It's Giving Ballroom

From Drag Shows to Gen Z: Exploring the Language of Today's Youth

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Abstract

While linguistic variation between different geographical areas in the United States have been studied more and more in recent years, far less research has been conducted on such variation between different age groups. Perhaps due to the unprecedented role of the internet and social media in shaping language over the past ten years, Generation Z speakers possess a particularly rich range of unique morphosyntactic constructions, many of which have hardly been documented and analyzed. These constructions differ greatly not only in terms of their syntactic structure but also their societal origins. This project is particularly interested in the collection of terms and constructions that developed within the Ballroom scene, first taking root as early as the 1980s before gradually making their way into the everyday language of many Gen Z speakers today. I take a close look at three constructions - *it's giving*, *spotlight not* and the *X is Xing* - highlighting their underlying morphosyntactic and semantic quirks as well as the unifying factors that have made them so popular among Gen Z speakers. I also consider the linguistic journey of these constructions from Ballroom to the mainstream, shining a light upon their origins and the role of linguistic appropriation in their popularization.

KEYWORDS: Generation Z, Ballroom, Linguistic Appropriation

Personal Interest

Since my first year at Yale, I've had a strong interest in linguistic variation. As a British student in the United States, I've been hyper aware of the variety of linguistic differences surrounding me for the entirety of my four years here. I speak a certain way, my friends another, their friends another, and my professors another way entirely. Constructions commonly used in the UK that I had taken for granted as universal of all English speakers weren't as widely shared as I thought, while I am also continually surprised as I am exposed to supposedly widespread American terms for the first time. In both cases, I've observed how quickly new terms and phrases can catch on as my friends and I have become regular users of constructions that others in our group have brought with them. At the same time, I've learned about African American English and other varieties of English within an academic setting. This has served to further open my eyes to the multitude of possible manipulations of the English language and has convinced me to attempt to understand as many of these as possible. One place where I've continually discovered more and more fascinating new constructions is the internet. A self-admitted phone addict, I can't help but smile when a new word or phrase is being passed around and I'm able to pinpoint the exact meme, video, song or social media presence that it was first popularized by. What my phone doesn't allow me to pinpoint, though, are the real life origins of these phrases that led to their eventual presence online. This project has offered me the opportunity to investigate that side of Gen Z language, providing me with a new and interesting perspective on the language that I use every day. I wrote this essay with the intention of it being fun and accessible as well as intellectually engaging and impactful in a different way than both the existing media articles as well as the linguistic academic literature. I hope the next 30 or so pages go some way to doing that.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Language in 2024

"The billionaires are billionaire-ing so hard, you wouldn't believe it" - Stephen Colbert introducing a segment about billionaires on an episode of The Late Show with Stephen Colbert March 6th this year. If the segment had been filmed a handful of months prior, it's likely that Colbert would've chosen to use a different set of words. Such is the rate of linguistic change and the speed with which new words and phrases tend to emerge into the collective internet culture lexicon, it's likely that even just one year ago Colbert hadn't even heard of the *X is Xing* construction that he uses here. This is just one of a variety of constructions that can be characterized as part of the corpus of "Gen Z language": words and constructions that are widespread in their usage amongst Gen Z members, many of which reached that status after being popularized online. Eventually, these terms become so well known that slightly older members of society are also using them, as we see in the case of *X is Xing* and Colbert.

Evidently, language change happens quickly, and often. This has been noted through the observation of the differences in speech between younger and older members of society, for example. It seems natural for the youngest people to embrace non-standard speech as a way of carving out their identity as something unique and distinct from their elders. Language change is most advanced among younger speakers (Labov, 2001) and, at the same time, people tend to speak more conservatively as they get older (Wagner, 2008). According to Wagner, the embrace of non-standard linguistic variants peaks at adolescence before beginning to decline as early as when people enter college or the workforce. The idea that (older) adults speak more conservatively has been further supported by Eckert (2017), who attributes it to the desire to speak more standard English in the workplace. Unsurprisingly, this contributes to clear age-related contrasts in the speech spoken around the United States. The use of *quotative like* - "and then I was like..." - is one such example of a linguistic phenomenon whose usage differentiates society based on age, with people tending to use it less as they get older (Buchstaller,

2015) (D'Arcy, 2007). In today's society it is Generation Z, which refers to those born between 1997 and 2012, that is at the forefront of the creation and embrace of non-standard variants in the English language.

Just three months ago, in December 2023, the Oxford University Press named *rizz*, a word that essentially didn't exist one year prior, the "Oxford Word of the Year". Oxford lexicographers chose a shortlist of eight words, including other newer words like *situationship* and *Swiftie*, before a public vote selected *rizz* as the winner (Oxford Languages, 2023). *Rizz* can be used as both a noun and a verb, denoting the ability to attract and seduce someone through one's demeanor. Popularized by the famous Twitch streamer Kai Cenat, the term's usage exploded in an incredibly short period of time as, according to the OUP, it went from unheard of in November 2022 with 0 online search tokens per million to widespread in June 2023 with close to 0.3 tokens per million, as exemplified in Figures 1 and 2 below (Oxford Languages, 2023). In a similar fashion to many other linguistic phenomena that are typical of Gen Z, some of which will be explored over the course of this essay, *rizz* originated in African American circles before being spread through social media and the internet and its usage increased quickly and dramatically as part of that spread. *Rizz* is a lexical term that can be used as both a verb and noun in the same way as *chat*, for example in sentences like:

(1) a. She just rizzed you up

b. She just chatted you up

(2) a. They have good rizz

b. They have good chat

R*izz* is just one of a multitude of new words and constructions that have emerged over the past handful of years and form part of the body of "Gen Z language". Figures 1 demonstrates the extent of this explosion, with the frequency of online searches for *rizz* going from zero in 2021 to less than 0.01 per million tokens in 2022 to almost ten times that figure in 2023. Figure 2 shows how a term can blow up on a smaller monthly scale, with *rizz* being searched three times as often in June than in the other

months of 2023. Another that springs to mind is *on fleek*, a term that exploded overnight thanks to Peaches Monroee uploading a video on the application Vine that was played 20 million times (Don, 2014). Thanks to the internet and social media, these terms have been able to "take off" at a previously impossible rate while reaching a previously impossibly large pool of people. Whilst some members of society or the media have criticized the usage of these new terms, labeling them as "degraded English" or a sign of a language in decline (Pringle, 2024), a central aim of this project is to highlight that this is not the case. These constructions are all complex - both in terms of their history and development as terms but also in terms of the ways in which they can be used. This essay explores those various complexities for three of these Gen Z constructions, examining their differences and commonalities as well as their significance in understanding ways in which language and society interact in today's world.
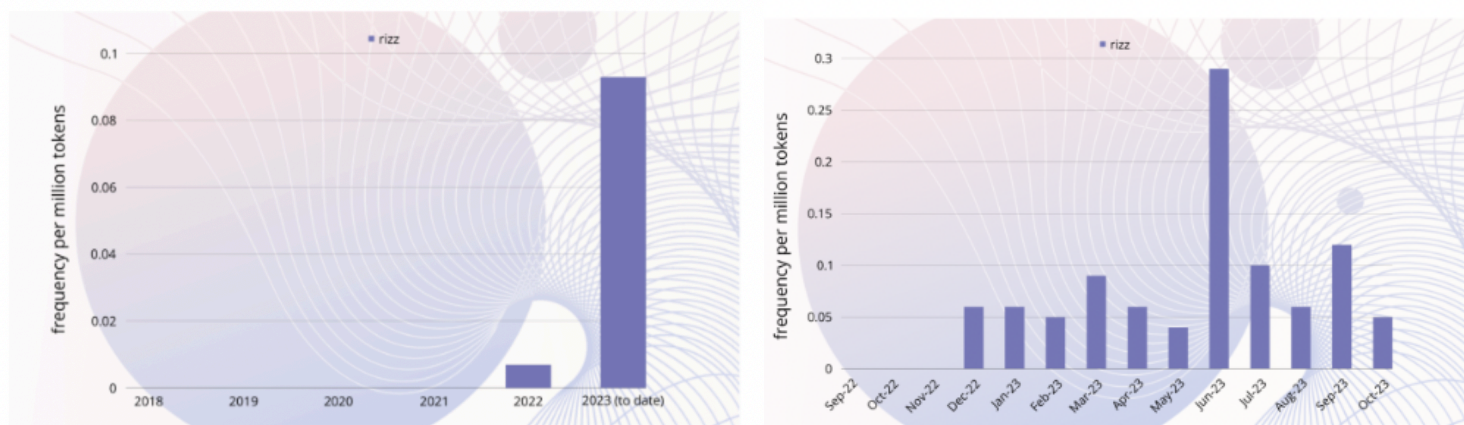
Figures 1&2. Online searches for *rizz* over time**.** Oxford University Press

1.2. Origins

While they are labeled as Gen Z language, the majority of these terms aren't original to the current generation. Many of them were already being used in various smaller speech communities prior to being popularized on a wider scale amongst Gen Z members. So where exactly do these new words and phrases come from? It is certainly clear that the internet and social media play a role in widening

the dissemination of these new terms. Some, like *rizz*, are the product of YouTube and/or influencer culture and can easily be pinpointed to one specific group or individual and maybe even one specific video. These expressions were both born and promulgated online, evidence of the immense social reach of the most popular content creators. They continue to be used online and eventually even break into everyday in-person conversation. *On fleek* is another similar example. Instead of demonstrating the pervasiveness of influencer culture, however, it serves as a sign of the extent to which virality can transform even the most obscure clips or videos into influential factors for an entire generation's language. But going viral is only the tip of the iceberg. Did Peaches Monroee invent *on fleek*? Most likely not. Many of these terms that take off online and soon find themselves part of the wider Gen Z lexicon were already being used in other more intimate circles years in advance. The meme or the video is just the bridge between those different worlds that allows for these words to go from a small in-group to an entire generation of Americans.

One place from which a portion of Gen Z language has originated is the involuntary celibate (incel) culture (Aleksic, 2024). This refers to online communities of men who aren't sexually active and are well known for sharing misogynistic content and resenting those who are more romantically successful. Online chat websites such as 4chan are examples of environments where incel culture has thrived. Part of that thriving has been the creation of new words and phrases that are used to signal in-group status. Aleksic describes how "memes and niche vocabulary become a form of cultural currency, fueling their proliferation". 4chan and similar sites have been the birthing ground for Gen Z terms such as the suffix *maxxing*, which means maximizing, and *cucked*, which conveys the idea of emasculation. After being promulgated within that specific group of site users, these terms eventually find their way onto other more mainstream sites such as Reddit (Gothard, 2020), bleeding their way into wider culture as the words are picked up and reshared in meme and video form. At that point, whether the words are used in the same manner as they were on 4chan is, to some extent, irrelevant. They might be engaged with because people find them funny or ironic, not because they feel a particular allegiance to the words or subscribe to the beliefs associated with them. Regardless, the terms are popularized and slowly edge their way into the mainstream Gen Z language.

Another common starting place for Gen Z language has been racial and sexual minority communities. In particular, African American Vernacular English has proven to be a frequent beginning point for Gen Z language (Drummond, 2023), to the extent that some Black Americans feel as though their language is being appropriated by more privileged youth (Johnson, 2023). One example of this was the response to the May 8th 2021 Saturday Night Live Episode, which ran a sketch titled "Gen Z Hospital" that attempted to comically mimic the language spoken by Gen Z members, utilizing words such as *sus*, *pressed*, *deadass* and *say less* in order to do so (Kickham, 2021). The episode received intense backlash on X as users expressed their thoughts about AAVE being misrepresented as simply Gen Z language. Working with the aforementioned definition of Gen Z language, I do believe that many of these terms can be considered to be a part of this generation's lexicon. But, as highlighted by numerous X users after the SNL sketch, forgetting or refusing to acknowledge their roots is deeply problematic. Just because something fits within the frame of Gen Z language doesn't mean that it should only be understood as a linguistic item belonging to Gen Z. On the contrary, every word should be considered within the broader sociological context from which it emerged and the various speech communities that it touched along the way. This discussion is continued in section 6 as I reflect upon the ramifications of understanding *it's giving*, *X is Xing* and *spotlight not* as parts of Gen Z language.

Figure 3. Screenshot of a 2021 tweet responding to the "Gen Z Hospital" skit

1.3. Ballroom Culture

Though the discussion surrounding appropriation of AAVE is an important one, it's similarly important to point out that Black Americans, or any other speech community for that matter, are not a linguistically homogeneous group. Barrett (1997), for example, argues against the concept of speech communities, particularly in the case of gay and lesbian speakers. Barrett points out that sexual orientation represents just one of many communities that the speakers belong to that influences their language, with there often being plenty of overlap with other communities such as heterosexual women and/or African Americans. To consider all queer people as belonging to a single speech community, and only that community, would be wrong. A similar argument might be made about Black Americans. Hinton and Pollock (2003) demonstrated this through their study on regional variations in the phonological characteristics of AAVE speakers around the country. They found a clear difference in the usage of /r/ between a community in Davenport, Iowa and another in Memphis, Tennessee. Those in the Davenport community produced vocalic and postvocalic /r/ in all contexts, whereas it was context dependent for those in the Memphis community. Clearly, everyone has their own unique idiolects that exist regardless of their membership to specific speech communities.

One example of a slightly more narrow community than isn't solely defined by being an AAVE speaker or identifying as LGBTQ+ is the Ballroom scene, which represents a unique blend of both of these communities. Ballroom culture began to blossom in the house music and queer dance club scene in Harlem, New York during the 1980s, representing safe spaces for Black and Latinx queer expression. People expressed their identity through extravagant performances of gender involving dance, dress and attitude as well as language (Unknown, *Van Vogue Jam*, n.d.). It has and continues to evolve but has always been centered around drag and dance in various forms, unifying collections of Black LGBTQ+ figures in New York. Originating out of a dispute over racism in the voting at a 1967 drag competition, the Ballroom scene was formed in reaction with the goal of providing a more safe and inclusive space for Black drag queens (Prado, 2017). The balls took place late at night in order to provide further security in the face of the discrimination the queens were receiving. The Ballroom scene quickly began to use language in a similar way to the gay males in the UK with Polari in an attempt to fight back and

carve out their own identity in the face of systematic oppression based on being both a person of color and queer (Davis, 2021). A small set of common example words and phrases used are shown in (38) (Cosca, 2023) (Ballroom Glossary, 2017).

(3)   a. *Throwing shade*   Creatively insulting someone

       b. *Vogue*   Highly stylized type of Ballroom dance

       c. *Realness*   Rating an attempt to pass off as cisgender

       d. *Kiki*   Low-key Ballroom function

       e. *Serve* (a look)   Do extremely well, e.g. pull off a look

       f. *Vogue*   Particular style of dance common in Ballroom

       g. *Reading*   Creatively insult Ballroom opponents

       h. *House*   Organization within Ballroom community

       i. *Mother*   Leader of house (usually drag queen)

Figure 4. Dorian Corey explains the concept of shade in *Paris is Burning*

Ballroom culture continued to become more prominent towards the end of the twentieth century. *Paris is Burning*, the well known 1990 documentary that follows the African American, Latino, gay and transgender communities of New York City, has been largely credited as initiating the spread of the language used in those circles to the broader public (Unknown, *Van Vogue Jam*, n.d.). It is often cited as the first known source for constructions such as *Spotlight Not* and *it's giving* (Morris, 2021), which are discussed at more length later on. At the same time, the obvious, but unavoidably important, development and subsequent take-up of the internet meant that media like *Paris is Burning* could spread much more easily than in previous years. What had been constrained to a small minority in New York ten to twenty years prior was becoming more and more accessible to the rest of the country. Even more significant than the internet, though, was the emergence of social media in the early 2000s. This gave a whole new meaning to what it meant for media to spread easily. "Likes", "trending" and "viral" all quickly developed as new concepts that would come to define the childhood of Generation Z). As drag and Ballroom culture began to become more accepted in American society, particularly among the younger generations who were actively using social media, more and more drag and Ballroom influenced media spread online. The hit TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* is one such example. The show pits a group of drag queens against each other in a competition where they undergo various challenges each week to see who can emerge as the most impressive queen. Crucially, the show has served to massively popularize terms that date back to *Paris is Burning* and the 1980s Ballroom culture. One of the challenges, for example, involves each contestant *reading* one another, in other words delivering the "real art form of insult" (Paris is Burning, 1990). It is this pipeline of words and phrases that originated within the Ballroom scene before being popularized amongst a wider Gen Z audience that is the focus of the remainder of this essay.

2. It's giving

2.1. Introduction

It's giving is a construction that has become heavily used in the speech of many Generation Z members over the past three years or so. It is used by speakers to mean something like "this has the vibes of" or "this reminds me of". The vibes in question can vary from superficial physical one to well known social connotations, for example in saying that *it's giving Joe Biden* the speaker could be saying that the *it* in question either *looks like* or is *acting like* Joe Biden. Crucially, the thing being said to give off Joe Biden vibes should not be Joe Biden himself. That would be like looking at a table and saying "this reminds me of a table". This is why famous singer Camila Cabello drew criticism in 2021 for an incorrect use of *it's giving* (Madison, 2021), describing her makeup as *giving dots* when it simply was dots. What Cabello missed is that the construction is based upon comparison and reference, not just a restatement of the obvious. The earliest posts about *it's giving* on Urban Dictionary appeared in March 2020, with the phrase gaining mainstream popularity that year and continuing to become more popular since then. The flexible nature of its meaning is captured aptly through the Urban Dictionary March 23, 2020 definition: "used before describing something or if used alone means serving like serving a look". Its usage can be observed all over social media - on X, Instagram, TikTok, for example - which has likely contributed to its emergence as such a common construction for so many young people. Black Twitter in particular has proven to be a hotbed for the spread of the use of *it's giving* (Friedman, 2022). The examples in (4) demonstrate the basic premise being conveyed through *it's giving* (Amber, 2023).

(4)   a. It's giving Christmas

          b. This has the same vibes of something I associate with Christmas

          c. This reminds me of Christmas in general or a specific thing that happened at Christmas

As with the other constructions that are discussed in this essay, the precise origins of *it's giving* aren't easily discernible from one's engagement with them online and on social media. The phrase floats about in a variety of contexts, with a variety of figures apparently claiming to be the one holding the key to its meaning. Rappers Doja Cat and Rolling Ray have both claimed some kind of ownership over the construction, with the former releasing a clothing line under the brand name *it's giving* and even attempting to trademark those two words as a result. Rolling Ray, meanwhile, maintains that he coined *it's giving* in a 2019 tweet on X and Doja Cat had taken it without his permission (Corbett, 2022). More convincing than either of those claims, however, is the idea that *it's giving* originated within the aforementioned Ballroom scene several years before its emergence into popular Gen Z language (Madison 2021). Its appearance in *Paris is Burning* - Jennie Livingston's 1991 documentary focused on showcasing the culture of drag queens in New York city - seems to validate this claim. More recently, it has been used frequently in TV shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the cast of which released a song called *It's giving fashion* in 2023. A reasonable hypothesis, then, is that *it's giving* first circulated in the Ballroom scene towards the end of the 20th century before being proliferated further into drag culture through popular media by members of that community. *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which launched in 2009 and quickly gathered a large audience, now in its sixteenth season and drawing in hundreds of thousands of viewers with each episode (Stoll, 2023), helped to spread the construction further into mainstream internet culture.

2.2. A Unique Form of Giving

The "standard" use of *giving*, as in (3), involves three arguments: the entity doing the giving, the entity being given and the recipient of the given item. *It's giving,* however, miraculously does away with two of those arguments: there is neither a giver nor recipient. Sometimes, even the thing being given doesn't seem to be there either, i.e. there is no object. Something can simply "be giving".

(5)   The bird is giving food to its children

(6)   a. What do you think of my outfit?

       b. It's giving

Examples like (5) add to our list of questions about the construction. Not only are we questioning who is doing the giving, and who is the recipient of the giving, but also what is being given at all! This is clearly a form of *giving* that's different from the standard transitive usage of the verb. In these cases, *it's giving* serves as a compliment, meaning something like "it's giving off good vibes". *Vibe*, which refers to "a distinctive emotional atmosphere; sensed intuitively" (Khalid, 2004), seems to be influential in the distribution of *it's giving*. In this case, then, person (b) in (4) is expressing a positive reaction to (a)'s outfit.

(7)   a. * Jack's mom gave him chocolate chip cookie

       b. That spotted wallpaper is giving chocolate chip cookie

       c. * That spotted wallpaper is giving a chocolate chip cookie

Figure 5. Screenshot of a 2021 tweet featuring *it's giving*

A further distinguishing factor between standard *giving* and *it's giving* is the ability to take a bare noun complement, as demonstrated in (7). In fact, the noun must be bare for the construction to be grammatical: the inclusion of an overt article or determiner blocks the successful implementation of *it's giving*. The thing being given must be *a chocolate chip cookie* instead of *a* chocolate chip cookie. This

is opposite behavior than the standard form of *give*, where bare singular count nouns such as (chocolate chip) cookie cannot exist in the object position. According to Bruyn et al. (2017) that's a general rule that is always true in English: bare singular count nouns can occur in neither subject nor object position. The *give* in *it's giving* violating this rule proves that it operates differently than not only the standard form of *give*, but also all other verbs. It's possible to think of certain perception verbs such as *smell* or *taste* that can also occur with bare singular count nouns, but only when in conjunction with *like*. The *give* in *it's giving* doesn't work this way and adding a like actually makes the construction ungrammatical.

(8)   a. It smells like chocolate chip cookie

        b. *It smells chocolate chip cookie

        c. *It gives like chocolate chip cookie

2.3. Syntactic Properties

2.3.1. Subject and Object

While the prototypical example of *it's giving* uses *it* as the subject, the construction can also be used with full noun phrases consisting of either animate or inanimate subjects. Unsurprisingly, most common subjects include third person singular or plural since *it's giving* is usually used as a comment on the appearance of someone or something. Saying that *I'm giving X* makes sense, but would be an extremely unusual way of using the construction.

(9)   She's giving successful businesswoman in Forbes 30 under 30

(10)   Her outfit is giving successful businesswoman in Forbes 30 under 30

The constraints on the object are similarly flexible. The object is usually a noun phrase but adjective phrases are also acceptable, albeit less preferable. Manual searching on X seems to confirm that instances like *it's giving chao*s, for example, occur more frequently than *it's giving chaotic*.

(11)   a. It's giving stressed

b. It's giving chaotic

c. It's giving depressed

It's also possible to add an argument for the recipient of the giving, but in these cases it's necessary to insert an overt *vibes* or *energy* in order to maintain the grammaticality of the construction.

(12)   a. It's giving me Jack Sparrow energy

b. * It's giving me Jack Sparrow

This inclusion of *vibes* and/or *energy* as shown in (9) is one argument for the proposition stipulated by Friedman (2022) that *it's giving* possesses a *vibes* component that is usually deleted. This idea was supported in multiple conversations with the members of the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project - a group of students at Yale working on documenting morphosyntactic variation in the United States - about the *it's giving* construction. Under this premise, the example we see in (12a) would be the original form of the construction, but both the recipient of the giving and the vibes/energy component are traditionally deleted in order to get the more common *it's giving Jack Sparrow* form.

<div style="text-align:center">

It's giving me Jack Sparrow vibes

↓

It's giving ~~me~~ Jack Sparrow ~~vibes~~

↓

It's giving Jack Sparrow

</div>

This "null vibes" idea is supported by the existence of comparable unpronounced elements of other similar constructions. Irwin (2014), for example, proposes an unpronounced *totally* component in the Drama SO construction. Irwin proposes that Drama SO is a degree word that modifies the speaker oriented adverb *totally*, and that its distribution matches that of *totally* as a result, allowing for its subsequent deletion. Equally, the Drama SO seems unable to appear in cases where the *totally* can't either, for example after a negative like *not* as shown in (11). Drama SO, then, appears to also be a positive polarity item like *totally*. Irwin's analysis makes sense when the grammaticality of ordinary degree *so* is considered, like in example (12).

(13)   Jamie has SO ~~totally~~ dated that guy before

(14)   * Jamie has not SO dated that type of guy before

(15)   I'm not so happy about Jamie's new boyfriend

Friedman's proposal is that a similar operation is occurring with *it's giving*. The construction's use is flexible, but it sounds most natural in instances where it is perfectly grammatical to say *it's giving me X vibes* as well. This explains why more concrete noun objects are generally preferred with *it's giving*: it makes much more sense to refer to "Jack Sparrow vibes" or "Einstein vibes" as opposed to more abstract ideas like *chaos* or *intelligence*. Everyone has a different idea of what intelligence looks like, and hence what *intelligence vibe*s would be, but there is a much more universal understanding of what it means to be like Jack Sparrow and so what it would mean for something to have the vibes of Jack Sparrow. The construction is built upon the notion of prototypicality - that whatever it is that is *giving Jack Sparrow* is widely understood to represent the prototypical characteristics that are associated with Jack Sparrow, for example being a little crazy. This distinction also seems to hold weight given the environments in which *it's giving* originated and spread. It's particularly easy to imagine the construction being used on *RuPaul's Drag Race* to refer to tangible concepts or ideas that are physically visible or fundamental elements of the show's environment, for example the construction might revolve around the comparison of someone's outfit or dance moves with something, or specific

people such as other famous drag queens or celebrity personalities that are well known and might come up often in conversation.

2.3.2. Tense and Aspect

It's giving is prototypically used in the present tense along with the progressive aspect. It is also commonly used in the past tense, but much less so in the future tense. This was also agreed upon by the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project. This preference for the progressive can be explained through the *null vibes* hypothesis and the aforementioned definition of *vibes* as "a distinctive emotional atmosphere; sensed intuitively". Conveying emotion and intuition in conversation is easier in the present tense when it's possible to directly refer to something physical visible or on people's minds, or in the past tense when the hearers have a clear image of the thing being given in their head, but less so in the future tense when one is trying to conjure up a feeling of emotion about something they can picture less easily. This isn't to say it's impossible to talk about judgments in the future tense - it is of course very common to say things like "the house will smell wonderful" - but there are certainly some constructions where the present tense is the only option, for example with representatives with utterances such as "here's a pencil" or "here's your bag". *It's giving* behaves somewhat similarly in that it relies upon a concrete physical image or mental representation of something. Otherwise, it either wouldn't even be clear what the *it* in *it's giving* is referring to.

(16)   It was giving Bieber aesthetic

(17)   I love her but it gave drag race design challenge

(18)   ? I can't help but think it's gonna give Mick Jagger

Unsurprisingly given the inherent subjective nature of any phrase using *it's giving* (subjective in the sense that it's giving is always attached to a binary judgment about the comparison between things. The feeling that this is a valid comparison likely isn't always shared), the progressive aspect is used most

frequently when forming the construction. *It's giving* is based around individual emotion and intuition - people's personal associations with certain ideas and figures. The progressive aspect encapsulates this subjective side of the construction as well as the idea that what is being given could change in the future. Since the present tense conveys habitual aspect in English, to say *it gives X* seems to assume that a natural continuity to what is being given, like it is a simple state of the world rather than a temporally limited subjective snapshot.

3. X is Xing

3.1. Introduction

The *X is Xing* is another construction that has become part of the language of many Gen Z speakers in the past handful of years. It is used by speakers to mean something like "X is performing/doing well as an X", where X is a noun. It is also frequently used in the negative to indicate that something isn't fulfilling its role as well as one might expect. While *it's giving* has already been noted in at least a handful of articles online, the *X is Xing* is seemingly still undocumented at this point. This might be because it is always realized in several different forms, with prototypical nouns including *budget*, *money*, *queen* and *hair*. As such, it is difficult to trace the origins of the phrase or measure the increase in its usage over the past handful of years. It seems apparent from social media and the internet, however, that the construction is particularly present within the same LGBTQ+ communities that also gave rise to *it's giving*, such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Paris is Burning*. It's another phenomenon that likely first emerged within the context of Ballroom culture before being spread into the mainstream through popular media showcasing queer and drag identity.

(19)   Still in awe watching fireworks from uchiage hanabi, the budget is budgeting (@nagaserice, April 11 2024)

(20)   HER WIG??? QUEEN IS QUEENING (@kk_romeow, April 10 2024)

Both (19) and (20) are real examples posted on X from during the middle of April this year. Each represents typical instances of the usage of X is Xing, where the speakers are expressing how impressed they are with the budget and the wig respectively. In (19) they are commenting on the extravagance of the fireworks performance, hypothesizing that there must have been a big budget in order to afford it. In (20) they are claiming that the queen's wig looks fantastic and as a result she looks like a very beautiful queen. It's the *queening* realization that is the only rendition of *X is Xing* to have received some level of recognition online, with an Urban Dictionary entry from 2018 claiming that it means "the act of a woman acting, looking, behaving as a queen. Often used in Black culture". This definition seems slightly restrictive, but gives a good general idea of how the construction functions. If we were to carry the definition along to the *budgeting* example in (19), it would claim that it means something like "the act of a budget acting and looking like a (well done) budget". This gives a basic understanding, but there is also more to it. (19) and other online examples of *budget is budgeting* show that the sentiment being conveyed is strongly positive - the idea of there being a large budget rather than there being a small one. To say the *budget is budgeting* does not mean, as one might otherwise assume, that there is a strict, limited budget being imposed upon the object that is fulfilling its job of saving money very well. Instead, it means the opposite: lots of money is being spent, and that's clear from the quality of the thing that the money is being spent on.

Figure 6. Screenshot of a 2022 tweet featuring *money is moneying*

3.2. A Different Kind of Verb

The unique, cool part of the *X is Xing* construction is the apparent ability to create verbs out of nouns that cannot function as verbs in Standard English. *To money* is not a normal verb and neither is *to queen* or *to budget* (in this sense). There is of course the standard interpretation of *to budget*, meaning to intentionally save money, but this is actually quite the opposite of what is meant when saying that *the budget is budgeting*. Nonetheless, each of these new, invented verbs makes perfect sense. *To money* is to perform in the way that one would hope money to. So the example demonstrated in figure 6 is lamenting how money isn't what it once was due to the current economic situation and also perhaps due to the fact that the speaker, who only recently began adulting, has struggled with the transition of having to pay for themselves all the time instead of having their needs paid for by their family. Crucially, though, the only thing that can, or cannot, carry out the action of *moneying* is money itself.

(21)   * I am not moneying like I used to

(22)   * My job is not moneying like it used to

The same can be said for other renditions of the construction. While examples like *budget* and *visuals* might seem different because they can also be used as a verb outside of the construction (budgeting, visualizing) their meaning is not the same when deployed in the style of *X is Xing*. To say "The school is budgeting" means that the school is imposing cuts, not that the school is living extravagantly and giving the impression that it has a massive budget. Similarly, to say "the movie is visualizing ..." means that the movie is making something visible, not that the movie is showcasing elaborate visuals. In this way, the *X is Xing* construction gives rise to a new and unique verb form that can only be used with the corresponding noun.

3.3. Syntactic Properties

3.3.1. Restrictions on the Subject

X is Xing is relatively restrictive in the kind of subject that it allows. In a similar way to *it's giving*, but perhaps even more so, the range of possible subjects tends to be to do with money and glamor, focused on appearance and performance. Prototypicality is again important - the construction relies upon the speaker and the audience sharing some understanding of how the X in question should typically behave. As such, it makes sense why *money is moneying*, *budget is budgeting* and *queen is queening* are some of the most common renditions of this construction. Other common examples like *visuals are visualizing* and *hair is hairing* seem to further reinforce this idea. Furthermore, in a similar fashion to *it's giving*, more abstract nouns with less obvious associated visual cues such *chaos* and *intelligence* are certainly unpreferred when attempted within this construction. To say the *chaos is choosing* can be understood, but is an unusual way of utilizing this construction. Again, this is likely down to the fact that everyone has slightly different understandings of chaos and intelligence. The idea of the *chaos chaosing* seems vague and doesn't quite work with a construction that is geared towards the description of observable, rather than abstract, entities.

(23)   Maybe the weirdest moment was the final category, Best Picture, when Al Pacino...Al Pacino'd.

A further area in which the construction is heavily used is with reference to celebrities, movies characters and politicians, (23) being an example of this drawn from March 11th 2024's episode of the Late Show with Stephen Colbert. Colbert is banking on the fact that will share the same conceptions about Al Pacino's character and actions as he does, which is only possible with known figures such as Al Pacino. This explains another common example: *trump is trumping*. The speaker is relying on the fact that the hearers share the same impression of what standard Trump behavior is in order for the utterance to make sense. The impression doesn't necessarily have to be a strongly polarized bad or good moral judgment, but it's certainly likely that the speaker and the community they're in will use the

construction in a way that depends on the listeners thinking either strongly or negatively of Trump, or Biden, or whichever figure is being discussed at the time. In a similar vein, it is common to use the construction to say things like *the midterms are midterming* to convey that the speaker is really struggling with their exams.

3.3.2. Tense and Aspect

Much in the same way as *it's giving*, the *X is Xing* construction favors present and past tenses. Example (23) already demonstrated how it might be used in the past tense for the same effect as the present. While it's not difficult to understand what would be meant by somebody saying "the money is gonna money" as in example (24), this form is hardly ever utilized. This is for the same reasons as *it's giving*: the construction is rooted in physical perceptions that are much easier to make when referring to something immediately physically or topically relevant. Speaking in the future tense requires a kind of guessing that makes such judgments harder to pass. Similarly, the construction only occurs in the progressive aspect, as demonstrated in (25). Allowing for the grammaticality of sentences like "the budget budgets" implies that this is always the case and undermines the purpose of the *X is Xing* construction, which is meant to express excitement and surprise at how something is performing its job to a particularly high standard at the given moment in time.

Figure 7. Screenshot of a 2023 tweet featuring *money was moneying*

(24)   * I'm feeling confident. The money is gonna money

(25)   * Wow! The budget budgets

3.4. Haters Gonna Hate

A different but similar construction that bears resemblance to *X is Xing* is *haters gonna hate*. This is a slightly older phenomenon, at least in terms of the time that it has existed in mainstream pop culture, seemingly dating back to 3LW's song *Playas Gon' Play* from 2000. Part of the song's chorus is captured in (26). The construction - which conveys an indifference to hostile remarks addressed towards the speaker - continued to become more popular in the following years, becoming a viral meme thanks to artist Noory's 2009 depiction (zerosozha, 2010). The sign of it truly breaking into the mainstream, though, was its appearance in Taylor Swift's 2014 hit single *Shake it Off,* the relevant lyrics of which are shown in (27).

(26)   Them haters gonna hate, them callers gonna call, them ballers gonna ball

(27)   Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play

         And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate

Haters gonna hate seems similar to *X is Xing* in that they can both seem to qualify as what Geoffrey K. Pullum and Glen Whitman coined as *snowclones* in the early 2000s. By Pullum's (2004) definition, *snowclones* are "multi-use, customizable, instantly recognizable, time-worn, quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence that can be used in an entirely open array of different jokey variants". In practice, that means constructions that share a common sense and structure but the precise words used to form them varies, for example "putting the X into Y" or "X is the new Y". *Haters gonna hate* and *X is Xing* both seem to be further examples of this phenomenon because they share the trait of being "multi-use and customizable". This is demonstrated in 3LW's song alone, as we see in (26), given that *callers* and *ballers* can both be inserted in the place of haters in order to replicate the same underlying

construction but convey a different meaning based upon the unique word being used. The same can be said for *money*, *budget* and *queen* - amongst the other examples that have and haven't already been discussed - in the case of *X is Xing*. This leaves us with two new snowclones: *X-ers gonna X* and *X is Xing*. The main difference between the meaning of *X-ers gonna X* and *X is Xing* is that the former doesn't tend to engage with elements of pop culture, i.e. famous figures and nouns denoting beauty and glamor, relying less heavily on shared understandings of prototypical examples of those people or concepts. Instead, *X-ers gonna X* tends to describe simple verbs such as call*, run, act, hate* or *teach*, to name just a few. As a result, the words created by using *X-ers gonna X* aren't necessarily new words like in *X is Xing,* and the construction is always much easier to understand (there is not really any serious ambiguity about what it means to hate compared to what it means for the budget to be budgeting).

3.5. Lexical Clones

A further similar phenomenon is lexical clones, which (Horn, 2018) describes as "the full reduplication of a lexical item or phrase to form a modifier-head construction with focal stress on the first (modifying) element". The effect of this is to emphasize the word being modified, drawing attention to it and highlighting how it is conveying a particularly strong version of its meaning in this case. Examples of this are shown in (28) and (29).

(28)   What a nice house! You must be earning MONEY money.

(29)   Do you like him? Or do you LIKE him like him?

In the first example (28) we see how the speaker is emphasizing their surprise at just how wealthy the listener appears to be. It's like saying *you must be earning a lot of money*, but the effect is even stronger and the implication is that just *a lot* wouldn't do the situation justice. The possible feeling of surprise that's being conveyed is also noteworthy. The implication is that the speaker understood that the listener is rich, but upon arriving at the house realized that they had

underestimated the extent of their wealth. They already knew that the listener was earning money, so the lexical clone allows them to differentiate from their original assumption. The second example (29) also demonstrates an emphasizing effect, with the additional nuances of the word *like* adding another layer of meaning to the construction. Here, the speaker is asking the listener to what extent they like someone with the implication that their relationship might be sexual. It could be read as something like *do you like him as a friend or as a love interest?*

Lexical clones, then, bear resemblance to the *X is Xing* construction in that they both seem to express a feeling that something is occurring to a great extent. For example, imagine the contrast between saying something like *wow, the budget is budgeting* and *wow, that's a BUDGET budget*. In both cases the speaker is demonstrating their feeling that the budget is extremely big. The difference is that the *X is Xing* construction allows some greater level of depth to the meaning than lexical clones. Whereas the budget being big, perhaps surprisingly so, is about the only inference that can be made from the lexical clone example, more can be made from the *budget is budgeting* example, which has the capability to go a step further and imply that the budget is being spent well and producing a good outcome. This reading is less possible with *that's a BUDGET budget*. The budget might be being used effectively, or it might not. It's unclear. Furthermore, *X is Xing* is obviously more flexible with its range of possible subjects, specifically its ability to use proper nouns. While it would be okay to say something like *trump is trumping*, it wouldn't make as much sense to say that's TRUMP trump.

Figure 8. 2023 post on X marveling at how expensive rapper Diddy's Halloween costume is.

4. Spotlight Not

4.1. Introduction

Spotlight Not is the final construction being examined in this essay. Just like *it's giving* and *X is Xing*, it has also only reached widespread usage amongst Gen Z members within the last five years or so. There is more substantial literature describing this construction than either of the previous two,

with Morris (2021) and Pereira (2023) having both written about it at great depth, meaning that this section is more of a literature review and discussion. In a similar way to both *it's giving* and *X is Xing*, *Spotlight Not* seems to have originated within the intersection between LGBTQ+ and African American subcultures that is the (New York) Ballroom scene. Yet again, *RuPaul's Drag Race* appears to have played some kind of role in the popularization of *Spotlight Not*, although Morris (2021) notes that it is only rarely used on the show. What Morris does confirm, however, is that *Spotlight Not* can be found most abundantly on drag and gay Reddit spaces, and that the frequency with which the construction is used exploded from almost nothing in 2020 to a sizable amount in 2021. Morris questions whether an observed dip in usage towards the end of 2021 is a sign of *Spotlight Not* is "destined to burn out", but at the time of writing in 2024 anecdotal evidence suggests that this prediction did not come true. In fact, *Spotlight Not* is undoubtedly one of the most recognisable elements of Gen Z language, perhaps even more so than both *it's giving* and certainly more than *X is Xing*.

While *it's giving* and *X is Xing* are multi-word phrases that stand out when used, *Spotlight Not* could easily be confused with other uses of the *not* fragment so is perhaps less easy to identify on first glance.

(30)   [Alex' hair is being pulled] "Ow! Not my hair!"

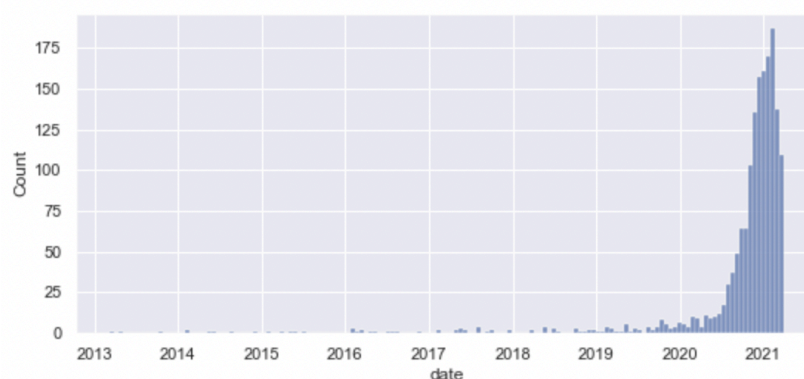(31)   [Edwin is picked on in class for the fifth time in a row] "Not me again!"

Figure 9. Use of Spotlight Not on Reddit between 2013 and 2021 (Morris 2021)

For Morris (2021), the "defining feature" that differentiates *Spotlight Not* - what he calls *ironic "not"* - is the layer of irony that it adds to the utterance, expressing "something like mock horror or playful incredulity" at the situation being referenced. Pereira (2023) builds upon this definition, coining the term *Spotlight Not* because, in the same way as a spotlight, the *not* fragment uses the irony noted by Morris to draw attention "to an event that the speaker believes is worth special mention because of how incredible (or embarrassing, shameful, surprising, bad, etc.) it is". Example (32) below, illustrates this different kind of *not* that's in play. Here, the claim is not that Nicki Minaj did *not* do the splits, or that she shouldn't have done the splits, but that she did the splits and it was pretty incredible and/or surprising. With the additional help of the *queen is queening* form of the *X is Xing* construction, it's clear that the speaker is expressing their admiration for the acrobatics on show during Minaj's performance.

(32)   Not Nicki popping a split. Queen is queening.

Equally, as demonstrated in figure 6 and outlined by Pereira (2023) in their definition above, *Spotlight Not* can be used to express more negative feelings such as embarrassment, whereby the speaker is poking fun at themselves or others for doing something funny.

Figure 10. Screenshot of a 2024 tweet featuring *Spotlight Not*

4.2. Syntactic Properties

4.2.1. Polarity

Pereira, having conducted a detailed online survey and consulted with peers, points out that in spite of the presence of the negative *not,* the polarity of the construction is not negative (Pereira, 2023). He shows this by pointing out the grammaticality of sentences when *Spotlight Not* constructions are paired with positive polarity items such as *too, already* and *somewhere* and the ungrammaticality of sentences when they are paired with negative polarity items like *either*, *yet*, *at all* and *anywhere*. Some examples sentences are shown below.

(33)   a. * Not us being smart either

        b. Not us being smart too

(34)   a. *Not them cooking yet

        b. Not them cooking already

(35)   a. *Not her forgetting her bag anywhere

        b. Not her forgetting her bag somewhere

4.2.2. Restrictions on the Subject and Predicate

The main restriction on the subject of the *Spotlight Not* construction is that it is always in the accusative case. It would be ungrammatical to say *Not I being late for class*, for example. With regards to determiners, Pereira (2023) notes that while *the* and *every* are perfectly fine to be used, *some* isn't favored. He highlights the response of one person who took the survey and noted that they scored *some* low because it implies a "kind of an existential or more general reading" and they are of the opinion that *Spotlight Not* "should refer to particular events". Interestingly, this echoes some of the earlier discussion with both *it's giving* and *X is Xing*, where more tangible events and entities are favored because of their prototypicality.

Pereira (2023) also points out that the predicate of *Spotlight Not* small clauses can only be a PP or an AdjP, although PPs seem to be preferable according to the survey.

(36)   * Not me [DP the dumbest person]

(37)   Not them [PP on the way back home already]

(38)   ? Not us [AdjP unwell and tired]

Despite some of these cases being grammatical and possibly grammatical, it's what Pereira refers to as gerund-participle clauses that are identified as the most popular form of the construction. Attempting other types of clauses with verbs is usually ungrammatical. This means sentences such as *not him eating hot wings* are preferable, instead of examples like *not him eat hot wings* or *not him eats hot wings*, neither of which are grammatical.

4.3. I *know* it's not the same construction

An interesting passing observation made by Morris (2021) is the potential similarity between *Spotlight Not* and what I will call the *emphatic know* construction that he alludes to. *Emphatic know* is used to a similar effect as *spotlight not*, that is to reflect the same "mock horror or playful incredulity" that Morris sees as the key differentiating feature of the latter construction. In (39), for example, we see how both constructions can be used to convey essentially the same meaning: in this case, a sense of surprise and maybe even disgust at the fact that "he" is talking to "her".

(39)   a. I know he's not talking to her right now
        b. Not him talking to her right now

How do we know that the "know" in (39) is actually an example of *emphatic know*? What characterizes *emphatic know* is the direct contradiction between what is being said and what is being meant. *Emphatic know*'s meaning lies in the subversion of the typical understanding of *know*. It is also

always paired with a negating *not* fragment that seems extremely similar to the *Spotlight Not* fragment. What is meant in (39a) is not that the speaker is asserting that "he" is not talking to "her", but rather something very different and more along the lines of *I can't believe he's talking to her right now*. As we know, that's a very similar meaning to what is conveyed by the *Spotlight Not* fragment in (39b). Picking apart the meanings on the finest level, I would say that the only small difference lies in the attitude being expressed. The fact that the personal pronoun is used in (39a) gives the impression that the utterance is more centered around the speaker themselves and their own opinions, whereas (39b) is strictly a commentary on two other people without necessarily the addition of a third party opinion. Saying *I know he's not talking to her right now* implies a personal level of surprise and upset at the fact that he is indeed talking to her right now whereas *not him talking to her right now* doesn't carry the same baggage. For example, the "him" in question might've previously conveyed to the speaker that he doesn't want to talk to "her" and the speaker's comment is more out of disappointment on his friend's behalf because of their lack of self control. Admittedly, though, these details are so minor that the two constructions are likely interchangeable in the majority of cases. Further exploration of the comparison between them would be an interesting avenue for future research.

Figure 11. Screenshot of a 2024 tweet featuring *Emphatic Know*

5. How did these constructions become a part of "Gen Z language"?

5.1. Introduction

So far we have discussed *it's giving*, *spotlight not* and *X is Xing* as well as the idea that each of them originated within the New York Ballroom scene. But we haven't yet explored why and how this process came to be. While the internet is certainly the main vector through which these constructions are spread, stopping there would only tell half of the story. In this section I follow the trail of that linguistic evolution from inception to the present moment, highlighting the importance of the various characters and environments encountered on this journey along the way. In showing that much of today's Gen Z language is deeply rooted in Ballroom culture, I argue that there are two primary reasons for these constructions making the jump from smaller communities to the mainstream. First, the increase in social acceptance of the associated minority groups - primarily Black and LGBTQ+ - has led to a natural increase in the visibility of their unique cultural traits like the language they speak. Second, and more interestingly, this is another example of the tendency towards cultural appropriation of minority groups. I explain why this is the case and how, if at all, these constructions' connection with linguistic appropriation should influence the way we engage with them.

The relationship between language and identity emerged as an area of linguistic research as early as the 1930s, but rose to particular prominence in the United States in the 1960s thanks to linguists such as William Labov, Walt Wolfram, Lewis Levine and Harry Crockett Jr. Labov's famous PhD dissertation *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* was one such early investigation into social variation in language, where he used ground breaking field research techniques to show how the use of English vowels and consonants varied among different socioeconomic groups (Labov, 1966). This paved the way for a host of new linguistic field research, with Labov himself beginning to explore the connection between language and racial identity through his study of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Thanks to similarly thorough fieldwork conducted in Harlem and across

the country during the late 1960s, Labov was able to publish his 1972 book *Language In the Inner City*, which provided one of the fundamental early major documentations of AAVE alongside the works of others like John Rickford. Labov showed that AAVE was as much of an intricate, rule-driven language as Standard English, providing a detailed structural analysis of its many features, an account of its history and evolution as well as a discussion of the real-world applications of his findings, for example in the education of AAVE-speaking students (Labov, 1972). Labov's work on AAVE was just the starting point of the decades of linguistic research that has ensued, demonstrating its distinct grammar system (double negatives and habitual *be* are just two well known examples of many) and proving its status as a unique language (Rickford, 2016).

Around the same time that Labov was cementing himself at the forefront of the research into AAVE, a further intersection of language and society was beginning to be investigated. The discourse surrounding language and gender is often said to have been kicked off by Robin Lakoff's 1973 article *Language and Woman's Place* (Lakoff, 1973). More recently, scholars such as Judith Butler have proposed the idea that gender is a performative social construct, describing how "gender reality is created through sustained social performances means" and "that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990). Here Butler is making the claim that the assumption that there are only two clear cut genders is rooted in socialization more than anything. We might understand there to be two genders because the way we have traditionally used language to describe gender hasn't allowed us to even consider that there could be more, for example by understanding *he* and *she* as the only available third person pronouns. But, by understanding gender as a performative construct, we can empower ourselves to take control of language and make it fit with our identity, rather than the other way around. The words we use and the way we say them encode our gender identity on a daily basis. In a world dominated by heteronormative and patriarchal norms, many minorities might feel that the use of Standard English signals an adherence to the mainstream. It becomes understandable, then, that the

language of minority groups might gradually shift over time away from Standard English, offering what might feel like a more accurate and meaningful way of communicating their identity.

I argue this to be an important point that holds beyond just gender. It isn't just with regards to gender that language is a signal of our identity. Labov's figure heading of the sociolinguistic tradition, for example, shows us other ways in which language is tied to society and culture, and that minority groups such as African Americans often have their own unique, but equally grammatical, variants on Standard English (Labov, 1972). This seems closely related to Butler's ideas about the importance of language as a social marker. Language is fundamentally tied to identity and everything we say - whether deliberately or not - informs those around us of the way we would like to be perceived in the world. It seems a fair claim to make, then, that AAVE is a crucially important part of African American identity and culture (Rickford et al. 2015). Conversely, the language spoken by other minority groups is equally important in defining their identity. But how does this language-identity relationship change in the face of linguistic change over time, especially with regards to these same minority groups?

5.2. Language and Identity

On the one hand, the language of minorities might change as a means of strengthening their sense of identity. One such example is Polari, the language spoken by gay men in the United Kingdom during the second half of the twentieth century in an effort to both hide their sexual identity from the people around them and to subtly indicate it to fellow gay males (Baker, 2002). Functioning as a sort of secret gay language amidst a societal environment of rampant homophobia, Polari allowed gay Brits to cultivate safe spaces where they could truly express themselves without worry of judgment. Events such as the suicide of the famous World War Two codebreaker Alan Turing have been touted as key moments in the development of the shared interest in creating a possible new, secret language (Baker, 2019). Despite being an incredible war hero, Turing was prosecuted in 1952 for homosexual acts and is deemed to have committed suicide shortly afterwards. Homophobia apparently knew no bounds and something clearly needed to change for gay men to feel comfortable and safe expressing themselves in

post war society. Out of this environment came Polari, which was a collection of lexical items borrowed from a host of other languages such as Italian, Yiddish and Cockney Rhyming Slang (Baker, 2002). Example (40) illustrates some of the unique words belonging to Polari.

(40)   a. *ajax* - next to

                b. *bevvy* - drink

                c. *bona* - good

                d. *vada* - to look

                e. *naff* - awful/tasteless

Polari thrived up until the 1970s, at which point its increased popularity meant it had become difficult to maintain as a "secret" language. Popular comedy radio show Round the Horne, for example, famously showcased Polari through the speech of two camp characters Julian and Sandy, saying things like the sentence shown in (41) (Paul Baker, 2019).

(41)   *a. "Oh hello Mr Horne! How Bona to vada your dolly old eke"*

                b. "Hello Mr Horne! How good to see your pretty old face"

Eventually, though, Polari began to die out as the social climate became more accepting of LGBTQ+ figures. There was less of a need for the secret language as gay men felt more able to express themselves in the open. It is worth noting, however, that the influence of Polari can still be felt today. My family has always used the word *naff*, which means tacky/poor quality and remains commonplace in the lexicon of many British English speakers (Forde, n.d.). Overall, though, Polari is an intriguing case study that illustrates how the language of one group - gay men in the UK - changed over time in response to dynamic societal conditions.

        Sticking on the same side of the Atlantic, we can also observe other ways in which the language of minorities has changed. Specifically, the language of Jamaican immigrants in the UK. In the years

following World War Two nearly half a million people migrated from Commonwealth countries to the UK, many of which hailing from the Caribbean (Unknown, *The National Archives*, n.d.). Jamaican Patois quickly became heavily influential in shaping the language spoken in multicultural urban communities all around the UK. Fast forward to today, and Black British English is a widely spoken variant of Standard British English with clear Jamaican roots (Alexandria, 2022). Such is its prominence, the language is today more often referred to as Multicultural London English (MLE), illustrating how it has begun to transcend the bounds of race in recent years. I myself attended a diverse high school in London and can anecdotally attest to the widespread usage of elements of MLE amongst almost all of my peers, regardless of race. What started as a collection of imported loanwords spoken by a small group of immigrants 70 years ago has blossomed over time into a crucial part of the lexicon of large portions of urban youths across the UK. Example (42) shows just a few of the words that I myself use in conversation with friends and have been identified as stemming from Jamaican Patois (Alexandria, 2022).

(42)   a. *Mandem, g(y)aldem*   Men, women

          b. *Dutty*   Dirty

          c. *Bare*   Very / a lot

          d. *Creps*   Shoes

          e. *Nuff*   Many

And while Polari's uniqueness is strictly lexical, MLE is also notable for some morphosyntactic variation from Standard English. In particular, MLE includes non standard uses of *to be*, has several interesting properties as part of its system of negation and also possesses original pragmatic markers. For example, many speakers regularize the *to be* in the past tense by having a consistent *was* in the positive and either *wasn't* or *weren't* in the negative regardless of the subject (Cheshire and Fox, 2009).

(43)   a. I weren't/wasn't talking to you

b. Why weren't/wasn't you at school yesterday?

c. Jamie went home early, he weren't/wasn't feeling it last night

d. We had to dip cos we weren't/wasn't tryna get caught

The negation system is also particularly interesting thanks to the use of negative concord as well as the contractions *ain't* and *don't* (Palacios, 2017). *Ain't* replaces forms of *am not, is not, are not, has not* and *have not* (Quirk et al., 1989) whereas *don't* is a shortened form of *doesn't* (Palacios, 2017*)*.

(44)   a. I ain't got nothing yet mate.

b. No way I'm studying for an exam that don't mean shit to me.

c. I'm gone this weekend anyway so it don't make no difference.

The word *innit* is a further morphosyntactic quirk of MLE, being explained by Urban Dictionary as contraction of *isn't it, isn't he/she, aren't they, isn't there* and many other end-of-sentence questions (hux, 2003). Its meaning has evolved over time so that now it is also used as a tag to express surprise or emphasis (Palacios, 2017).

(45)   a. Houses are mad expensive these days, innit?

b. It's almost time to go, innit?

c. It's their problem, innit. Let's do something else.

The case study of Jamaican Patois, then, represents an example of how the language of a minority group can cross over into the mainstream over time. What might start as simply the unique lexicon of a tight in-group could quickly become pillars of the language spoken by an entire generation. Whereas Polari represents an instance of language narrowing in and strengthening the linguistic identity of one group, Jamaican Patois arguably demonstrates a dilution of the linguistic identity of another. How can

the words in (3) function as social markers in the same way they used to when they are now being used so widely, especially by people such as myself who have no connection to Jamaica at all?

5.3. Covert Prestige and Linguistic Appropriation

The role of Jamaican Patois in shaping MLE raises a further relevant point: covert prestige. Covert prestige, which was first highlighted by Labov in his famous department store study (Labov, 1966), describes the scenario in which members of a speech community regard certain nonstandard languages or dialects as having high linguistic prestige. This often manifests itself as someone - consciously or unconsciously - subtly altering the way they speak, i.e. trying to speak less Standard English, in order to fit in with an exclusive community, even though that community might be generally seen to be socially inferior (aggslanguage, 2009). However, using language fitting within that community would earn the speaker respect and recognition amongst its members. A famous study on covert prestige was performed by Trudgill (1972) in Norwich, United Kingdom, where he showed the differences between how men and women try to adjust their speech in light of their social standing. Trudgill found that whereas male speakers were more likely to display nonstandard, working class speech varieties, prioritizing the achievement of group solidarity over sounding like they are of a high status themselves, women were more disposed to do the opposite. Given that the men felt comfortable enough in their social standing already, they felt less of a need to prove their status through their speech, while the women viewed speech as an opportunity to gain more respect by letting people know that they do indeed deserve a high status since they can speak so well. Obviously, this speaks to the inequality between the two genders in that particular community.

Covert prestige isn't just limited to Norwich, however. In and around London, Jamaican Patois has on one level been criticized for being a "worse" form of English but on another has been so influential that an entire generation of youths are now saying things like "wagwan", irrespective of their race. Across the Atlantic, there is a similar story with AAVE, which is held in covert prestige and often imitated by non Black speakers despite having been lamented as broken English for decades

(Luu, 2020). Such is the pervasiveness of the covert prestige effects, AAVE is often seen on major news channels (Lee 1999). As already touched upon in section 1, many Black Americans have voiced their dismay at the fact that AAVE is being picked up and used by others. Perhaps most frustratingly, these AAVE features are then often mislabelled as simply belonging to Gen Z language (Overs, 2020). This is happening for a few reasons. First, AAVE features appear to spread disproportionately far and wide on social media (Jack Grieve et al., 2018). Grieve's study found that despite being in a minority, "three of our five common patterns of lexical innovation appear to be primarily associated with African American English, showing the inordinate influence of African American English on Twitter". The second reason is simply ignorance. Once a term is labeled as Gen Z language and begins to be passed around between people with no connection to the original speech community, in this case AAVE speakers, the origins are quickly forgotten. I believe that, in a similar way to AAVE on its own, the language of Ballroom is also holding massive covert prestige in today's society. Perhaps it is in an effort to be particularly inclusive towards these minority groups in a way that didn't quite exist to the same extent before. Ballroom language represents a different, cool in-group linguistic experience - something that it seems natural people would want to join. And, thanks to social media, all of these words and constructions spread extremely easily and pervasively as viewers begin to tweet, comment or upload messages containing them online (Zhang et al., 2016). I believe that it's through this process of viewing and recirculation that constructions like *it's giving*, *spotlight not* and *X is Xing* have eventually emerged as such widely spoken phenomena amongst Gen Z members today. In a similar way to how words from Jamaican Patois are no longer solely used by Jamaicans in the United Kingdom, these constructions have grown into many more idiolects just like those within the Ballroom culture presented in RuPaul's race. And just like with Jamaican Patois, people like myself who are neither African American nor a drag queen find themselves using the same constructions. This is why it is possible for me and others to first encounter them as simply Generation Z language: their prevalence has quickly become so great that there are now many speakers who both have no understanding of or connection to their origins. But while the injection of these words and phrases into my vocabulary feels

fun and cool for me, what does it mean for the drag queens portrayed in Paris is Burning? What are the implications for the contestants in RuPaul's Drag Race?

While on first glance it might seem positive that the language of a minority group has spread so broadly, the situation is more complicated than that. Sticking with Ballroom culture, the appropriation of constructions that originated within it arguably dilutes their value as social markers to the members of that original community (Laing, 2021). While twenty years ago someone saying *it's giving* would be a clear indication of their membership to the Ballroom community, this is no longer the case. This understandably leads to the question that if the language used to create a safe space for this group no longer becomes the language of solely this group, does that constitute a damaging of that safe space? (Davis, 2021). It is clear that there are certainly nuances to this linguistic spread. The transition of constructions like *it's giving* and *spotlight not* into more widely used constructions appears to represent a version of cultural appropriation, defined as "cultural borrowing that is in someway inappropriate, unauthorized, or undesirable" (Arewa, 2017), where the majority group has taken them from the minority African American and LGBTQ+ groups in which they originated. The term *cultural appropriation* has been used more and more in recent decades, particularly in the media, to the extent that it has become a highly politicized issue feeding into the debate surrounding "woke ideology". Elliot (2017) and Wanner (2006) offer more complex takes on the term, with the former suggesting that we should move away from the politicized term "appropriation" and instead begin referring to it as "cultural misrepresentation and miseducation" (p. 43). For Wanner, cultural appropriation means "the taking of an original idea by members of a dominant group from a minority without acknowledgement, and insidiously refashioning it, so that said idea appears as if it had always belonged to the dominant group". Given the virality of linguistic terms on the internet in today's world and the understandable difficulty in tracing their origins as people pick them up through posts and short clips, Wanner's definition is perhaps particularly helpful in understanding the emergence of constructions like i*t's giving*, *spotlight not* and *X is Xing* out of the Ballroom scene and the associated problems that all affected speech communities face. The problem doesn't necessarily arrive at the point of refashioning,

but at the point after refashioning where there is an absence of acknowledgment for where the constructions in question actually came from.

6. Discussion

What does all of this mean? For members of the Ballroom community, for young adults belonging to Gen Z, for the future generations of linguistic appropriators? Among linguists, opinions seem to vary. John McWorther (2024) suggests that the crossover between AAVE and non-black American speakers is inevitable and not worth trying to prevent. In McWhorter's words, "Black English is a linguistic spice to be taken off the rack as needed". He believes the solution is to focus on stopping discrimination towards Black people for the way they speak rather than to prevent White people from taking on what he calls "shades of a blaccent". This comes in defense of the White comedian Matt Rife, who has come under fire on X for frequently dipping into AAVE while on stage.

rai is in a tardis ☆ 🍉 @lunargoodnesss · Dec 5, 2023   ...
matt rife's little **blaccent** that he does for every joke he tells is EGREGIOUS like i mean it doesn't help that the jokes themselves aren't funny but also Why are you talking like that

💬 2   ↺ 1   ♡ 6   ⅲ 370   🔖 ↥

Figure 12. X user criticizes Matt Rife's "blaccent"

The argument against Rife is that he is mocking, or at least inviting the mockery of Black people through his speech. Amoura Monroe describes in a Washington Post article how such performances are "giving [the performer] a Black caricature in a way, kind of like a minstrel show" (Chery, 2022). Furthermore, not only does this kind of performance invite criticism of AAVE, but also dilutes the in-group membership effect that has already been mentioned multiple times in this essay and is a fundamental part of why AAVE is so valuable to Black Americans (Laing, 2021). Rife engaging in a "blaccent" on the stage conveys an arrogance and sense of entitlement on his part, and symbolically on

the part of fellow White Americans too. In a similar way that Trudgill's Norwich investigation found that men were confident enough in their status that they attempted to deviate away from Standard English while women did the opposite, Rife's negligence speaks to the White man's privilege to adopt any accent he wants in the name of humor. But when it's black Americans talking in the same accent, they're perceived negatively (King and Kinzler, 2020).

It seems straightforward to take McWhorter's argument about AAVE and extend it to other minority groups too, such as people in the LGBTQ+ community. If McWhorter is consistent, he would also be okay with taking Ballroom-born terms off the "spice rack" in the name of linguistic innovation and cross-group pollination. In some way, I am in agreement with him. The online explosion of the constructions mentioned in this essay, along with the countless others that haven't been covered, is, to me, an incredible and beautiful example of linguistic change and creativity. But I disagree that to use is to honor - in the case of Rife, for example, I see a clear example of somebody actively affecting Black Americans and AAVE in a negative way. If a construction is created by a minority group and used by them in order to carve out their identity, it feels wrong and exploitative to see that dilution of value happen in the name of White entertainment. So, these words should be used carefully and deliberately. Ultimately, the wheel will keep spinning regardless: the spread of language is unstoppable. Within a year or two, there will no doubt be a hot, new selection of popular constructions constituting Gen Z language, perhaps also from the Ballroom scene given that I expect the pipeline described in this essay to continue to exist beyond just *it's giving*, *X is Xing* and *spotlight not*. In fact, some, like Adam Aleksic, are already predicting the next terms to "blow up" based on data on the current trending words in the gay communities ((Adam Aleksic 2024b)). This could be a fruitful field for further research for those interested in understanding how words go viral online and the extent to which it is either random or can be accurately predicted. Equally, each of the constructions mentioned in this essay can and should be pursued in greater detail by any willing linguist. Given its versatility as a construction and complete lack of prior documentation, *X is Xing* in particular begs further research, alongside any of the future constructions that emerge from the fascinating linguistic backdrop that is Ballroom culture.

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