</i>	∅	AAVE and SE	AAVE	SE	AAVE
<i>Formation (2016)</i>	∅	AAVE and SE	∅	AAVE	AAVE
<i>Sorry (2016)</i>	AAVE	AAVE	SE	AAVE	AAVE
<i>Hold Up (2016)</i>	∅	AAVE and SE	∅	AAVE	AAVE
<i>Freedom (2016)</i>	∅	∅	SE	SE	∅
<i>All Night (2016)</i>	AAVE	AAVE and SE	SE	∅	SE
<i>Brown-Skin Girl (2019)</i>	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE
<i>Black Parade (2020)</i>	∅	AAVE and SE	SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE and SE
<i>Savage Remix (Megan Thee Stallion featuring Beyoncé) (2020)</i>	∅	AAVE and SE	SE	AAVE and SE	AAVE

7.1 AAVE AND SE LINGUISTIC FEATURES

Regarding Table 1, some of these figures are worth a few notes: the double negative feature is the only one which appears more often in the AAVE form instead of SE form, and it is the only AAVE feature to be found in the songs *Sweet Dreams* and *Broken-Hearted Girl*. Besides, the presence of copula and variant *be* are the only SE features encountered in every song in their SE form, while invariant *be* is the one with the least occurrences of AAVE form, suggesting less acceptability. And then there is the realization of the third person singular, which is the only linguistic phenomenon that is not found in multiple songs in either AAVE or SE form, which is due to the songs' lyrical content, since Beyoncé is either addressing herself or a second-person interlocutor, lacking content in third-person for analysis.

In Table 2, although we can notice a remarkable shift in Beyoncé's use of language at this point of her career, the invariant *be* maintained similar results in terms of predominance. In both phases of Beyoncé's career, the singer did not employ this AAVE feature as frequently as the other linguistic features under analysis. While this small frequency can be explained by the stereotypes assigned to this feature, there is still a difference between the way Beyoncé used it in *Sasha Fierce* and her recent songs: in *Drunk In Love*, the invariant *be* is placed right at the song's chorus, that is, it is placed at a section of the song where it is highlighted and repeated multiple times across the song. The negative form was the only feature whose AAVE occurrences surpassed the number of SE forms.

It is also interesting to highlight that co-occurrences have been considered in the number of occurrences of each linguistic variety in table 3. And comparing the three columns of each career phase, a transition in the language pattern is noticeable. Before 2010, most AAVE occurrences are co-occurrences; after 2010, most SE occurrences are co-occurrences. So, table 3 allows a clearer understanding of the aforementioned language choice transition in terms of a new preference for AAVE forms or co-occurrences (into the right columns of the table), instead of SE forms, in most of the linguistic features.

Table 3: Linguistic Feature *type* occurrences according to career phase

Career Phase	Before 2010			After 2010		
	SE	AAVE	Co-occurrence	SE	AAVE	Co-occurrence
Negative	5	6	3	1	3	1
Presence/Absence of copula	9	4	4	7	8	7
Variant/Invariant <i>be</i>	7	2	2	6	2	1
Plural	7	4	3	5	6	3
Third person -s	4	4	2	3	7	2
TOTAL:	32	20	14	22	26	14

7.2 SONGS

Before 2010, the occurrence of AAVE forms in every feature in *Diva* deserves attention, a standout to all the other songs. Kooijman (2019) studied the history of the term "diva" and how it was used to refer to female celebrities, especially those who are Black, as arrogant and rude, a term that was also constantly used to describe Beyoncé in the media. As the author states, Beyoncé appropriates the meaning of the term to call herself a diva in a hip-hop song that equals the female "diva" to the male "hustler", in a song full of attitude and bragging. Due to its hip-hop sonority, a standout in a rather pop album, it could be interpreted that Beyoncé saw the need for the lyrics of the song to stand out as well, returning to the concept of covert prestige explained by Peterson (2020, p. 71), hence the increase in AAVE features in comparison to the other singles from the same album.

After 2010, *Freedom* stands out among the selected songs as it is the only one with no occurrence of AAVE form of the researched features, a fact that illuminates two important points of discussion: *Freedom* is composed as an anthem for Black liberation, a gospel song in which Beyoncé passionately claims for justice and victory, and that justifies the smaller rate of AAVE features in the discourse

as, according to Edwards and Ash (2004 *apud* Eberhardt and Vdoviak-Markow, 2020, p. 70), the rates of nonstandard markers is significantly smaller in songs with “reflective and deferential” lyrics as opposed to songs with “angry and defiant” lyrics. Thus, songs such as *Freedom* require fewer AAVE features. Even though the selected linguistic features for this current paper are not found in the song’s lyrics, there are still other phonetic AAVE features in the song, as the combination of “trying to” becoming “tryna” and the deletion of -g and -d for tense-aspect auxiliaries, turning “I’m going to” into “I’mma” (Rickford, 1999, p. 5), with both of these occurrences being repeated often throughout the song. Thus, while Beyoncé did use fewer AAVE markers in this song as its lyrics and genre require a more formal approach, she still managed to emphasize the only two she applied to the song’s lyrics.

7.3 LANGUAGE VARIETY ACROSS TIME

Before 2010, all in all, the data was composed of 38 linguistic features’ realizations (excluding the ones where there were no AAVE nor SE results), and SE forms were used in 32 of them, representing 84% of the occurring types, while AAVE forms happened in 20 boxes, representing 52% of them. Therefore, although there was no statistical analysis, the results show that, at this point of Beyoncé’s career, there was a predominance of SE in the singer’s speech, mirroring her political statements and exploring of music genres at that time.

After 2010, excluding the cases in which there was no occurrence of either AAVE or SE forms of the selected features, there were 34 occurrences of the linguistic features. AAVE forms represented 76% of these, while SE forms represented 47%, a remarkable difference compared to *Sasha Fierce*’s respective 52% and 84% results, therefore showing that not only Beyoncé’s use of AAVE increased in her recent works but also her use of SE decreased, as table 3 had already highlighted. This inversion can also be noted when the percentage numbers are calculated considering SE and AAVE language choice prevalence excluding co-occurrences, available in table 4, below: another clear sign that language choice followed the shift observed in her discourse, aesthetics, and sonority.

Table 4: Language choice according to career phase

Language Variety	SE		AAVE	
	Before 2010	After 2010	Before 2010	After 2010
Negative	5	1	6	3
Presence/Absence of copula	9	7	4	8
Variant/Invariant be	7	6	2	2
Plural	7	5	4	6
Third person -s	4	3	4	7
Percentage:	59%	41%	44%	56%

8 CONCLUSION

Considering how Black women are neglected by Linguistic studies, this paper intended to focus on the discourse of these women in order to contribute to the historical records on the research of Black women’s speech and identity in the Linguistics field. Given Beyoncé’s cultural influence as a Black woman, her language choices might either reflect or influence socio-cultural changes in the US Black bilingual community. So, we investigated the relation between language and identity for African American women, analyzing the occurrence of code-switching in her lyrics across time (before and after 2010) and across music domains (pop and hip-hop/rap).

The results of the research found an increase in the use of AAVE forms of the five selected syntactic features on the singer’s releases after 2010, when she paid homage to her African American heritage. The singer still practices code-switching in her songwriting, however, it is possible to notice a transition in her language choices, indicating an inversion of the frequency in which she uses AAVE and SE syntactic features, with the former now taking the leading position, except for the invariant be.

Therefore, we can say Beyoncé's language choice shift reflects her identity change from a more "discolored" cultural presence into an explicit Black feminine one after gaining social power to express her real self. Since the singer adjusted her discourse, music genre, and language choices as a political statement of her Blackness in her lyrics, this shift also interestingly illustrates how language and identity are interconnected by ideology and performance within the communities of practice we engage with. Thus, it highlights the impact of power relations, that result from established cultural beliefs, in the relation between language and society that cannot be disregarded in the sociolinguistic studies of multilingual settings.

Nonetheless, we highlight the importance of different factors in bilinguals' language choice: domains, topic, situational setting, and historic phase. Considering that rap is a language domain in which AAVE has covert prestige and that, even after 2010, there were no AAVE forms in *Freedom*, a more formal gospel song dedicated to a reflective topic, some questions emerge for future investigations when it comes to broadcasting influences such as Beyoncé. For example, is Beyoncé's historic language choice transition restricted to her shift into a new language domain, i.e. rapping, where AAVE is considered a language of covert prestige? Can the situations in which AAVE has covert prestige be expanded due to power influences such as Beyoncé's? If so, for each syntactic feature would this be true, since in the analyzed data the invariant *be* hasn't been affected by her new language choices? For now, Beyoncé's post-pandemic 2022 releases focusing on different topics and music genres might help us analyze whether the shift in language choices and domains to express her individual identity was mainly influenced by a sociopolitical historical factor, contributing to sociology of language regarding identity in multilingual settings.

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