

Teaching Unit 29: Style and Persona on Twitter

Background

This teaching unit focuses on language used on Twitter, focusing on four words originally from African American English. It encourages students to look at the language used in these tweets, including African American English, internet short-hands and acronyms, and emoji. It introduces the concept of indexicality, discusses the impact of African American English on internet slang, and covers issues of linguistic appropriation. It uses freely available Twitter corpora from 2016, as well as tweets gathered in 2020, filtered by specific words. Using lists of example tweets, students can discuss how these linguistic features are used in order to create a certain style or persona on Twitter.

Indexicality

We use our language to portray different characteristics and personas in conversation, and one way in which we do this is indexicality. In linguistics an ‘index’ is a relationship between a linguistic feature and the category where it is found. We notice that a certain group of speakers uses a certain feature, and that feature then becomes associated with the group that uses it. For example, in the UK, it has been observed that middle and upper-class English speakers were more likely to pronounce ING at the end of verbs such as ‘running’. Therefore, we could say that pronouncing ING at the end of verbs is ‘indexical’ of being upper-class, whereas pronouncing the word as ‘runnin’ is indexical of lower-class speech. This relationship between a linguistic form and a group is called ‘direct indexicality’.

However, this relationship can sometimes be more complex than this. The next level of indexicality is when a linguistic feature is associated with, not a group, but characteristics associated with that group. There are certain characteristics that we might associate with the group ‘upper-class’ in the UK: wealthy, successful, educated. Therefore, using ING at the end of verbs could be indexical of being more educated, and so we might find ourselves pronouncing ING more frequently in situations where we want to appear more educated, such as a job interview. This relationship between a linguistic feature and the characteristics associated with the group that uses it is called ‘indirect indexicality’.

African American English

The internet has allowed us to communicate with people from all over the world, and this allows slang to be spread more easily. One of the biggest contributors to internet slang is African American English (AAE) – a set of dialects spoken by some black individuals in the USA and Canada. This variety is in a complex position: although many linguists have shown that it has stable rules like any other language, it is often treated as inferior, and speakers of AAE are regularly characterised as uneducated.

Despite this, there is evidence of non-African American communities using AAE. African American culture is often popular with those outside of the community and there are many studies which have shown that many non-African American speakers use components of AAE to index certain desirable characteristics which are associated with African American people and culture. For example, in 1999, Mary Bucholtz examined the linguistic performance of a young White teenager, who aligned with black youth culture and so used aspects of AAE to portray certain characteristics associated with black men, such as physical power. More recently in 2015, Eberhardt and Freeman examined the use of AAE by white rapper Iggy Azalea, and how she benefits from the indexical association of AAE and 'coolness' in her music. Both studies discuss how these white speakers benefit from using AAE, without facing the same negative social stereotypes that many black people do.

When speakers from one community use linguistic features from another variety, it is described as 'linguistic appropriation'. Black people have expressed frustration over the fact that white people appropriate words from their variety and popularise them, without acknowledging the origins. In 2015, Huffpost published an opinion article titled "12 Words Black People Invented, and White People Ruined", about words which had been appropriated from AAE and then "killed" through overuse and sometimes misuse. The list included words such as 'bae', 'squad', 'ratchet', and 'on fleek'.

The Data

This teaching unit uses three corpora.

1. Free corpus of 200,000 tweets from the USA – 2016
2. Free corpus of 170,000 tweets from the UK – 2016
3. Pan-regional, word-specific twitter data, collected in March and April 2020

The first two datasets were found online from <http://followthehashtag.com/datasets/> and comprise of geolocated tweets collected over 48 hours, automatically excluding retweets. The third dataset was collected using FireAnt, which collects incoming tweets filtered by specific word. For each word, the first 100 incoming tweets were collected. These were then filtered for retweets, irrelevant uses, and tweets which did not contain the word, but were replies or comments on tweets which did.

This data focuses on tweets using one of these four words: 'bae', 'bougie' 'finna' and 'queen'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, all have origins in AAE, although 'bae' and 'bougie' have become more popular among white people, and 'queen' is generally now associated with drag and gay culture. 'Finna' is widely recognised, although perhaps less frequently used by non-AAE speakers.

The table below shows the number of tweets collected for each word.

	US 2016	UK 2016	2020
Bae	120	72	63
Bougie (and other spellings)	2	2	90
Finna	12	1	35
Queen (and other spellings)	9	At least 2	56

For each word there is a selection of tweets. Use these to discuss the following:

1. What are the different styles that occur with each word, and the different personas that are portrayed in them?
2. Does the language in these tweets index any particular groups or characteristics?
3. All four words are originally from African American English. How could we distinguish between 'authentic' and 'non-authentic' uses?

You might want to consider the following linguistic features:

1) *Internet spelling conventions*

- acronyms, for example, 'lmao'
- abbreviations, for example 'thx' instead of 'thanks'
- substitutions, for example, 'u' instead of 'you'
- Punctuation

2) *Emoji*

- What kind of emoji are popular?
- What do these emoji add to the tweet?

3) *African American English*

- 'Missing' verbs such as 'be' (copula absence)
- Representations of accent, for example 'wit', 'ma'
- Demonstrative them, for example 'working them boots'
- AAE words

4) *Non-standard spellings and grammar/ Other slang/ Common words or phrases*

Further Discussion Questions

Are there any of these tweets that you don't think you, personally, would say? Are there any that you wouldn't say, but you might write on social media? Why/why not?

Do you think that there is a universal 'internet style' that anyone on Twitter can use? Why/why not?

What is the role of emoji in these tweets?

Bae

Definition: “colloquial (originally in African-American usage). A boyfriend or girlfriend; Originally and chiefly as a term of endearment: sweetheart, darling, baby.

'Bae' gained mainstream popularity in around 2013. Do you think it is still strongly associated with African American English? Why/Why not?

US 2016

1	@User @User y'all been blowing up my tl for almost an hour meanwhile im waiting for bae to text back , bye asf
2	Me & Bae! 😍😍😍😍😍😍😍😍 #MontyBirthdayParty #Celebration #HappyBirthday #BlackNWhiteParty 🎉🎉🎉🎉
3	Ridin wit bae 🏠🏠🏠
4	Baegas with the perfect dude 🏠
5	baseball more like baesball 😄🏆🏆
6	She the bae, I'm her boo 🎵
7	Future bae out there drinking with her current bae 😞
8	Much needed weekend for the both of us! #baeday we just doing us do y'all mind?? 😄😄😄

UK 2016

9	@User yes ma bae, am i gna be seein u ? 😍😍 xxxxx
10	Turtle Bay with baes 🐢
11	When bae gets her glo up 😏😏 #mercedes
12	Table Talk 🍷🍷 Viet Dinner w/ bae talkin' way too loudly about all the inappropriate things people shouldn't talk about when squashed between two tight tables 😄😄👯👯👯
13	Every last bite was savoured. Pizza is bae. 🍕🍕🍕 #YesIsaidbae #Ihavenobaereally
14	mad about this pink ting ❤️ another bae killin' it for my missguided X theclosetmcr Look Book 📷
15	“@User: Emily is my tru bae I love no one else” back off
16	Are you really best friends if people don't mistake you for a couple? #bae #relationshipgoals

2020

17	@User thx u bae.)
18	@User IMYSM bae
19	yes bae 🌊
20	My quarantine Bae finna be me and PALMala and this xnxx 🙊
21	RT @User: Need me a corona bae 😞
22	until ofc me and bae do a track workout later
23	RT @User: 🙊🙊 Y'all better not come out of the PANDEMIC PREGNANT. Be careful in them self quarantines with bae 🙊

24 I wanna go on a baecation 😞😞 I need a bae first.

Bougie

Definition: "slang (chiefly U.S., originally in African-American usage). Chiefly depreciative. A person, esp. an African-American, regarded as bourgeois or middle-class. 'Bougie' can be spelled many different ways, such as 'boujie' or 'boujee'.

Sometimes 'bougie' is used as an insult, sometimes as a synonym for anything fancy or indulgent. Is one more common than the other in these tweets?

US 2016

25 My view from the "bougie people" section

UK 2016

26 Boujie lunch #glutenfreebakery #artisanbakery #hipster #glutenfree #fashion #blog #blogger

2020

27 RT @User Classy. Bougie. Ratchet. ✨💎

28 bitch im acting bougie u can't even get a reply

29 Lmao she really bougie

30 RT @User: People really be out here thinking I'm mean and boujee when I'm just awkward, nerdy and goofy asf 🤪🤪

31 @User Our local crappy grocery store used to be Bravo, but it's slowly getting bougie. You know things are changing when they start selling Mrs. Meyers soaps.

32 You know your Costco is bougie when THIS is what they're out of right now 🤪

33 I only fw bougie bitches , I can't do a groupie 😏👏

34 Walmart has these boujee as pajamas and ngl I am real tempted to buy them

35 My mom is such a cute little fancy/boujie lady 😏

36 I found the car for my practical bougie ass 😏🙏

37 User 😏😏😏 these da boujee folks foo know we ain gone get no love on dis bih

38 I'm glad bougie ass Spanish hoes do my nails 🤪🤪🤪🤪👉

39 Y'all be so fake bougie on this app but I feel it you gotta impress the people that you don't know.

40 Simply so bougie and I love em 😏😏😏

41 Still vex I missed Summerjam last year because I was too boujie to Camp 😏

42 My momma side bougie 😏

43 Guys this bougie ass toilet paper always cost 15 bucks for a 12 pack. #Shoppersdrugmart

Finna

Definition: *U.S. regional and colloquial (originally esp. in African-American usage). 'Fixing to': intending or preparing to; about to.*

'Finna' only appears once in the UK sample, and is more frequent in the US sample. Why do you think this is?

Tweets containing 'finna' also contained more taboo and swear words than the other three words. Why do you think this is? How does this contribute to a style or persona?

US 2016

44	Imm just finna go bacc to vegas (: ✂
45	This mfa finna throw up when we get home
46	I cnt believe I'm finna be 23 in 5 days shit just ain't real I'm at a mid life crisis
47	ok whom finna make it snow when I'm in Detroit ?
48	This big ole machine is messing me up lol everytime im Finna win this thing kill me..!!! 😬

UK 2016

49	"@User: 😬 [LINK]" you hit the big time thugger. Who you finna bless up @User
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2020

50	RT @User: I wouldn't hold a baby all day if it was mine what makes you think I'm finna hold somebody else's 😬
51	@User Meaning....I'm finna request a \$100 from everyone who dropped they cash app
52	RT @User: "You're so beautiful, how are you still single?" Lmao you finna find out just now wait a minute
53	Y'all don't understand how hurt I am rn 😬 I thought I was finna get my brows done ! It's some hating ass hoes out here man shit sick
54	Cause y'all not finna play wimmie 😬
55	RT @User: yeen finna tlk bout me on hea 😬
56	RT @User: @User Bro..... all good tho we finna bounce back harder than ever
57	RT @User: Once I sit up and you see me grab the wheel like this..... just know I'm finna FLOAT this mfa

Queen

Definition: Originates from drag community. As well as Drag Queen, a related definition from the OED: *13. slang. A homosexual man, typically one regarded as ostentatiously effeminate.* However, it is increasingly used to refer to cisgender women, in a supportive, empowering, and solidarity-building context.

Notice the different spellings, 'queen', 'qween', and 'kween'. Do you think these different spellings are important? Look at example 74: "Kween With The K". Why is it important to point out the spelling?

Emoji are particularly important in this sample. Why are certain emoji, such as 🙌, 🙏 or 👑 particularly common? How does this contribute to style or persona?

There are many mentions of the word 'stan' (to be an extreme fan of something or someone). Why do you think 'queen' is common in this context?

US 2016

58	Kween of Coachella @kyliejenner rocking her @perversesunnies
59	Litt @User flow queens whats good im here???
60	Watching broad city I feel has changed me as a person.. I'm a queen and so are you. 🙌🤔🤔
61	@User YAS QWEEN

UK 2016

62	Yass Kween 😍 Fried Nutella sandwich, Graveney and Meadow, I'm impressed 🙌🙌
63	Badass Queen. ☹️ ❌ 🚫 #VSCOcam #ThisIsLondon #MaddoxGallery

2020

64	RT @User yas Our warrior KWEEN
65	RT @User Congrats to bread on its big moment. The gluten-shaming years must have been rough, but we stan a comeback queen.
66	@User We all Stan for this qween!
67	Gonna start using that line: "I don't compete, I complete." 🙌🙌🙌! A kween 👑, I stan!!!!
68	@User periodt irene wwe fighter tall KWEEN
69	🙌WHAT🙌A🙌KWEEN🙌
70	Queen 😍🙌🙌🙌
71	@User A queen 🙌👑
72	@User Much love and good vibes your way kween ❤️❤️❤️
73	STAN KWEEN J FOR CLEAR SKIN 👑
74	RT @User: Kween With The K ❤️👑👑
75	The Queen has spoken 🙌
76	@UserLove you too queen 😍
77	RT @User: she raising a bilingual Black queen. that's legendaric.

78 RT @User: this whole thing of calling ppl "ma'am" "sis" "girl" "queen" n all that when you do not know them or what they go by needs to stop like,, n especially when u get called out but keep doing it !?;!;
