



The use of “Blaccent” between Appropriation and Style Shifting

Professor Omer Elsheikh Hago Elmahdi

Open university of Sudan

Currently, affiliated to the Department of Languages and Translation, Faculty of Science and Arts, Taibah University, Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia

Email: Ohago65@gmail.com

Dr. Abdulrahman Mokbel Mahyoub Hezam

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Taiz University, Yemen;

Currently working as an associate professor at the Department of Languages and Translation, Faculty of Science and Arts, Taibah University, Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT

This study is a part of the ongoing discussion regarding cultural appropriation, which is the practice of adopting customs from another culture without giving those customs the respect or credit they deserve. The goals and objectives of this qualitative study are exploratory in nature. Data is gathered using qualitative approaches from a variety of sources. Borrowing or using things from a culture other than your own without showing that you understand or respect that culture is known as "cultural appropriation." It is the wrongful appropriation of customs, ideologies, behaviors, etc. from one people or culture by individuals from another. Cultural appropriation has grown as a result of the popularity of social media in several ways. It facilitated access to various cultures and promoted the spread of marginalized civilizations. On the other side, it has made it simple for anybody to denounce cultural exploitation. Globalization and all of its components, including digital technology, have made it easier to access other cultures and have eroded the barriers that separate them. This makes it more important than ever to consider the moral concerns raised by cultural appropriation and make sure that cultures are shared in an appropriate manner. Awkwafina's situation serves as a wonderful illustration of the usage of black culture, cultural appropriation, and stylistic shifts. According to the researchers, Awkwafina has "put Blackness on" when she speaks and acts in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and portrays roles that could be seen as minstrelsy. She does not have the right to disregard limitations placed on the use of particular cultural objects by another marginalized culture just because she is a member of a minority group. She can be blamed for copying Black culture and encouraging racism by using Black words without acknowledging the problems of Black Americans.

Keywords: Black English; social identity; culture and society; sociolinguistics; black American culture; Cultural appropriation.



1- Introduction

Cultural appropriation is the adoption of elements of a particular culture by members of another culture and this may be between different countries or within one country. It is a debated topic in many fields including literature and the arts, journalism, legal studies, politics, and sociology. Cultural appropriation takes place when members of a majority group adopt cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way. (Encyclopaedia Britannica) The significance of cultural appropriation has been stressed by many because “it concerns the phenomenon of exploitation that has existed historically and continues to do so between cultures of unequal power”(Arya, 3, 2021) Globalization with all its features including digital technology has made access to foreign cultures easier and cultural barriers weaker. Due to this, it is more important than ever to consider the moral dilemmas raised by cultural appropriation and make sure that cultures are appropriately shared.

Cultural influence in general has many aspects, positive and negative, and it is not limited to a specific field, but exists in several different fields. But it is more evident in the artistic field, especially singing and acting. There are many singers and actors who use other dialects, depending on what the artwork requires. Some are trying to spread more and reach a wider audience, and some are trying to prove the diversity of their talent and their ability to speak different dialects. The important question is when is artistic influence a positive phenomenon and when does it become exploitation of another culture for personal interests? To answer this question, we must know the type of culture and whether it is a dominant majority culture or a marginalized minority culture because marginalized culture usually feels persecuted and interprets any imitation of it as undermining or exploiting it. According to Arya “whilst sharing or experiencing cultures other than one's own is a rich part of human experience, it remains problematic because of the damage it may cause, especially when the culture that has been taken from is marginalized, that is, is either a minority or indigenous culture.”(2021)Nadra Kareem Nittle writes that “Cultural appropriation remains a concern for a variety of reasons. For one, this sort of “borrowing” is exploitative because it robs oppressed groups of the credit they deserve and often the capital owed to them as well.”(2021)

Examples of cultural appropriation and style-shifting can be found in different parts of the world. In the Arab world, since the last century, many Arab actors and singers resorted to imitating what we can call “Egyptcent” or the Egyptian accent of the Arabic language to gain more fame and popularity. This is because “Egyptcent”, unlike other accents of the Arabic language, is easily understood by the majority in all Arab countries. This phenomenon increased after the Arab Spring and the flight of many Syrian actors to Egypt and work in Egyptian TV dramas and movies. However, this phenomenon differs from “blaccent” because the Egyptian culture is not of a marginalized minority, and the Egyptians did not feel that this detracted from their



culture. Being a multicultural mosaic, the US is a rich area on the topic of appropriation and style-shifting because it has an ethnically diverse population that must learn how to interact with one another's and their own cultures. Other people in the culture feel the effects of how people interact with and represent different races, including their own. In this article and as a reflection that sheds light on the Blavity article about star Awkwafina, the researchers are going to discuss the use of "Blaccent" not only as a form of cultural appropriation but also anti-Black racism. The discussion of this issue will contextualize the comments on social media on the line between appropriation and style-shifting. Who is Awkwafina in this article? Awkwafina is the first performer of Asian descent to win a Golden Globe award for lead actress in a motion picture. Her win does not come without a bitter aftertaste. For many Asian Americans, her history-making recognition validates the importance of seeing themselves represented in film. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that Awkwafina's win also rewards a career-long exploitation of Black culture for personal gain.

2- Research Questions

The study is part of the ongoing debate about cultural appropriation, which is the act of incorporating traditions from another culture without paying due respect or credit. The study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What about the effects of exploiting other cultures for personal gain?
2. Is it possible, then, to celebrate Awkwafina's Golden Globe acting win without celebrating Awkwafina's personal choices? Can we separate the performance from the performer?
3. What about the Asian Americans' point of view on the Awkwafina's career-long exploitation of Black culture for personal gain?
4. Is it possible to say that the appropriation of Black aesthetics would be to perpetuate a system that rewards the exploitation of Blackness?
5. The reflections on identity appropriation on social media and the case of Awkwafina.
6. Is it really that the natives of Blaccent have become proud of it as a social phenomenon?

3- Methodology:

This qualitative research aims and objectives are exploratory in nature. Qualitative data collection methods are used to collect data from different sources including articles, books, websites, and social Media outlets.



4- Blaccent and Style-shifting

Wikipedia defines blaccent as “an accent characteristic of African-Americans (black Americans)”. It is defined by Dictionary.com as “a blend of black and accent, is the imitation of Black English by non-black people”. Talking about the history of AAVE and its genetic affiliation, Sidnell states that “Some scholars contend that AAVE developed out of the contact between speakers of West African languages and speakers of vernacular English varieties. According to such a view, West Africans learnt English on plantations in the southern Coastal States (Georgia, South Carolina, etc.) from a very small number of native speakers (the indentured labourers). Some suggest that this led to the development of a rudimentary pidgin which was later expanded through a process of creolization”. Before the year 2010, Black English, a complete dialect of the English language, was referred to as blaccent. Blaccent's main goal throughout the last decade has been to belittle non-black individuals who attempt to speak Black English. Popular media outlets like Complex, Refinery29, Drudge Report, and the illustrious Washington Post have used it in this meaning. Twitter users frequently encounter it as well. (Lemoine, A, 2021)

Style shifting, on the other hand, is described by sociolinguists Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling as variation within a speaker's speech in which speakers change how they use grammatical, phonological, and lexical variants in response to social circumstances. (2016) While Mayerhoff thinks that style-shifting is “variation in an individual's speech correlating with differences in addressee, social context, personal goals or externally imposed tasks” (2006, 28) style-shifting takes place as a result of many social, cultural and linguistic factors.

Rina Arya (2021) states that cultural appropriation, powerfully present within public awareness usually because of the commercial use of marginalised and/or indigenous cultures, often provokes moral outrage, global protests, and sanctions. Academia is becoming more and more interested in it, and over the past 20 years, several significant studies have been published. Cultural appropriation has a wide variety of manifestations, actions, and effects. There are similar difficulties and themes, but it is not a standard approach and must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Cultural influences in daily life stem from how one chooses to portray himself through personal choices. In their study “Belonging, identity and Third Culture Kids” H. Fail, Jeff Thompson, and G. Walker argue that “An individual who, having spent a significant part of the development years in a culture other than the parents' culture develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationships to others of similar experience.”(2004)

It is believed that style is an emergent store through which youth build and implement identities acknowledgeable by the particularities of their migration histories, political economy, and their educational level. In language use and social



groups in high schools, Penelope Eckert (2000) proves how youth embody social meanings linked to styles and analyzes how social groupings shape, and are shaped by, style. She emphasizes, “Style is not just the product of the construction of social meaning or even the locus of construction of such social meaning; it is what makes the negotiation of such social meaning possible” (Eckert 2008: 126). Discussing Eckert’s work with youth, Kathryn Woolard (2008: 445) expands on the methods in which youth manage and perform style: “Young people take up the elements of style right along with, and as inherent parts of, the situation, the genre, and the stance or identity that they index.” In a migration setting, the ways in which youth use social voices and approve of certain ways of speaking not only to questions of social groups but also to subjectivity and the formation of ethnic and racial meanings.

The observer of modern social media in this era will find that it is playing a major role in shaping public opinion and drawing clearer mental images for the public, in particular. Today's social media is among the most popular genres. Social networks, message boards, forums, blogs, and other user-generated content offer a social context originating from various locations across the world, bringing together individuals with quite varied life experiences and offering the potential for simple contact between groups. Beyond the previous internet era's or even its successor's vision, social media offers an inclusive and open society. (Laughey, 2010, 19) “We often find that these means play a role in reflecting the opinions of readers and viewers so that the media has become available to everyone, which contributes to the development of many ideas and social values”. We are now in the process of discussing a very important topic, which is what resulted in a positive or negative effect on what was done by the star Awkwafina and her role as black people personification to reach her personal goals and her indifference to the insults inflicted on blacks.

5- Awkwafina and cultural appropriation

As written by Gina Martinez (2022) “Awkwafina issued a statement about her use of African American Vernacular English, also referred to as a 'blaccent,' over the years. 'Blaccent' is defined as a combination of the words 'black' and 'accent' and is when a non-black person imitates Black English. The award-winning actress, whose real name is Nora Lum, has starred in the hit films Crazy Rich Asians and Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings. The 33-year-old found fame in 2012 after her music video for My Vag went viral and since she has been accused of cultural appropriation for her 'blaccent'. 'But I must emphasize: To mock, belittle, or to be unkind in any way possible at the expense of others is: Simply. Not. My. Nature. It never has, and it never was,' She also announced she was leaving Twitter, although she would remain on her other social media sites. 'I am retiring from the ingrown toenail that is Twitter’”

History shows that it is natural and even beneficial to draw from other cultures. Vepachedu, S. (2018: 1-31), continues that “borrowing from other cultures is inevitable as historical evidence demonstrates and potentially positive, but not always.” In recent years, however, many stars have come under criticism for using



Blaccent. Teen pop star Olivia Rodrigo, Billie Eilish, Iggy Azalea, Ariana Grande, and Awkwafina are among the non-Black celebrity to face criticism for speaking in a “blaccent” and using AAVE (African American vernacular English). If other celebrities have adopted the same mannerisms, yet received little to no backlash for it. Why, then, have many people reacted strongly to Awkwafina’s use of AAVE? She was harshly criticized for misappropriating black culture. Why is the actress criticized for using an African American accent? First, it should be noted that she belongs to a cultural minority, which is the Asian American community, and she used another minority dialect, which is not considered a dominant culture. Perhaps the great difference between the two ethnic minorities is the main motive behind this attack on Awkwafina. Reacting to the criticism laid at her, Awkwafina, in a series of Tweets, attributes her use of Blaccent to the environment in which she was brought up.” My immigrant background allowed me to carve an American identity off the movies and tv shows I watched, the children I went to public school with, and my undying love and respect for hip hop,” she wrote. “I think as a group, Asian Americans are still trying to figure out what that journey means for them – what is correct and where they don’t belong.” she went on to say that in real life, the narrow line between offense and pop culture is influenced by linguistic acculturation, immigrant acculturation, and the inevitable spread of international internet lingo.

To what extent is this attack justified and has she really used cultural appropriation for personal purposes and to achieve private benefits? To answer these questions, we must understand when cultural appropriation becomes inappropriate. Vepachedu, S. (2018: 1-31) defines “Cultural appropriation as the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture. It is the inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another.” The researchers think this is what has been done by the star Awkwafina when “Coopting African American Vernacular English (AAVE), speaking in a 'blaccent' and playing characters that could be interpreted as minstrelsy, Awkwafina has worn Blackness like a costume, putting it on when it commercially rewards her ('Crazy Rich Asians' and 'Oceans 8')”.

Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa critique appropriateness-based approaches to language diversity in education. Those who subscribe to these approaches conceptualize standardized linguistic practices as an objective set of linguistic forms that are appropriate for an academic setting. In contrast, Flores and Rosa highlight the raciolinguistic ideologies through which racialized bodies come to be constructed as engaging in appropriate academic linguistic practices. Drawing on theories of language ideologies and racialization, they offer a perspective from which students classified as long-term English learners, heritage language learners, and Standard English learners can be understood to inhabit a shared racial positioning that frames their linguistic practices as deficient regardless of how closely they follow supposed rules of appropriateness. Flores, N. & Rosa, J. (2015: 149-171).



Based on the criticism of appropriateness-based approaches to language diversity in education, many scholars, and raciolinguistic ideologies that come to be assembled as attractive appropriate academic linguistic practices, one can say Blaccent has become a social phenomenon that its natives feel proud of it. Looking deeply at the Blaccent as an African American Vernacular English, one will come to the result that it is a comprehensive and representative style of human beings that have sense, feelings, and commitment. This fact is indicated by Shalini Shankar when he says that “style” is a linguistic and cultural concept that can demonstrate how identities performed through language use are linked to topics of central concern in studies of immigrant youth, including racial and ethnic formation, generational cohorts, acculturation, assimilation, and gender. Shankar (2011: 646-671).

As pointed out earlier, social media plays a significant role in this phenomenon. The slang used by these non-African stars is common across social media and particularly on TikTok, and often those who use it are not actually aware of its origins or of AAVE in general. So social media has made black culture very influential in America in particular. Some may argue that these stars including Awkwafina live in a time where black culture is influencing society so much to the point where people do not realize that they are being influenced by black culture. Others especially African Americans may consider persons who attempt to utilize AAVE incorrectly to be intruders because they did not grow up using it. As they adopt Black vocabulary without assuming Black Americans' struggles, they run the risk of being seen as appropriating Black culture and fostering racism. These non-Black speakers of AAE do so for amusement. When Black people use it, they are disparaged and told they are speaking inappropriately.

Awkwafina's use of Blaccent can be explained in light of the identity loss that most Asian Americans suffer from. Unlike, African Americans and Hispanic Americans who can claim to have a distinct culture, Asian Americans do not have a unified culture. Born to a Chinese father and a Korean mother, Awkwafina is divided between two cultures, Chinese and Korean. This may explain why she resorted to Black culture. In her response to criticism, Awkwafina acknowledges this when she said “I think as a group, Asian Americans are still trying to figure out what that journey means for them – what is correct and where they don't belong.” Another important point that should be taken into consideration when talking about Awkwafina and cultural appropriation is that she herself belongs to a minority group. Communities that want to impose restrictions on the use of specific cultural items, may or may not be worried about the racial background of the outsider who is transgressing those standards.

6. Conclusion

Cultural appropriation is the act of borrowing or using items from a culture other than your own, especially without demonstrating that you understand or respect that culture. It is the improper appropriation of one people's or culture's habits, practices, ideas, etc. by members of another. The rise of social media has increased cultural



appropriation in different ways. It made access to other cultures easier and it allowed marginalized cultures to spread. On the other hand, it has made criticizing cultural appropriation available for all. Access to foreign cultures has become simpler, and boundaries between cultures have weakened, thanks to globalization and all of its elements, including digital technology. This makes it more crucial than ever to take into account the ethical issues highlighted by cultural appropriation and ensure that cultures are shared appropriately. The case of Awkwafina is a good example of the use of Blaccent, appropriation, and style shifting. The researchers think Awkwafina has put Blackness on when it pays her commercially by speaking African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and playing characters that may be construed as minstrelsy. The fact that she belongs to a minority group does not give her the right to violate restrictions on the use of specific cultural items set by another marginalized culture. Adopting Black vocabulary without assuming Black Americans' struggles, she can be blamed for appropriating Black culture and fostering racism.

References

1. Arya, R. (2021). Cultural appropriation: What it is and why it matters? *Sociology Compass*, e12923. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12923>
2. Blaccent. (2022, August 23). Wiktionary, The Free Dictionary. Retrieved 08:15, November 17, 2022, from <https://en.wiktionary.org/w/index.php?title=blaccent&oldid=68697791>.
3. Eckert, Penelope 2000. *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice: The Linguistic Construction of Identity at Belten High*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
4. Eckert, Penelope 2008. Variation and the indexical field. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12(4): 453–476.
5. Fail, H., Thompson, J., & Walker, G. (2004). Belonging, identity and Third Culture Kids. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 3, 319 - 338.
6. FLORES, N. & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing Appropriateness: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and Language Diversity in Education. *Harvard Educational Review* (2015) 85 (2): 149–171. <https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149>.
7. Gina Martinez for Dailymail.Com published: 01:05 GMT, 6 February 2022 | UPDATED: 17:54 GMT, 6 February 2022 visited Wednesday, Nov 23rd, 2022.
8. Lemoine, A. (2021) Blaccent meaning & origin, Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com. Available at: <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/blaccent/> (Accessed: November 17, 2022).
9. Lenard, Patti Tamara, and Peter Balint. "What Is (the Wrong of) Cultural Appropriation?" *Ethnicities* 20.2 (2019): 331–352. Web.
10. Mayerhoff, M. (2006) *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. London, New York: Routledge.



11. Mosley, Ariel & Biernat, Monica. (2020). The New Identity Theft: Perceptions of Cultural Appropriation in Intergroup Contexts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1-25. 10.1037/pspi00000327.
12. Nittle, N.K. (2021) A guide to understanding and avoiding cultural appropriation, ThoughtCo. ThoughtCo. Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/cultural-appropriation-and-why-its-wrong-2834561> (Accessed: November 22, 2022).
13. Shankar, S. (2011). Style and Language Use among Youth of the New Immigration: Formations of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Everyday Practice. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 18:646–671, Taylor & Francis Group, LLC ISSN: 1070-289X print / 1547-3384 online DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2011.672867.
14. Sidnell Jack, “African American vernacular English”. Available at: <https://www.hawaii.edu/satocenter/langnet/definitions/aave.html> (Accessed: November 21, 2022).
15. Sreenivasarao, V. (2018). Cultural Appropriation & Codeswitching. 1-31. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327390884_CULTURAL_APPROPRIATION_CODESITCHING 9. Oct. 21. 3:39 PM.
16. Suh, YongGu & Hur, Jungyun & Davies, Gary. (2015). Cultural appropriation and the country of origin effect. *Journal of Business Research*. 69. 10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.11.007.
17. Wolfram, Walt, and Natalie Schilling-Estes. (2016). *American English: Dialects and Variation*. Third edition. *Language in Society* 25. Chichester, West Sussex [England] ; Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.
18. Woolard, Kathryn 2008. Why dat now? Linguistic-anthropological contributions to the explanation of sociolinguistic icons and change. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12(4): 432–452.
19. Young, James. (2008). Cultural Appropriation and the Arts. *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*. 1-168. 10.1002/9780470694190.