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'You Know My Steez': The Effects of Race, Gender, and Hip Hop Cultural Knowledge on the Speech Styles of Black Youth

**‘You know my steez’:
The effects of race, gender, and Hip Hop
cultural knowledge on the speech styles of Black youth**

H. Samy Alim

1 Introduction

This paper, as part of a longer, more comprehensive study (Alim 2003a), presents data on style-shifting in a Black American speech community. In this paper, I will focus on the stylistic variation of the copula based on race, gender, and Hip Hop cultural knowledge. The data is drawn from semi-structured conversations (SSCs) between four “Sunnysidaz” and eight “Stanfordians.”

2 The Controversial Copula

The African American Language (AAL) copula is one of the most extensively studied sociolinguistic variables (Labov et al. 1968, Labov 1969, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972, Rickford 1997, 1999, Walker 1999). It is one of the features that gives AAL its distinctiveness, setting it apart from other varieties of American English (with some exceptions in White Southern speech, where it has been hypothesized that Whites have been influenced by Blacks; see Feagan 1979, Labov 1969, Wolfram 1974). It has been used to support the notion that AAL is diverging from other varieties of American English (Bailey and Maynor 1989; Butters 1989, Fasold 1987, Rickford 1992).

The AAL copula also plays a crucial role in heated debates about the historical reconstruction of AAL, as it is perhaps the best indicator of AAL’s Creole-like origins. The feature has been analyzed extensively to draw support for the Creole origins of AAL (Bailey 1965, Baugh 1979, 1980, Alleyne 1980, Holm 1984, Rickford 1998, Singler 1991, Stewart 1968, Winford 1992, 1998). Labov (1969), and since then, has maintained that AAL-speakers exhibit copula absence only where White English speakers can contract the copula, concluding phonological constraints are the primary constraints in deletion. Recent research (Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991, Walker 1999) also argues in favor of the copula’s Anglican origin. While this debate is beyond the purview of this paper, I have analyzed data from Black peer, in-group talk as a potential AAL baseline from which copula patterns in different contexts derive.

The copula is an important variable for the study of style in AAL. Recent research (Alim 2002) on the AAL copula in Hip Hop Nation Language (see Alim 2004) suggests that speakers can consciously vary their usage of copula absence. Wolfram and Thomas (2002) have found that the younger Blacks in Hyde County, North Carolina who identify strongly with Black culture seem to be aligning their copula pattern away from the localized regional norm and towards a national norm. This finding perhaps adds more evidence to Alim's (2002, 2003b) suggestion that the artists and participants in the Hip Hop Nation, in seeking to present a "street-conscious" identity, are the main preservers and maintainers of AAL. Further support for the Hip Hop Nation's potential impact on AAL is found in Rowe (2003), who suggests that Hip Hop artists employ a "performance register" and increase speakers' awareness of AAL features.

The findings on the stylistic behavior of the copula have been inconclusive to date. Some studies have shown that Black Americans vary their copula usage stylistically, although the data in these studies are not exactly comparable with the present analysis. Wolfram (1969), for example, found that Detroit Blacks exhibit copula absence much less when reading (7.9%) than when speaking in an interview (41.8%). This data is not comparable with the present study for since there is no reading task in this study. It is also true that reading constitutes a different modality than speaking, since the reader is interacting with the printed page, rather than an interlocutor. Alim (2002) also showed significant style-shifting in the copula. While these data show that Black American Hip Hop artists increase their rates of copula absence in their lyrics verses their normal conversation, the lyrical data is only indirectly interactive, and *not* equivalent to conversation, which requires the direct participation of an interlocutor.

Two other studies, with more comparable data sets, both suggest that the copula is not stylistically sensitive. Labov et al. (1968) presented data that showed that Black male adolescents do not vary their copula usage significantly in one-on-one versus group contexts. Baugh (1979, 1983) concluded that situational factors (familiarity and Black street culture membership) did not significantly affect the copula, and found the internal linguistic constraints to be more significant.

Rickford & McNair-Knox (1994) did find the copula to be stylistically sensitive. Although this study had a limited sample, the findings were strongly in support of the hypothesis that the copula varied stylistically based, in part, on the identity characteristics of the interviewer. With the familiar, Black interviewer, Foxy Boston had *copula absence* 70% (197/283) of the time, but only 40% (70/176) of the time with the White, unfamiliar interviewer (significant at the .001 level). The current study builds upon pre-

vious studies and adds tremendous support to Rickford & McNair-Knox’s findings. It is also the first study to isolate the effects of race, gender and Hip Hop cultural knowledge on speech style.

In the next section, we break down the data for copula absence on multiple levels. First, we present a detailed linguistic and social anatomy of style-shifting in the entire corpus of 32 SSCs. Second, we look at how the Sunnysidaz, as a group, style-shifted across the eight Stanfordian interlocutors. Third, we see how Sunnysidaz, as individuals—Amira, Bilal, Careem and Kijana—shifted their styles up according to the eight Stanfordian interlocutors. Examining individual variability in style at this detailed level of analysis increases our understanding of how different speech styles emerge for any given speaker.

We will first look at an unresolved methodological issue that deals directly with the supposed need to separate *is* and *are* in our analyses of the AAL copula.

3 Copula Analysis for 32 SSCs

Table 1 shows the output of the analysis of the speakers’ copula absence data using the variable rule program, GOLDVARB 2001. I have separated the results for *is* and *are*, as well as presented a *combined* run, to determine if *is* and *are* are similarly constrained. Rickford et al. (1991), citing previous work by Wolfram (1974), concluded that *is* and *are* are similarly constrained, with some minor differences. This study, in part, seeks to test their justification for the conflation of *is* and *are*. The runs show probability coefficients for internal linguistic constraints as well as external identity constraints.

<i>Factor group</i>	<i>Constraints</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>are</i>	<i>combined</i>
Total frequency		18% (N=846)	33% (N=692)	26% (N=1538)
Input probability		.190	.340	.254
Following grammatical environment	<i>gon</i>	.935	.960	.944
	Verb+ <i>ing</i>	.718	.598	.655
	Locative	.542	.548	.564
	Adjective	.424	.305	.389
	Noun Phrase	.403	.260	.354

	<i>gonna</i>	[0%]	.080	.107
	Miscellaneous	.283	.672	.423
Subject type	Personal pronoun	(.589)	(.568)	(.578)
	Other pronoun	(.547)	---	(.460)
	Noun phrase	(.355)	(.178)	(.315)
Person-number	2 nd person and plural			.637
	3 rd person singular			.387
Preceding phonological environment	Consonant__	.213	.158	.213
	Vowel	.644	.573	.606
Following phonological environment	__Consonant	(.480)	(.497)	(.486)
	Vowel	(.589)	(.520)	(.578)
Interlocutor race	Black	.633	.783	.716
	White	.315	.183	.259
Interlocutor gender	Male	.638	.647	.638
	Female	.312	.329	.325
Interlocutor familiarity with HHC	HH	.601	.637	.619
	NoHH	.371	.328	.350
Significance of best run		0.000	0.000	0.000

() = factor group not chosen as significant by best run

Table 1: Probability coefficients for best runs for speakers' copula absence in 32 SSCs

Examining the internal linguistic constraints first, Table 1 shows us that the copula forms of *is* and *are* are constrained by the same factor groups in exactly the same ordering. These data provide clear cut evidence for the positing of a single copula absence rule. Practically, this means that we have the

advantage of analyzing more tokens of the copula in each run, and that our data can be represented in a single *copula absence* run, with probability coefficients presented for the person-number factor group.

Beginning with following grammatical category, we see that the ordering of the factors within the group follow the main pattern presented in the AAL copula literature, in decreasing order: *gon* » Verb+ing » Locative » Adjective » Noun Phrase. I also coded *gon* and *gonna* separately, as they showed extremely divergent probability coefficients for the rule. Research on the copula has traditionally combined *gon* and *gonna*, but it is clear from these results that *gon* strongly favors absence while *gonna* strongly disfavors it. The ordering of the factors in the subject type factor group was also similar to previous studies with personal pronouns favoring absence. Phonologically speaking, preceding vowels strongly favored absence, while preceding consonants strongly disfavored the rule. The following phonological environment was not chosen as significant in the best run.

Turning to the external identity constraints, the table shows us that all three identity factor groups exhibit significant effects on speech style. Black speakers tend to use more absence when speaking with Black versus White interlocutors; male versus female interlocutors; and interlocutors who were more familiar with Hip Hop Culture (HHC). See Figure 1 below for a graphical representation of the external identity constraints.

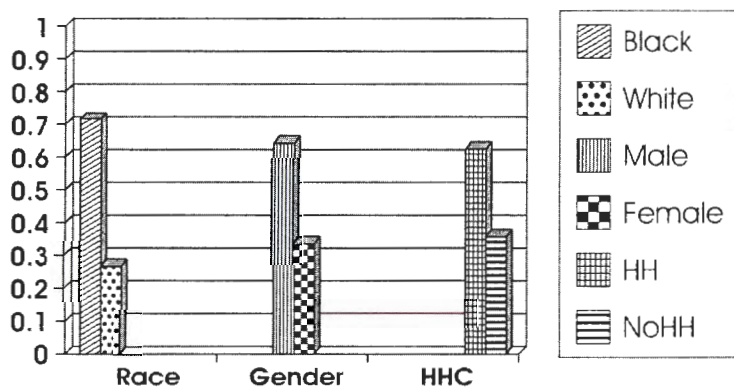


Figure 1: Graphical representation of the effects of interlocutor race, gender, and Hip Hop cultural knowledge


We are now in a position to determine the relative impact of linguistic and identity constraints on absence. By examining GOLDVARB's ranking

of groups selected during the best run, we see that internal linguistic constraints interact with external identity constraints to produce the stylistic shifts. Three linguistic constraints and three identity constraints were selected in decreasing order: Following grammatical category » Race » Preceding phonological environment » Gender » Hip Hop cultural knowledge » Person-number. These data show the value of including both linguistic and identity constraints in our analyses, as we see that, at least for this feature, the variation is affected by both types of constraints. Linguistically, while following grammatical category and preceding phonological environment interact, absence is affected most greatly by the following grammatical category. In terms of identity, while race, gender and Hip Hop cultural knowledge were all selected as significant, race has the greatest impact on the rule.

4 Copula Analysis for 32 SSCs Across 8 Interlocutors

In this section, we present the data for copula absence as it varies by interlocutor. In other words, these data show how, as a group, the Sunnysidaz spoke to the eight Stanfordian interlocutors. Given the primary significance of race, the secondary significance of gender, and the tertiary significance of Hip Hop cultural knowledge, we can hypothesize that the ordering of the interlocutors would proceed in this manner, with decreasing rates of absence: (1) BMH, (2) BMN, (3) BFH, (4) BFN, (5) WMH, (6) WMN, (7) WFH, (8) WFN. In the run, the identity characteristics of the interlocutors are subsumed under the numbers 1-8. When we look more closely at the interlocutors as individuals, we can begin to see a finer level of analysis emerging. Table 2 displays the observed probability coefficients for the best run by interlocutor adjacent to the hypothesized ordering.

Remarkably, the observed ordering of interlocutors matches up almost precisely with our hypothesized ordering. Even more remarkably, the one interlocutor who veers from the hypothesized ranking is the White male Hip Hopper, who superceded his race category due to his familiarity with HHC. This finer level of analysis allowed us to see what the previous level of analysis had obscured—the interaction of the three identity characteristics. That is, despite the ordered significance of race, gender and HHC knowledge, the White male Hip Hopper was able to invite more copula absence from Blacks than the Black female Non-Hip Hopper.



Hypothesized ordering	Observed Ordering	Probability coefficients for observed ordering
BMH	BMH	.833
BMN	BMN	.684
BFH	BFH	.663
BFN	WMH	.444
WMH	BFN	.426
WMN	WMN	.311
WFH	WFH	.194
WFN	WFN	.171
Significance in best run: 0.000		

Table 2: Observed probability coefficients for the best run by interlocutor adjacent to the hypothesized ordering of interlocutors

5 Copula Analysis for 32 for Individual Speakers across 8 Interlocutors

Thus far, we have examined the internal linguistic constraints and external identity characteristics for all speakers in all 32 SSCs, and determined that both types of constraints were significant in style-shifting. Then we provided a more fine-grained analysis to see how the Black speakers, as a group, re-


sponded to each individual interlocutor. In this section, we look even more closely at each individual Black speaker to reveal their personal rankings of the interlocutors with regards to this feature. In other words, the overall pattern suggests that the WMH was ranked fourth, but we might ask: Did the WMH invite informality from each individual to the same degree? More broadly, is there any individual variation in the way that individual Sunnysidaz rank the interlocutors? Table 3 displays the observed ordering of the interlocutors for each individual Sunnysida—Amira, Bilal, Careem and Kijana—and the probability coefficients. Based on the data presented in the previous section, the hypothesized ordering of interlocutors now becomes: (1) BMH, (2) BMN, (3) BFH, (4) WMH, (5) BFN, (6) WMN, (7) WFH, (8) WFN.

Table 3 reveals several pieces of information that may have been obscured had we not performed this even finer level of analysis. For one, we can see that the WMH does not, in fact, occupy the 4th position for any of the speakers and that, generally, there is a considerable amount of individual variation that can be obscured by looking at the larger, undifferentiated analysis. We also see that the WMN was able to supercede our racial expectations by ranking 4th among interlocutors in Careem's 8 SSCs.

This table leads to more questions: Is the ordering of race, gender and HHC knowledge the same for the Black male and female Sunnysidaz? If we examine the copula absence data for each individual, we can begin to see what appears to be a once-obscured gendered pattern. Table 4 shows the probability coefficients for identity characteristics for the individual speakers.

Table 4 provides a much more nuanced picture that may help us further probe the reason why the identity characteristics of race, gender and HHC knowledge ordered the way that they did. Further, by seeing what characteristics were significant to whom, we can begin to try to understand *why* this particular ordering, for this particular individual. The first thing that immediately strikes us when the data is presented in this fashion is that race (Black) is the one identity characteristic selected by all speakers, and it is the primary indicator of style-shifting as it was selected *first* in the GOLDVARB analysis. The second glaring item that strikes us is that gender was only selected by the males. Neither female selected gender in the best run. This indicates that gender of the interlocutor matters differently for Black males than it does for females. While both males exhibit a tremendous preference to use *copula absence* with male versus female interlocutors, females are not as selective. So, while all speakers tend to exhibit highly racialized style-shift, it is only the males that produce significant gendered style-shifts. Thus, the

performance of the males strongly influenced the overall pattern where gender was selected as a secondary identity characteristic.



Hypothesized ordering	Bilal	Kijana	Amira	Careem
BMH	BMH .861	BMH .823	BMN .821	BMH .963
BMN	BMN .746	WMH .693	BFH .778	BFH .591
BFH	WMH .612	BFH .690	BMH .760	WMH .272
WMH	BFH .542	BMN .528	BFN .198	WMN .225
BFN	BFN .317	BFN .424	WFN .113	BMN. 214
WMN	WMN .307	WFN .371	WMH .101	WFH .188
WFH	WFH .131	WFH .233	WMN .000	BFN .187
WFN	WFN .000	WMN .154	WFH .000	WFN .000
significance in best run	0.000	0.041	0.000	0.000

Table 3: Observed probability coefficients for the best run for Amira, Bilal, Careem and Kijana by interlocutor, adjacent to the hypothesized ordering of interlocutors

	Race	Gender	HHC familiarity	Order selected	Significance of best run
<i>Amira</i>	B = .863 W = .132	<i>Not selected</i>	<i>Not selected</i>	Race	0.000
<i>Kijana</i>	B = .615 W = .368	<i>Not selected</i>	HH = .633 NHH = .381	Race HH	0.012
<i>Bilal</i>	B = .688 W = .269	M = .691 F = .244	HH = .626 NHH = .378	Race Gender HH	0.001
<i>Careem</i>	B = .814 W = .154	M = .723 F = .256	HH = .710 NHH = .174	Race Gender HH	0.000

Table 4: Observed probability coefficients for identity characteristics that were selected in the best run for Amira, Bilal, Careem and Kijana

HHC knowledge was selected by all Sunnysidaz except Amira. This leads us to search for an explanation as to why Amira did not produce Hip Hop Cultured style-shifts. Interestingly enough, while Amira is a big fan of Busta Rhymes, Lil Kim and other Hip Hop artists, when she is questioned by one of the interlocutors about a Hip Hop detail, she claims: “Well, that’s hard for me, cuz like I’m really a child of R&B, more than Hip Hop.” A close reading of the transcripts reveals that Amira is not as well-versed in HHC as she seems to be, and relative to the other speakers, she is the least knowledgeable. While this is obviously not an airtight explanation, it provides an interesting qualitative detail that we would have to explore more fully.

Exploring Amira further, we see that she exhibits the greatest range of copula absence for race. It turns out that Amira is known for having the *most overt* race ideology out of any student at Haven High. She is known for trying to force other students to stop using the “n-word” around her, as she feels that White folks “is steady laughin at Black folks callin themselves outta

they name.” I can recall one intense class discussion on the use of the words “nigga” and “nigger,” where Amira fervently argued that Blacks should not refer to themselves by that label. In extreme frustration at the end of the discussion, she let out an exasperated cry, “I hate White people!” Amira is, like many Blacks, frustrated with the everyday living conditions of the majority of her people (see Alim 2003a). While Amira provides an interesting case study of how identity, ideology and consciousness may impact speech style, more work is needed to pursue these complex issues.

6 De-conflating Race and Familiarity

As I mentioned above, the copula plays a central role in the debate over the creole ancestry of AAL. While this is clearly not a historical study of the copula, I believe that the data for the present study can contribute to this discussion. In the interest of developing an AAL baseline for the four speakers in the study, I set out to record their speech when they were among the primary in-group, peer network within the Black Sunnyside speech community. This data not only provides an AAL baseline for these speakers, but it is interesting for two additional reasons: (1) The data allow us to compare the speech of speakers when they are talking with unfamiliar interlocutors (in the 32 SSCs) to their speech when they are talking with familiar interlocutors, thus allowing us to test some of Baugh’s findings based on his four speech event grids described above, and (2) The data allow us to compare the most significant linguistic constraint on the copula (the following grammatical category) in the differing situational contexts.

It should be pointed out that the data are not comparable in terms of number of copula tokens, with the number of tokens in the familiar, in-group, peer conversation being far less than the number of tokens in the 32 SSCs. Despite this, there are enough tokens in the group data to suggest some interesting preliminary findings. Table 5 shows the frequency of copula absence and the ordering of the most significant linguistic constraint on the copula (following grammatical category) in four contexts: (1) Unfamiliar Blacks and Whites, (2) Unfamiliar Blacks, and (3) Unfamiliar Whites, (4) Familiar Black peer group (AAL baseline).

Given the significant impact that race has on speech style for Black speakers, as we’ve demonstrated above, it follows that Black speakers would exhibit higher rates of copula absence when talking with Unfamiliar Blacks versus Unfamiliar Whites. We can also see that Black speakers exhibit greater rates of copula absence when talking with Black familiars (Black peer group) than Black unfamiliars. These results run counter to Baugh’s data (1979, 1983), where he found that level of familiarity and membership

in the Black street culture did *not* have a significant impact on copula absence rates for Black speakers. I would speculate that the difference lies in the fact that Baugh was studying the style-shifting of Black adults, whereas these data are for adolescents.

	Most significant constraint on copula	Unfamiliar Blacks and Whites	Unfamiliar Blacks	Unfamiliar Whites	Familiar Black peer group (AAL baseline)
Total frequency		26% (N=1538)	37% (N=819)	11% (N=718)	80% (N=235)
Input probability		.254	.375	.121	.762
Following grammatical environment	<i>gon</i>	.944	.916	.957	[100%]
	Verb+ing	.655	.641	.590	.760
	Locative	.564	.545	.451	.319
	Adjective	.389	.399	.387	.463
	Noun Phrase	.354	.306	.467	.380
	<i>gonna</i>	.107	.185	[0%]	[100%]
	Miscellaneous	.423	.352	.417	.117
Significance of best run		.0000	.0043	0.001	.0010

Table 5: Frequencies and probability coefficients for copula absence across four speech situations: Unfamiliar Blacks and Whites, Unfamiliar Blacks, Unfamiliar Whites, and Familiar Black peer group (which serves as an AAL baseline)

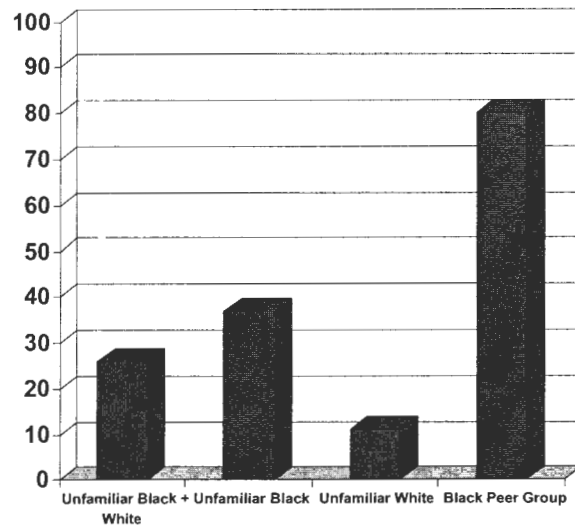


Figure 2: Frequencies of copula absence in all four contexts

These results also remind us of the extreme importance of isolating race and familiarity in sociolinguistic studies of style. For example, in Rickford & McNair-Knox's (1994) study of Foxy Boston, as we pointed out previously, there is no telling how much Foxy was responding to the Black interviewers' race versus the level of familiarity, since she was both Black and familiar. Although we recognize that the level of familiarity in a Black peer group is probably higher than that in the Black interviewers' relationship with Foxy Boston, it's the *relative* level of familiarity that's important. The point is: They could have arrived at some less significant results had both the Black and White interviewers been unfamiliar to the speaker. Future research on sociolinguistic style might find it useful to develop tighter experimental controls.

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