Which Box to Check: Language, Race, and Sexuality in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*

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Presentation Outline

- Titus and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*
- Research
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    - Gay-Sounding Speech
    - African American Language
    - Language and Identity
    - Language and Media
  - Design, Data Collection, and Hypotheses
  - Results
- Discussion

Titus & *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*

- *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* is a Netflix show that first aired in 2015
  - The show does not specifically target queer and/or Black viewers
- Focuses on Kimmy, who meets Titus Andromedon after moving to NYC
- Andromedon is a side character and fan favorite
  - Portrayed by Tituss Burgess
- Shared characteristics between Burgess & Andromedon:
  - Openly gay
  - From southern states
  - Performers

Titus Andromedon

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Research Questions

1. How is language used to express intersecting identities?
2. How can media help us better understand the interaction between language & identity?

Specifically: How does a Black gay character use language to perform identity?

Gay-Sounding Speech

- Features associated (primarily) with white, gay, cisgender men
- "Gay-sounding" to call attention to variation within and between gay communities and individuals (Podesva, et al., 2002)
- Features:
  - /s/ duration and pitch
  - Released /t/
  - Pitch range
  - Voice Quality
    - Falsetto
    - Creak
- Percepts of gayness often rely on more than one feature (Levon, 2007)

African American Language

- Phonological Features:
  - Consonant Cluster Reduction (CCR) (Rickford & Rickford, 2002)
  - Monophthongization
  - L+H* Pitch Accent (Thomas, 2015; Holliday, 2016; McClarty, 2018)
- Grammatical Features:
  - Habitual *be*
  - Null copula
  - Negative Concord
  - Omission of third person singular and possessive *s*

Language & Identity

- Identities are often studied in isolation, but they are not experienced in isolation
- Identity is performed through actions, clothing, and speech
- Indexical Fields (Eckert, 2008)
    - Meaning is influenced by the surrounding society
    - One variable can be used to index a number of different identities
- *Style* is a linguistic tool that allows a speaker to position themselves within a particular context (Podesva, et al., 2002)
    - Features are used at different rates depending on the situation (Podesva, 2007)

Language & Media

- Language is used to enact identity in media
  - Hopefully moving away from the idea that you can "see" a person's identity (Kohnen, 2016)
- Media acts as a lens through which sociological patterns can be examined
- Stereotypical features may be used to make a character's identity more accessible to an audience (Queen, 2015)

Research Design

- Compared Tituss Burgess (actor) to Titus Andromedon (character) to see if he was adding/avoiding features.

- Looked at grammatical and phonological features associated with AAL and GSS

- Goal: Use an intersectional approach to examine one way Black gay identity is performed through language

Data collection

- Four Episodes
  - Episode 1 – *Kimmy Goes Outside*
  - Episode 5 – *Kimmy Kisses a Boy*
  - Episode 8 – *Kimmy is Bad at Math*
  - Episode 10 – *Kimmy's in a Love Triangle*
- Two Interviews
  - *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*
  - *LA Times* with Sarah Rodman
- Omitted overlapping speech, background music, audience reactions

Total Episode Data: 33 minutes 20 seconds

Total Interview Data: 27 minutes 15 seconds

Hypotheses

I. All features are expected to occur in both the *UKS* episodes and in interviews, though at differing rates.

    •   Burgess is expected to use features from his own speech in his performance of Andromedon.

II. Rates of features associated with AAL and GSS are expected to vary based on two broad episode topics: race and sexuality.

    •   Andromedon's speech style is expected to reflect the identity most relevant to his storyline within an episode.

III. Rates of features associated with AAL are expected to vary based on interview type.

    •   Burgess is expected to accommodate his speech to his interviewer's identity, with one interviewer being a Black woman and another being a white man.

General Results

- Andromedon has a higher speaking pitch than Burgess **AND** a wider pitch range
- There's an avoidance of grammatical AAL features by both Burgess & Andromedon
- /s/ pitch was higher in Episodes than in Interviews, though duration was not
- Features of GSS were used more overall
- Closer to a "standard" variety
  - Perhaps avoiding AAL because of Andromedon's feminine gay identity

Summary of Results by Hypothesis

I. **All features are expected to occur in both the *UKS* episodes and in interviews, though at differing rates.**

    ✓ Yes, with the exception of grammatical AAL features, which don't actually occur in the analyzed episodes

II. **Rates of features associated with AAL and GSS are expected to vary based on two broad episode topics: race and sexuality.**

    ✗ No, the features do vary between episodes, but do not appear to vary based on episode topic

III. **Rates of features associated with AAL are expected to vary based on interview type.**

    ✓ Yes, but the differences in Burgess' speech in the two interviews may be due to other factors, such as live audience presence, atmosphere, and interviewer

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Discussion

Discussion

- There is not a significant difference between Burgess' use of AAL features compared to Andromedon's. However, there are some significant differences in GSS features between the two.

- Presence of GSS features while AAL features are not present may be motivated by Andromedon's feminine gay male identity being the most relevant in the show.
    - AAL use is often tied to (hyper)masculine performance (Bucholtz, 1999; Bucholtz & Lopez, 2011)

- This data shows that Black gay speech may be something more complex than GSS + AAL.

Who isn't being heard?

- Black queer people are silenced within linguistics research
- Polarized ideology surrounding GSS and AAL
  - GSS = white, gay, hyperstandard
  - AAL = Black, straight, non-standard
- Relationships to language varieties are influenced by a person's position in the world

Conclusion:
Rethinking Black Queerness in Language

- Previous methodology assumes that, for a Black gay speaker, GSS + AAL exist separately and then combine to create something in the middle
  - Implying that identity and its performance are additive
  - Fails to consider the ways race, gender, and sexuality interact in navigating the world (linguistically and otherwise)
- Applying intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to sociolinguistic research would make it possible to examine identity performance outside of a "single-axis framework" (Crenshaw, 1989)
- Applying an intersectional framework to queer linguistics research will make it possible to further understand the complex ways queer identity is navigated

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Thank You!

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