A Study Proposal for AAL Imitation in Pop Music Involving Comparisons of Word Realizations in Two Speech Registers

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Abstract: This paper adapts an intra-speaker comparison approach to dialect imitation (e.g., Neuhauser, 2008; Segerup, 1999) for pop music. Same or equivalent utterances from one speaker in two speech contexts (spoken speech and sung speech) are compared, allowing phonological disparities to be interpreted as dialect features. In this paper, and in the proposed project, the approach is used to chart tendencies of non–African American Language (AAL) speakers to mimic AAL and/or Southern American English (SAE) in sung speech, with examples from pop singers Adele, Elle King, Elvis Presley, and Barbara Windsor. This paper also presents a critique of imitation explanations such as "melody-induced" dialect leveling and accommodation theory, and details the benefits of intra-speaker approaches like Neuhauser (2008) over those beginning with preselected sociolinguistic variables (e.g., Trudgill, 1997; Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015). Additionally, it stresses the relevance of subjective evaluations to dialect imitation in music as they are elicited through matched-guise tests and Preston's (1989) perceptual dialectology methods. The aim of the study this paper proposes is to contribute to a move toward the objective measurement of cultural appropriation.

Keywords: AAL, AAVE, dialect imitation, cultural appropriation, Adele, Elvis Presley

1 Introduction

The concept of cultural appropriation has been met with criticism (see McWhorter, 2021; Lenard & Balint, 2020) due in part to disagreement over its defining characteristics and the supposed impossibility of reliably defining an act as cultural appropriation. Young (2008) proposes that one of the qualifiers is in the cultural difference between the appropriator and the appropriated, stating that, "[i]f we cannot identify someone definitively as an insider or an outsider with respect to a given culture, we may not be able to determine whether a specific action is an act of cultural appropriation" (2008: 13–14). He notes that this becomes difficult when there is an "overlapping of cultures" (Young, 2008: 13). Building on this notion, the present paper applies areal linguistics data to establish geographically different cultures (i.e., "insiders" and "outsiders"), and then uses objective measures of difference between two phonetic data sets to attempt to evaluate the degree of vocal affectation, which evidently is considered a type of cultural appropriation in music (see Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015). The primary aim of these analyses is to establish an easily reproducible method which can later be applied on a larger scale to suggest a trend of an increasing tendency of vocalists to adjust their speech to match that of African American Language (AAL) and/or Southern American English (SAE).[1] A secondary aim

[1] It is impossible to establish such a trend with four subjects, so this paper adapts a method for establishing that trend on a later occasion.

of this paper is to define the line between cultural appropriation (a debatable theoretical concept) and vocal affectation (an objectively measurable phenomenon), which will be discussed further below.

After a review of previous research and theories on vocal affectation in popular music (Sections 2.1 and 2.2)—specifically Crystal (2009) and Trudgill (1997)—this paper introduces the singer subjects and methods for the present analyses (Section 3). Each singer is discussed separately (Sections 4–4.3), and then I further examine Adele's, one of the singers, use of AAL features as they are distributed in a social stratification model from Wolfram (1969; quoted in Rickford, 1999), considering the use of the model as a measure of the complexity of a singer's linguistic appropriation. After discussing the use of AAL and SAE paralinguistic features by some of the singers and the study of the paralanguage in the proposed study (Section 5.2), I note the advantages of the demonstrated methodology over the feature-based approach taken by Trudgill (1997) for the study of linguistic appropriation in music (Section 6). Following this, I summarize my proposed study (Section 6.1), and detail the necessity of a subjective evaluation aspect as it is extracted through such techniques as the matched-guise test (Section 6.2.1) and Preston's (1989) five-point method (Section 6.2.2). Lastly, I briefly describe the effects of music training on speech and the importance of involving the consultation of professional vocalists and speech trainers (Section 6.3).

2 Background

2.1 Accent leveling due to melody

Crystal (2009) states that accents with a mix of American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) features are standard in popular music, claiming that, "in hardly any case do singers use a consistent regional accent throughout the whole song" (Crystal, 2009). He attributes this predominance of mixed accents to the supposed difficulty in retaining a regional accent amidst the phonetic demands of the song, essentially stating that qualities of regional accents such as intonation, speech rhythm, and vowel length are neutralized by singing. Crystal also suggests that the other factor in "accent leveling" is social, positing that singers consciously reduce their regional accents in order to match the sung speech of others. The first explanation—that musical features such as melody neutralize phonological features of regional accents—is not supported by other theories. Data from Trudgill (1997) find that regional features are actually quite difficult to hold back in sung speech, and I argue that the effects of speech training (see Section 6.3) are not great enough to create mixed accents. Crystal and Trudgill, however, do share views on the sociolinguistic factors in vocal affectation. Although, Trudgill presents a more comprehensive set of theories, showing that the phenomenon of affectation of this nature is more complicated and systematic than could be gathered from Crystal's assessment.

2.2 Accommodation theory and identification with audience

Trudgill (1997), in a study of British pop singers, states that AmE imitation most likely originated during the 1920s (the "Jazz Age") and gained particular spread during the 1950s (the start of the "Rock and Roll era") (Trudgill, 1997: 251). He claims that there are actually multiple potential sociolinguistic factors contributing to the phenomenon, offering that the "sociolinguistic notion of 'appropriateness'" (1997: 253) influences the speech choices of British

pop singers. Trudgill notes that all of the artificial pronunciation shifts he charts fit the AmE phonological profile (1997: 253), and asserts that this imitation spawns from a recognition of American (particularly Black-originating) dominance in popular music. In this view he considers BrE imitation of AmE singers a rough counterpart to AmE imitation of Shakespearean dialects.[2] By comparing productions by British singers such as Cliff Richards, Ray Davies, and Paul McCartney, Trudgill illustrates their difficulty in properly identifying AmE characteristics, such as presence of non-prevocalic /r/ (which is inserted into impressions of varieties of English that do not actually use it).

Trudgill attributes these errors in identifying the proper placement of /r/ to a natural difficulty in pronouncing non-prevocalic /r/; the singers simply drop it in instances where it becomes a burden, such as in the words "better man," (257); the /r/ is deleted in BrE. These data contradict Crystal's assertion that it is more difficult to retain a regional accent in sung speech over a "General American" (GenAm) one; although it might create Crystal's so-called "mixed accents" in the most extreme cases (Crystal, 2009). Continuing with his first explanation of BrE recognition of AmE dominance in popular music as a motivation for affectation, Trudgill notes that those subjects who had difficulty in assuming an American accent returned to their own accents early in their careers. He notes that this could be a result of BrE music's gaining dominance, which in turn resulted in the BrE accent's legitimation.

Another of Trudgill's explanations is that a singer's choice of accent is motivated by a desire to identify with a particular audience. He uses punk rock as an example: since the audience is different from a popular music audience (i.e., underprivileged British youth), the accent that is used to identify with them is different. Trudgill's data suggest that, aside from the genre-related desire to seem more aggressive by using 3rd/p. sg. *don't* for example, "[t]here is also clearly an intention to aid identification with and/or by British working-class youth[…]." He therefore posits that "[t]he 'covert prestige' of non-standard, low-prestige linguistic forms is clearly in evidence" (Trudgill 1997: 262). As opposed to Crystal's theory (which attributes this vocal affectation to one phonetic and one sociolinguistic factor), Trudgill essentially gives two sociolinguistic explanations: (1) accommodation of the appropriate pronunciation as it was established by those with dominance in the field (speakers of AmE, particularly AAL and SAE), and (2) a desire to identify with a particular audience.

I propose that the two mimic singers of the present paper, however, do not necessarily share Trudgill's motivations. Considering Trudgill's proposal of a desire to identify with a particular audience, whom would Adele and Elle King be attempting to identify with? It would appear that both of these singers' audiences are predominantly White middle class speakers of Standard English.[3] And, considering the level of accuracy of these two singers' affectation, perhaps they share motivations besides simply accommodation. In one song analyzed in this paper, "Easy on Me," Adele does not, for example, make the mistake of forgetting to use a voiced alveolar flap in place of a voiceless stop in intervocalic contexts, which in Trudgill (1997), shows variable use by BrE singers (Trudgill, 1997: 258): Adele uses a flap for all seven potential /t/ occurrences (in that sample).[4] Additionally, she does not use epenthetic /r/, a

[2] Obviously, Shakespearean English did not sound close to the modern British accent; however, Trudgill is asserting that the British reign supreme over Shakespeare performances.

[3] Ironically, in the interview from which Adele's spoken speech samples were gotten, she questions: "[W]ho's making the music for my generation?"

[4] The specific words analyzed for this variable are (in order of appearance) "that," "waters," "but," "what," "what," "but," and "what." Unfortunately for this count, the song contains no words with the *-ity* suffix, which Trudgill notes is the "phonological environment which causes British singers most difficulty" (1997: 258).

hyper-corrective feature that Trudgill cites as a mistake to which British singers mimicking (rhotic) American accents are prone (1997: 257). Given Adele's degree of accuracy with these two AmE features, I argue that singers like her do not merely mimic American English for accommodative purposes, and perhaps they warrant a more elaborate method of study not relying strictly on feature use.

3 Singers and methods

Adapting an intra-speaker approach to dialect imitation (see Neuhauser, 2008; Segerup, 1999), in this paper productions by four vocalists of the most immediately salient affectations (diphthongs in many cases) will be compared in two speech contexts: spoken speech (e.g., interviews) and sung speech. This paper focuses on only phonological difference; as relevant as other levels of the grammar may be to the larger discussion of linguistic appropriation in music, they will not be centered on here. In these analyses, the degree of affectation (e.g., vowel adjustment) is higher for the two contemporary vocalists, while it remains comparatively less so for the other two vocalists of previous eras.

Each of the following popular vocalists (represented in Figure 1 below) was chosen for the purposes of this paper because they represent an areal or temporal classification: Adele (Laurie Blue Adkins), a North London contemporary speaker of Cockney,[5] which is a London dialect (Trudgill, 2012: 75); Elle King, a speaker of contemporary Southern California "Valleyspeak," which is within the U.S. West dialect region (Labov, et al., 2006: 28); Elvis Presley, a 1960s speaker from Tennessee, which is within the U.S. central Southern/South Midland dialect regions (Preston, 1989; from Shuy, 1967); and Barbara Windsor, a 1960s speaker of North London Cockney, which is a London dialect (Trudgill, 2012: 75). On a temporal level, the latter two were selected to serve as counterparts to the two contemporary vocalists: Elvis Presley's speech matches the ultimate goal of at least one of the contemporary singers' affectation, while Barbara Windsor's speech represents the unaffected counterpart to Adele's speech. Figure 1 shows this relationship.

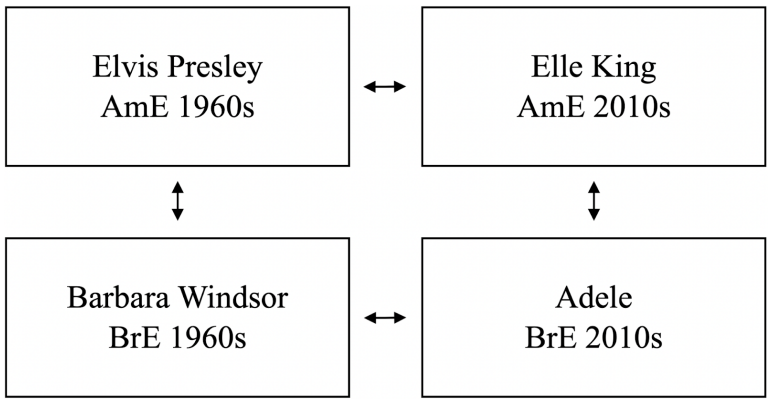

Figure 1. The areal and temporal relationships between the four vocalists: Elvis Presley, Elle King, Barbara Windsor, and Adele

[5] Trudgill (2012: 5) notes that there is little linguistic evidence for the existence of "Estuary English." For that reason, I use the term Cockney English to describe Adele's speech.

After choosing the singers, a track from each was selected for its popularity, and its vocals were isolated using the general use AI web application splitter.ai. Three out of four spoken speech portions were taken from interviews, with transcripts being used for ease of word search; the data for the fourth singer were taken from a film. Although the methods for each singer analysis varied slightly (due to accommodation of the true nature of the material),[6] the underlying process remained consistent. A goal of several tokens was hoped for each word, but this was not always possible. In the event that there were multiple phonological realizations and/or morphological forms (i.e., inflections) of the same word within the same speech context, all pronunciations were recorded (although the token numbers do not specify the numerical distribution of realizations). To ensure randomness in the case of an excess of tokens, the first handful of tokens were recorded (discounting unclear pronunciations).

4 "Easy on Me"

The first data to be analyzed are isolated from the single "Easy on Me" by Adele, released October 15, 2021. The differences in pronunciation between spoken speech and sung speech that were immediately considered the most salient are vowels; and so, three of four samples will be vowels. The vowels were also chosen because they present an opportunity for more accurately transcribed data due to the inconsistent performance quality of the splitter. This analysis will focus on the words "know," "can't," "feel," and "change"/"changed"/"changing"—for their frequency, beginning with the word "know."

In spoken speech, Adele often uses this word in the discourse marker, "you know," usually so quickly that it is difficult to make out the specific vowel realization. I would transcribe this pronunciation with a weak neutral vowel—[nəʊ]—but out of uncertainty I decided to record only the two most clear vowel pronunciations. Thus, Table 1 shows that this word is typically realized as [naʊ] and [nɛʊ] in spoken speech, but with a higher, more rounded, definitively American-sounding monophthong [noʊ] in "Easy on Me." This relationship is reversed for the word "can't": The pronunciation of "can't" in spoken speech [kɑːŋt] is typical of Southern BrE (Kortmann & Langstrof, 2017: 128), though it is realized in sung speech with diphthongs, with higher and fronter vowels: [keɪn] and [kæn]. Despite the vocalization of postvocalic /l/ in spoken speech, for the word "feel," /l/ appears in sung speech. This is an unusual sound change because, according to Rickford (1999: 5), deletion or vocalization of liquids such as /l/ is a feature of AAL. Since it is also a feature of Cockney (Trudgill, 2012: 76–77), having even been attested in Adele's spoken speech here, it might be assumed that there would be no change. This can be attributed to any number of factors, including the effect of speech training (see Section 6.3), an alternative goal of mimicking GenAm (see Section 5.1), or simply a failure to recognize and reproduce AAL phonology properly. Lastly, the word "change"/"changed"/"changing" is pronounced [t͡ʃəɑɪnd͡ʒɪŋ] in spoken speech, but [t͡ʃeɪnd͡ʒ] in sung speech. Unlike with the other words in Table 1, there is little difference in its status as having a diphthong; but the first vowel /aɪ/ is pronounced [eɪ] when the word is sung.

[6] The interviews yielded limited data, causing the target words to need to be adjusted several times, or else resulting in equivalents such as there are for the word "chang/ing."

Table 1. Pronunciations of four words in spoken speech from an interview and sung speech from the song "Easy on Me"

Word	Spoken speech	Tokens	"Easy on Me"	Tokens
know	[nɑʊ], [nɛʊ]	7	[noʊ]	2
can't	[kɑːŋt]	5	[keɪn], [kæn]	2
feel	[fɪə]	5	[fil]	3
chang/ing	[t͡ʃəɑɪnd͡ʒɪŋ], [t͡ʃeɪnd͡ʒ]	2	[t͡ʃeɪnd͡ʒ], [t͡ʃeɪnd͡ʒd]	2

Although these affectations could be dismissed as simply results of a switch of speech contexts (e.g., an intonational response to the melody of the song which results in an assimilation of some kind), I propose that they represent a systematic attempt to imitate AAL. As mentioned below, there are a few features of AAL that Adele does not fully adopt in sung speech, such as /l/ vocalization, a phonological feature of AAL (Rickford, 1999: 5) that I argue would be expected of an impression of an AAL speaker. However, these particular types of affectations are not only similar to the speech of some historically significant African American vocalists,[7] but are also produced by the subject of the following section. Therefore, she might be considered simply a contemporary vocalist who speaks with a Cockney accent in spoken speech, but who affects an AAL accent in a sung speech context. This is particularly interesting because she is a BrE speaker, rendering her affectation international, which adds her to the list of BrE singers who mimic AmE dialects (more on this above). The motivations behind her affectation are difficult to discern, but have been speculated above. It is also important to note that Adele might be modeling her speech on a variety of Black dialects; in "Easy on Me," an extra schwa-like sound is occasionally inserted interconsonantally (e.g., in between the words "this river"), similar to Italian-accented English (Del Torto, 2010: 57) or, what I consider to be more likely, Jamaican English (see Shields-Brodber, 1996).

4.1 "Ex's & Oh's"

This analysis, which is of Southern Californian vocalist Elle King, focuses on her single "Ex's & Oh's," released September 23, 2014. Table 2 shows that the word "know" is pronounced as Standard English [noʊ], however in sung speech as a more exaggerated pronunciation characteristic of SAE: [nəoʊ]. With a clearly pronounced schwa preceding the stressed vowel, the realization sounds a lot like a diphthong. Table 2 also shows that the vowel in the word "man" is pronounced with a Southern-sounding diphthong—[meɪn]—in "Ex's & Oh's," while the same vowel is pronounced more as a monophthong in spoken speech, which I think is more expected of a Southern California speaker: [mæn]. The word "I" is realized as a Standard English–sounding [aɪ] in spoken speech, but as a SAE-sounding [ah] in sung speech—or when unstressed, as a schwa. (Note that here I do not use a colon but instead an /h/ to denote vowel length, as Rickford (1999) does.) The difference here is again a contrast between monophthongal and diphthongal pronunciations. Lastly, Table 2 shows that King pronounces the word "two" [tʉ] in spoken speech, but with a much backer vowel—[tu]—in "Ex's & Oh's." Considering that

[7] Such as Etta James and Aretha Franklin, the former of whom Adele has cited as an influence.

GOOSE-fronting is a feature of Southern American English (Labov, et al., 2006: 299), I find it odd that King chooses to affect a backer vowel in sung speech. My assumption is that she is mimicking African American English in these circumstances rather than Southern American English, specifically the stereotypical GOOSE vowel that is present in African American English spoken in New York City.

Table 2. Pronunciations of four words in spoken speech from an interview and sung speech from the song "Ex's & Oh's"

Word	Spoken speech	Tokens	"Ex's & Oh's"	Tokens
know	[noʊ]	3	[nəoʊ]	1
man	[mæn]	1	[meɪn]	1
I	[aɪ]	4	[ah], [əh]	7
two	[tʉ]	2	[tu]	6

Generally, however, despite Rickford's (1999) listing monophthongal pronunciations of what would in Standard English be diphthongs as a phonological feature of AAL (Rickford, 1999: 5)—actually giving the example of [ah] instead of [aɪ] for the word "I"—there are particular nonlinguistic "cultural features" to indicate that Elle King is largely mimicking Southern American English rather than AAL. SAE grammar also aids in this distinction.[8] Regardless, I believe that Elle King and Adele belong to the same imitation movement, which strives to mimic both or either dialect (see Trudgill 1997; more on this above). These productions show a move toward SAE from Standard AmE (specifically Southern California speech); and therefore, like Adele, Elle King would be considered a vocalist with a high degree of vocal affectation.

4.2 "I'm Coming Home"

The next analysis covers Elvis Presley's "I'm Coming Home," released June 17, 1961. This song was chosen because it shares two of four words with each of the others' songs, facilitating a comparison of vowel pronunciations.[9] The spoken speech data were taken from an interview from 1960. Table 3 shows that the word "know" is consistently pronounced [noʊ] in both the interview and in "I'm Coming Home." In both contexts the vowel may be lowered in the direction of [ɔ], although I've transcribed them all as [o], judging them to be still generally within [o]'s parameters. For the word "say," the variable pronunciations [sɛɪ] and [səɛɪ] appear in both speech contexts, the difference between them being the insertion of an (albeit somewhat

[8] For example, King's use of a personal dative, a feature of SAE (with particular examples coming from Appalachian English, according to the *Yale Grammatical Diversity Project*) in the line "I had me a boy[…]." As mentioned above, however, grammatical features will not be analyzed further.

[9] I should mention that I replaced the original song choice, "Let Me Be There," because it was from the 1970s and therefore not consistent with the 1960s category. I originally considered the higher number of comparable words (across the singers) to be more important than the lack of temporal consistency, but I later decided that a match of decades was more important.

unpronounced) schwa-like sound. The following line, sung twice during the outro, illustrates this vowel breaking:

(1) Call her back and say I'm coming home to stay
[səɛɪ]

(2) Call her back and say I'm coming home to stay
[sɛɪ]

This variation mirrors Presley's variable pronunciation of the word in spoken speech. Table 3 also shows that the word "can't" is consistently pronounced [kænt] in both speech contexts, with a monophthong. Lastly, in both speech contexts, the word "I" is usually pronounced monophthongally, [ah], a feature of both AAL (Rickford, 1999: 5) and SAE (Labov, et al., 2006: 125). However, Presley uses both the monophthongal and diphthongal forms, at times even in the same sentence, for example:

(3) And I know I just can't stand it another day
[ah] [aɪ]

Interestingly, these "I" pronunciations prove to be exceptions to the phonological rule that applies to Tennessee (Presley's hometown) for monophthongal realizations of /aɪ/ described by Labov, et al. (2006). The rule states that glide deletion occurs when the phoneme precedes an obstruent or is word-final (2006: 125), as "I" is. Although the rule-defying sentence (3) alone would lead one to presume that Presley's variation is due to vocal conventions in music (see Section 6.3) or perhaps even Crystal's (2009) theory of accent neutralization due to melody (see Section 2.1)—it turns out that there is similar variation in the word in Presley's spoken speech (see Table 3). That leads me to believe that the choice of diphthongal "I" is actually a matter of either stress or phonological context.

Table 3. Pronunciations of four words in spoken speech from an interview and sung speech from the song "I'm Coming Home"

Word	Spoken speech	Tokens	"I'm Coming Home"	Tokens
know	[noʊ]	9	[noʊ]	2
say	[səɛɪ], [sɛɪ]	5	[səɛɪ], [sɛɪ]	2
can't	[kænt]	3	[kænt]	2
I	[ah], [aɪ]	11	[ah], [aɪ]	7

Given this comparison of pronunciations, I consider Elvis Presley to be a vocalist with minimal vocal affectation, using the same SAE in spoken speech and sung speech. Relatedly, these data illustrate one of the main drawbacks of Trudgill's (1997) feature-based approach to mimicry in sung speech (my criticisms are discussed in more detail in Section 6 below). The word "can't," for example, does not exhibit the Southern breaking expected of a SAE speaker

(Labov, et al., 2006: 179). Indeed, Presley's pronunciation is almost more monophthongal than the Standard English pronunciation. A comparison of this feature to the profile of SAE (as opposed to spoken speech data of the same speaker) would present a skewed view of the speaker's vernacularity; specifically it would suggest that Presley affects Standard English in sung speech, although that is evidently not the case, as the pronunciations are identical in both speech contexts.

4.3 "Sparrows Can't Sing"

This analysis is of a 1963 recording of the musical number "Sparrows Can't Sing" by Barbara Windsor, from the musical film of the same name. It was chosen in order to illustrate the high degree of difference between sung speech pronunciations similar to Adele's spoken speech,[10] and Adele's own sung speech. It, by way of containing minimal affectation (aside from that resulting from it being a theatrical performance) thus acts as an approximation of what Adele's performances would sound like if she were to use her natural accent, instead of employing an imitation of AAL. For the purposes of the paper, it presents the BrE component (areal) and the 1960s component (temporal) to the Adele and Elvis Presley data, respectively (see Figure 1). It was pondered whether the corresponding spoken speech samples should be taken from the same film, as such an arrangement would ensure two separate speech contexts with the same character. However, I decided that a spoken speech source separate from the film would be the better choice because with the same source being used for the two speech contexts, there is the possibility that the two productions are adjusted for consistent performance of the film character. Therefore, spoken speech samples were taken from the next readily available performance instead.[11]

Table 4 shows that the word "no" is pronounced [naʊ] in spoken speech, with the sung speech pronunciation being [nɔʊ]. Interestingly, the latter pronunciation uses the AmE THOUGHT vowel, although it doesn't sound quite American—the AmE pronunciation of the word would be transcribed as [noʊ]—indeed, they both sound Cockney. The word "there"/"there'd" is pronounced [ðɛː], the /r/ being vocalized in both speech contexts, as in most BrE dialects (Trudgill, 1997: 252). (This can be contrasted with Adele's variable non-prevocalic /r/ usage in "Easy on Me.") Table 4 also shows that a (perhaps somewhat exaggerated) Cockney pronunciation of the word "I" is used in both spoken and sung speech: [ɑɪ]. The first occurrence of this word in "Sparrows" has a fronter vowel, making it sound a bit closer to the American-sounding pronunciation, [aɪ].[12] Lastly, the word "say" is shown to be pronounced as [sɛɪ] in both speech contexts. It is worth noting that in the second of the two tokens in "Sparrows," the diphthong starts on a more open, more exaggerated Cockney-sounding vowel; although I didn't think the pronunciations were different enough from each other to warrant two transcriptions.

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[10] The social stigmatization of the Cockney accent explains its absence in popular music, which becomes apparent during attempts to find any viable non-novelty (i.e., music hall) music to analyze.

[11] This is the 1964 film *Crooks in Cloisters*, which was the cinematic performance by Barbara Windsor immediately following *Sparrows Can't Sing* with a large amount of words. It might be worth nothing that this is the only analysis that does not use interviews to provide spoken speech data. This was due to a lack of available interviews from the 1960s of Barbara Windsor.

[12] A linguistic factor, stress, also seems to influence whether Windsor uses the full Cockney form [ɑɪ] or a shortened form with just the initial vowel, [ɑ]. This variation is seen in the same spoken speech context.

Table 4. Pronunciations of four words in spoken speech from a film and sung speech from the song "Sparrows Can't Sing"

Word	Spoken speech	Tokens	"Sparrows Can't Sing"	Tokens
no	[naʊ]	4	[nɔʊ]	1
there/'d	[ðɛː]	1	[ðɛːd]	1
I	[ɑɪ]	2	[ɑɪ], [aɪ]	2
say	[sɛɪ]	1	[sɛɪ]	2

From these samples it is to be concluded that, though there is indeed some variation in pronunciation—even within the same speech context—both sung speech and spoken speech feature productions from Barbara Windsor in the same Cockney English dialect. For that reason, I consider her to be, like Presley, a vocalist with minimal vocal affectation. Considering the difference in sung speech productions between Windsor and Adele, who come from the same dialect region, it is unrealistic to assume that, for example, unconscious melody-induced dialect leveling (Crystal, 2009) plays a role in the latter's degree of vocal affectation. While all speakers have variation, with variation even being attested in Windsor and Presley's pronunciations within the same speech context, the degree to which the pronunciations of Adele and King differ in their two speech contexts shows that their variation is deliberate and not determined by internal linguistic factors.

5 Discussion

Interestingly, in the interview from which Adele's spoken speech data were taken, she performs an impromptu song (i.e., casual sung speech) in a mixed accent—comprising her natural Cockney accent and some AmE features.[13] This suggests that there is an underlying motive behind at least Adele's affectation: she chooses to use a mixed accent for one genre, or on one occasion, or for one audience type, one speech context, but not for another. This in turn indicates sociolinguistic complications (described in Sections 2.1 and 2.2 above). It is also important to note that the vocal affectation of the singers examined here is in many respects more complex than Trudgill's (1997) singers, and in my view therefore worthy of more comprehensive sociolinguistic attention,[14] to be covered in the following sections.

5.1 AAVE social stratification models as a measure of the complexity of a singer's linguistic appropriation

Rickford (1999) notes that AAL[15] features are greatly varied by social class, age, gender, and speech context, explaining in percentages that seven features,[16] for example, were used more

[13] There is no analysis for these pronunciations because there were not substantial data (only two lines of lyrics).
[14] Trudgill focuses on variables rather than comparing data sets. My criticisms of this approach are detailed below.
[15] Rickford refers to AAL as AAVE (African American Vernacular English).
[16] These features were consonant cluster reduction (referred to as "simplification") not in past tense; realization of voiceless [θ] as [f], [t], or Ø; multiple negation; copula deletion; and deletion of third person present tense *-s*, possessive *-s*, and plural *-s*.

consistently by lower working-class (LWC) speakers than they were by upper middle-class (UMC) Detroit speakers (Rickford, 1999; from Wolfram, 1969).[17] If we apply those standards to the use of AAL features in "Easy on Me," we can see that Adele's impression is actually in some areas consistent enough to be categorically working-class: While she does not use any of the four phonological features listed in the model above a rate of 66%—with that percentage being for deletion of voiceless interdental fricatives (i.e., [θ] → Ø)[18]—Adele does, for example, monophthongize 21 out of 26 occurrences of what would in Cockney English be diphthongal vowels (~[ɑɪ]), giving her a rate of 80%.[19] And such monophthongization—or as Labov, et al., call it, glide deletion (see Section 4.2 for Elvis Presley's use of this feature)—is one of Rickford's canonical features of AAL (1999: 5).

As mentioned—in contrast to Adele—singers from the 1960s, as Trudgill (1997) finds (Section 2.2), are not consistent at all in their use of features (although I myself have not conducted a comparison of their use of features to Adele's). Nevertheless, there are particular aspects of Adele's performance of "Easy on Me" that do not seem to align with the profile of WC AAL, as defined by Wolfram (1969; in Rickford, 1999). One consistent detail of Adele's sung speech (not included in the Wolfram profiles) is her failure to consistently vocalize postvocalic /l/, such as in the word "feel" (see Table 1): In "Easy on Me," she only vocalizes two out of eleven postvocalic /l/s, meaning she vocalizes /l/ at a rate of 18% in that sample.[20] As mentioned, vocalization of /l/ is a feature of AAL (Rickford, 1999: 5) as well as of Cockney English (Trudgill, 2012: 76–77). Therefore, Adele's lack of vocalization is, while still an affectation, an inaccurate feature of her mimicry. It would be expected that there would be no change in the word's pronunciation, and I assume that she is instead (accurately) mimicking GenAm in those circumstances.

In sum, although Adele's mimicry of AAL might be more accurate and consistent than that of Trudgill's subjects in some respects, she still does not use all of the AAL features. Therefore, we might consider that Adele's sung speech accent is either still a faulty impression, in some respects mixing with so-called "General American English," or that she is mimicking an idiolect, or even a mishmash of subdialects. The latter possibility is supported by the fact that Adele's sung speech matches many contemporary vocalists' sung speech affectations, and strengthened by the presence of specific features that, unfortunately for the purposes of the present paper, cannot be effectively summarized in detail because they are paralinguistic, rather than strictly phonological.

5.2 Paralinguistic features

Although this paper could be widened to include AAL grammatical and lexical features (based on the same model of spoken/sung speech data comparison) it would still be incomplete as it would be missing a description of paralinguistic features, as the IPA is limited in that way. Many

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[17] Rickford reviews Wolfram's (1969) feature use data, which illustrates the social stratification of AAL use.
[18] The words analyzed for this variable are "things," and "both" twice.
[19] The specific words analyzed for this variable are (in order of appearance) "I've," "my," "I," "I," "myself," "I," "silence," "I," "I," "time," "I," "deny," "I've," "I," "I," "I," "time," "I," "I," "I," "right," "I," "I," "I," "time," and "I."
[20] The specific words analyzed for this variable are (in order of appearance) "gold," "myself," "still," "child," "feel," "still," "child," "feel," "still," "child," and "feel." Here the only instances of /l/-vocalization that I heard were in the words "world" and "gold," although it is questionable whether the latter could be considered pronunciation as a weak neutral vowel since there is stress placed on the vowel Adele replaces /l/ with.

of the contemporary singers considered for the present discussion, and of course the eventual subjects, shared features such as adjusted voice pitch and intonation. For the present two contemporary singers, paralinguistic features included added distortion of some kind in Elle King's sung speech and pitch lowering and vocal strain in Adele's sung speech. The latter feature has been studied in her music: Edgar (2014), for instance, analyzes the use of vocal strain by Adele, writing that "[her] vocal strain links her performance to generations of blackvoice singers through the tonal representation of pain, incorporating the authenticity of suffering as a decorative musical embellishment" (2014: 174).

6 The drawbacks of preselected variables

A critical limitation of Trudgill's (1997) approach is that it inherently excludes features by way of its process: It charts realizations of preselected sociolinguistic variables (such as non-prevocalic (r), use of AmE [æ] versus BrE [aː], and intervocalic voiced alveolar flapping versus [t] or glottal stop) rather than comparing word pronunciations in two samples from the same speaker to find disparities. The comparison of speech from the same speaker is more effective than the use of speech from a genuine speaker as a reference dialect because it accounts for "individual variations" (Perkins et al, 2010: 1141), and because it is able to find unpredictable or inaccurate features, which may be otherwise obscured in an approach that focuses on preselected features attested in the reference dialect. The study proposed here follows Neuhauser (2008), wherein speakers read the same text, allowing the author to identify "the most noticeable articulatory and phonatory features characterising" the target dialect[21] (2008: 137). However, a consequence of the pop music register (as opposed to specifically prepared speech samples) is that individual words are the longest strings available for comparison.

6.1 Proposed study

The main issue with a study of this type is the quantity of material necessary to establish trends. It is recognized that, in order to establish a trend, hundreds of popular recordings across multiple epochs would need to be transcribed and analyzed. Given the time it took to produce the present results—which reviewed only four words from four subjects—it is simply unrealistic to imagine such a study could be completed without computer assistance of some kind. In addition to transcription, which could be aided by the application of Praat and DARLA, the use of an application for comparing transcriptions from two speech contexts (i.e., sung speech and spoken speech) is necessary. This would essentially be a text file comparison application (e.g., WinMerge) adapted for comparing IPA transcriptions in order to find pronunciation inconsistencies, which could then be interpreted as dialect imitation. After those inconsistencies are collected, they could be grouped and correlated with phonological features (and subsequently dialects) (e.g., AAL/SAE).

On a numerical level, the phonetic inconsistencies could be collected and a percentage ranking of the subjects by degree of vocal affectation could be calculated. The results would be similar in appearance to Trudgill's (1997) data, but more comprehensive, because they are not only based on a higher quantity of recordings, but they also approach the concept as phonological disparities in words in two contexts (rather than simply one: a discography), and not by starting with individual AAL/SAE features. Two main improvements over the materials of

[21] In Neuhauser's (2008) study this was a French accent.

the present paper would have to be ensured: first, the vocal isolation application used to procure sung speech samples would need to be of higher quality. Due to the questionable performance of the web application splitter.ai, the present paper had to resort to all but the most salient inconsistencies and phonological features. With a better splitter and (if necessary) cleanup programs, more nuanced AAL features would be more confidently identified, such as consonant cluster reduction (Rickford, 1999: 4) and unstressed nasal *-ing* fronting (Van Hofwegen & Wolfram, 2010: 433). Second, a larger quantity of music would allow for trends in popular music to be established if the songs were chosen systematically—from music charts, for example.

6.2 Recruitment of singers and laypeople for subjective evaluation aspect

Such a method (of comparing songs, not features) would present the bulk of the production data for the study; however, following Neuhauser (2008), I believe there is additionally a need for actual recruits for the charting of perceptions of dialect appropriation. To my knowledge, no previous studies of dialect imitation in popular music have included subjective evaluation tasks. But for the purposes of the proposed study, in my view it is not only beneficial, but actually necessary to collect perception data for the purpose of correlating them with production data, in order to present a better understanding of the topic of cultural appropriation through dialect imitation. The following two sections review the relevance of two methods for collecting such perception data.

6.2.1 Application of the matched-guise technique

Labov's modification of the matched-guise technique (Labov, 1972: 145; based on technique in Lambert, 1967) could be extremely useful in extracting opinions about dialect imitation. The idea would be to present respondents with AAL variables such as postvocalic (r), consonant cluster reduction, deletion of lateral approximants, and others (Rickford, 1999) in one sung speech track, matched with a "zero section" taken from the same speech context (sung speech). There are numerous possible questions for a subjective evaluation of this type of data, for example:

> Who is the better/worse, more professional/amateur singer?
> What is the age of the singer?
> What era is the recording from?
> What is the ethnicity of the singer?
> What region does the singer come from?

The respondents would ideally be a mix of singers and non-singers. This would allow for a comparison of not only professional opinion from potential producers of the affectation themselves, but also lay opinion, which can be interpreted as accounting for trends in the popularity of music.

6.2.2 Application of Preston's model

Additionally, due to the premise of the study being based on areal linguistic difference, a method for eliciting perceptual areal linguistic data should also be used. A modified version of Preston's

perceptual dialectology map task (Preston, 1989: 25)—a "dialect imitation map"—will prove useful to elicit opinions about the concept of cultural appropriation, an underlying aim of the study. The responses to questions like, "Which dialect areas are responsible for producing the least amount of fake accents in music?" could be collected and examined statistically for trends in opinions about cultural appropriation in popular music. Such questions would inevitably prompt responses revealing opinions about authenticity in singing and linguistic insecurity that were not considered before.

6.3 Effects of vocal training and consultation of vocalists

Montgomery (2020: 301–302) explains that diction training alters a singer's pronunciation; such adjustments—for example, vowel elongation and lowering (e.g., [ɪ] to [ɛ] in post-tonic strings in words like "heaven"), and the rapid and crisp articulation of consonants—can be expected to account for some pronunciation shifts. For that reason, in addition to the collection of perceptions of dialect imitation, it is important to consider the effects that vocal training methods have on singers. The study of imitation proposed here will take into account vocal training methods by consulting professional vocalists and speech training professionals, and the sung speech context will be fully established as a separate linguistic register with its own conventions, in order for a comparison between speech samples to be fairly undertaken. This consultation stage will happen simultaneously with analysis of the data.

7 Conclusions

These efforts go toward defining cultural appropriation in objectively measurable terms. As mentioned above, this paper aims to discern between vocal affectation and the concept of cultural appropriation. Considering dialect imitation as a type of cultural appropriation, we see that the concept of "insiders" and "outsiders," despite being but one defining characteristic of cultural appropriation, is an effective template nonetheless. The subjective evaluation aspect mentioned above becomes important when considering a subject's status as an appropriator; for example, Elvis Presley is considered by most to be an infamous appropriator of African American music, while Adele generally is not. However, as we have seen, the opposite is apparent when considering only speech production. The data on which such a conclusion could be made show both that cultural appropriation cannot simply be reduced to vocal affectation, and that vocal affectation is an objectively measurable phenomenon. If we continue in the study of sociolinguistically understudied phenomena such as AAL/SAE imitation in music, not only will we be able to find and measure the reasons for which someone like Elvis Presley is called an appropriator—but we will be moving toward a comprehensive definition, and linguistic measure, of the entire concept of cultural appropriation.

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