

‘The way it be settin’ the tone’: AAE Morphosyntax in Ariana Grande’s *thank u, next*

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Introduction

The use of African American English (AAE) in music, particularly those genres historically and socially associated with the Black American community, is a well-known and documented phenomenon. The use of such language has been linked to the creation of ‘street cred’ by Chelsey (2011), an important part of the Black American identity, particularly within music. Recent scholarship has begun to examine the ways in which white musical artists are using AAE in their own music as a way of creating musical identities that benefit from the ‘coolness’ and fetishisation of black culture (Eberhardt and Freeman 2015, Davis 2017). Importantly, these studies are not limited to hip-hop and rap, but extend also to mainstream pop music, which also contains frequent use of AAE features.



This paper contributes to this line of enquiry by examining the use of AAE morphosyntax by white American pop singer Ariana Grande in her 2019 album *thank u, next*, which has received universal claim and commercial success, despite allegations that music and corresponding music videos and promotion are appropriative of black American culture (Kornhaber, 2019).

Methods

For the present study, five salient morphosyntactic features of AAE were identified and then coded for in the entirety of Grande’s album *thank u, next*. Where there were repeated tokens (e.g. in choruses), only the first token was counted. The morphosyntactic features analysed are as follows:

- Deletion of 3rd person singular -s
- Copula deletion
- AAE verbal aspectual marking
- AAE verbal periphrastic future constructions
- Negative concord

The analysis of the musical data provided a total of 46 instances of AAE morphosyntax (the distribution is provided in Fig. 2).

Grande’s speech, taken from a publicly-available interview explicitly discussing the album in question, was then coded for the same features. This allows comparisons between speech and song to be drawn. Of note is the fact that in the interview, Grande has surrounded herself with black friends.

Results

Analysis of the album finds examples of all five features analysed, though with variability in their relative frequencies (Fig. 1).

Feature	Song	Lyrics
3rd Sing. {s} Deletion	<i>7 rings</i>	‘the way it shine’
Copula Deletion	<i>make up</i>	‘I like when you mad’
Aspectual Marking	<i>fake smile</i>	‘I done been through’
Future Constructions	<i>NASA</i>	‘I’mma need space
Negative Concord	<i>NASA</i>	‘it ain’t nothing wrong’

Figure 1: Examples of AAE Features in *thank u, next*

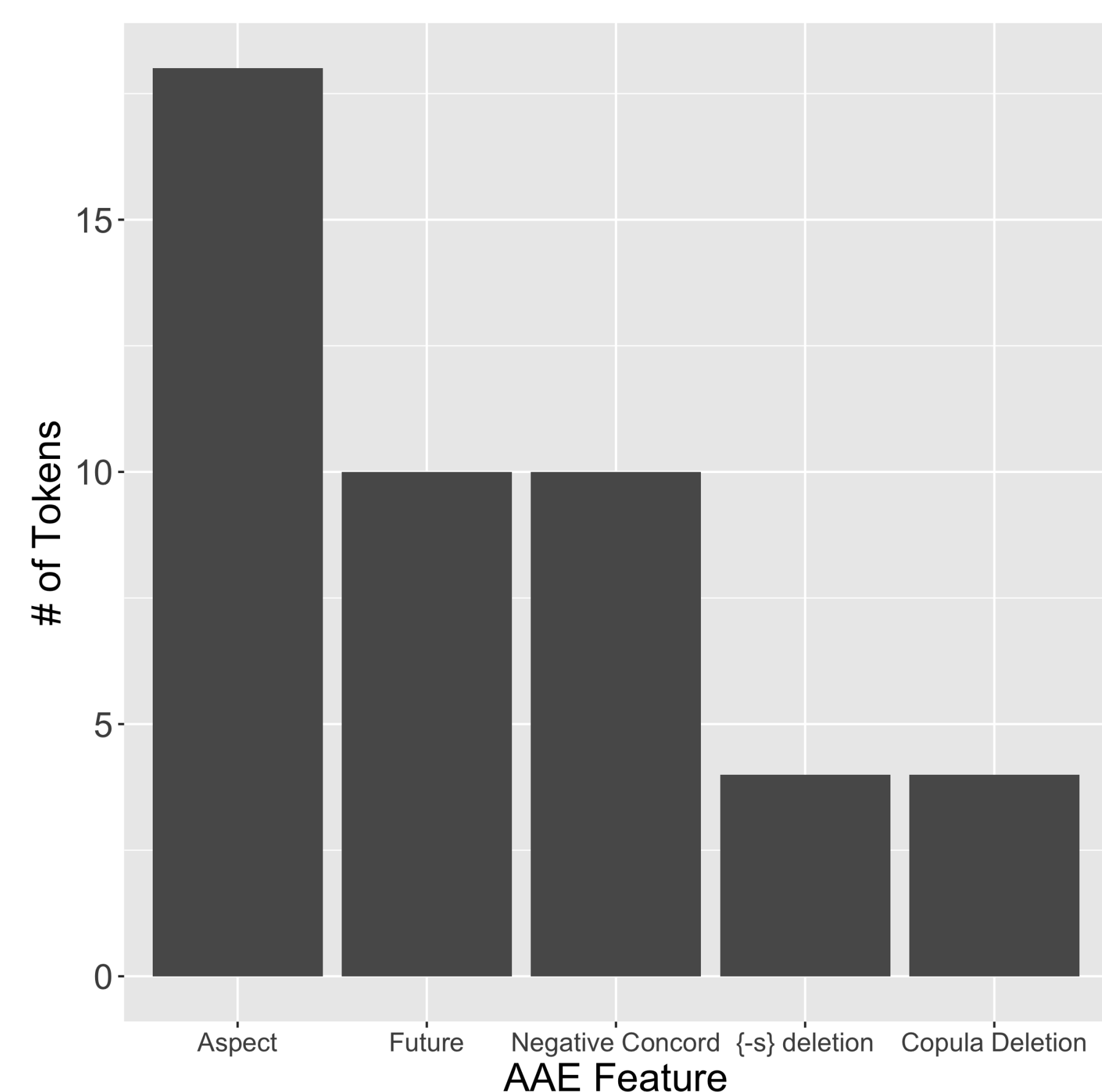


Figure 2: Features of AAE Morphosyntax in *thank u, next*

AAE Aspectual marking is the most frequent feature, while copula deletion and the {s} deletion are the least frequent (Fig. 2). When examined by topic, the songs with themes of independence and sex average 4.5 AAE constructions per song, whilst those about romance average 2.5. In the interview examined for comparison, no instances of AAE morphosyntax were produced by Grande.

Discussion

The fact that AAE morphosyntax appears in Grande’s singing, but not in her speech, indicate that the features examined the paper are being used for their indexical value. They are likely being used to create a persona associated with the ‘sassy/fierce black woman’, a social and racialised stereotype described by Ilsbury (2019), and also associated with aspects of ‘street cred’ (Chelsey 2011). In appropriating such features of AAE in her singing, Grande is able to exploit the fetishisation of Black American culture without suffering the consequences of the lived black experience (Rickford & Rickford 2000).