

Breaking Away From the Binary: Do Drag Queens Adopt a Female Style or a Distinct Drag Queen Speech?

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RuPaul's Drag Race [RPDR] is an American reality TV show that aired for the first time in 2009. In typical *America's Next Top Model* demeanour contestants are competing for the title of America's next drag superstar, participating in various challenges from singing to acting to walking the runway. The contestants are performing Drag Queens. Although Rusty Barrett describes Drag Queens as "almost always gay men" (313), this erases the identity of many of the contestants. Many of them identify as gay men, however a number of contestants also find themselves on the trans-spectrum, identify as non-binary, gender-queer, or as transsexual, sometimes already in transition. Here lies one of the biggest issues with the analysis of Drag: it might be very easy to see the contestants as men dressing up as women, but that would adhere to a binary that doesn't always apply to Drag Queens.

The show gained a wider audience and more attention in mainstream media after it changed from being aired on LogoTV to the more mainstream station VH1. The host is RuPaul, an African-American Drag Queen and one of the most widely known Drag Queens in the

media. He received several Emmy Awards for his show. He also released several music albums, even two books. He is often credited with being one of the most influential Drag Queens and making Drag more approachable for a wider audience.

In his essay "Indexing Polyphonus Identity in the Speech of African American Drag Queens", author Rusty Barrett argues, that African American Drag Queens adopt a "'white-woman' style of speaking" (413) as one of their voices utilised in their performances. But the question is: Do Drag Queens not necessarily adopt a "female" style, but a distinct "Drag Queen" way of speaking? Furthermore, what are the markers of this style? In the context of the show, the aim is not to sound like a woman, but to sound like a Drag Queen and to adhere to the rules and speech patterns used by Drag Queens, as this article further illustrates. In his essay "Speaking Like a Queen in RuPaul's Drag Race: Towards a Speech Code of American Drag Queens", Nathaniel Simmons argues that "drag queens use nonverbal aesthetics to communicate a coherent drag identity as

Queens blur gender lines and use performance as a space in which to bend the dominant American gender narrative binary" (631).

Drag Queens style themselves as female with the help of make-up, wigs, duct tape, fake nails and padding, but they also very often use an excessive amount of gesturing. In addition, Drag Queens also style their language to fit the idea of "linguistic drag". This particular way of speaking derives from Ball culture, which is an underground LGBT subculture in the United States. Their origin lies in cross dressing balls that white men hosted in the 1930s, often excluding black members. The Ball Culture in New York started as a counter movement to those problematic white dance events. Ball culture tried "to figure out how to respond to a society that devalued their lives and attempted to erase their presence" (Brathwaite).

This article focuses on Aja¹, a contestant of season 9. Aja is the stage name of Jay Rivera from Brooklyn, who is the youngest Queen to participate in season 9, as they were 22 during filming. When they are introduced to the other Queens in the first episode of season 9, fellow contestant Sasha Velour explains that Aja "is the number one name in Brooklyn that people are talking about right now", referring to their successful career in the

Drag scene.

Drag is a way of blurring gender lines and expressing identity that cannot be limited to a gender binary, neither in identity nor in linguistic style. Claiming that Drag Queens are trying to impersonate female speech patterns therefore restricts the art form to a gender binary. The point in question is whether language should be looked at through a binary perspective at all. Drag Queens blur the lines of the gender binary, the performers themselves often do not fit in a binary system. To sort them in these binary categories is adhering to stereotypes and a traditional view of gender that is being reconsidered nowadays, for example by scholars like Judith Butler.

I look at four scenes where Aja's style of speech was particularly prominent and point out the markers of their performance and which resources they use to style themselves as a Drag Queen. This research is necessary to work against a prevailing binary thinking in academia and to motivate researchers to think outside these barriers.

Although there is some research on Drag and Drag Queens, a lot of it relies on Rusty Barrett's research. This poses quite a few problems. When analysing whether Drag Queens stylise their language after white women, Barrett bases

¹ Since Aja identifies as genderfluid I will use the pronouns "they/them" when referring to them.

his ideas on the criteria for female speech by Robin Lakoff (Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place*, 1972).

"using specialist vocabulary linked to women's supposed interest (using precise colour terms, the vocabulary of sewing, etc)", "'empty' adjectives like divine or cute", "using tag questions in declarative utterances", "using hedges and super polite forms", "avoiding telling jokes" and "'speaking in italics', which refers to speaking on the assumption that no attention is being paid to one's speech" (Lakoff 8 - 19)

Lakoff's ideas do not meet today's standard of linguistics and gender studies. It is very clear to see how outdated these assumptions about a female way of speaking are. Furthermore, talking of "women's language" in general insinuates that there is a category of "woman" that is universal and shares the same linguistic background, no matter what class, ethnicity, sexuality or age. This belief is rather general and essentialist. According to Judith Butler's thesis on gender performance, gender is "in no way a stable identity", but "an identity tenuously constituted in time" (Butler 519). In this respect, a "woman" is a fluid social construction not an object with essential common features.

Drag slang can also be seen as staged language, in terms of Bell and Gibson's sociolinguistics of performance. *Stage performance* is the "scheduled identification and elevation [...] of one or more people to perform, typically

on a stage, or in a stage-like area such as a space in front of a camera or microphone" (557). Moreover, the "audience has an expectation of skill, and the performer is therefore subjected to an intense audience gaze" (557 - 558). This applies to a reality TV show. RPDR is targeted at a mainstream audience, however, there is a wide audience of Drag fans who expect their Queens to adhere to certain standards. Linguistic Drag is one of them; the audience is used to a particular speech behaviour of Drag Queens' performances. This points out that stylised speech needs "an acculturated audience able to read and predisposed to judge the semiotic value of a projected persona or genre" (Coupland 154). Also, the contestants have to prove themselves to a jury who is familiar with drag and its performance conventions. *Audience design* as Bell and Gibson call it, plays a part here, meaning that "speakers adapt their language style largely in response to their listeners", while *referee design* is said to involve the "initiate use of linguistic features to index a targeted referee group" (Bell and Gibson 560). Both hold true for Drag performance on RPDR. The same applies to *the factor of indexicality*, the idea that "present acts of meaning-making depend upon the meanings of parallel past acts" (560). Drag slang is a very distinct way of speaking with its own system of meaning, vocabulary and catch phrases, which can be understood only if one is fa-

miliar with it. That points to the indexicality of Drag performance.

The following four scenes illustrate how Aja uses a specific way of speaking to underline their identity as a Drag Queen. While analysing the four scenes in aspects of the use of vocabulary, Drag Queen slang, Lakoff's criteria for female speech patterns will be considered as well, since various articles use it as an argument for female speech patterns in Drag slang. Therefore, this will serve as a way of comparing and refute these ideas.

The first scene is Aja's introduction in the first episode. The Drag Queens enter the room successively, introduce themselves in Drag and comment on it out of Drag. They meet the other contestants for the first time and get the chance to talk about their own and the others' style and perceived personality. When Aja enters the room, they call their own drag "vangy" ("Oh. My. Gaga!", 09:50). Aja's use of vocabulary is often rather unusual and the word itself does not exist. It is, however, a slang word, defined by the Urban Dictionary as "a funny, amazing, loving, sweet, beautiful, and perfect girl that can be called a princess". Another remark Aja makes is: "Your edges are officially snatched" ("Oh. My. Gaga!", 09:48). This is very explicitly Drag slang. When women of colour wear wigs or weaves, "edges" are the natural hair that is left out to blend in and make

the wig look more natural. To "snatch" something is also a very prominent word in Drag culture and especially on RPDR, there is even a segment called "The Snatch Game". Therefore, this sentence explicitly calls to Drag culture and Drag slang. Considering this scene from the point of view of Lakoff's criteria for female speech pattern, it is clear that in this case, Aja is "using specialist vocabulary linked to women's supposed interest" (Barrett 222) and also speaking in italics, when they remark that they are "*so* happy" to see everyone.

In the next scene, the Queens are preparing for a challenge, where they have to act as different characters. Every role has an assigned adjective, like "snoozy" or "sassy". Aja explains it as following: "There's literally, like, an adjective for every single Queen" ("She Done Already Brought It On", 07:13). When discussing the way to go on from there, they propose: "Should we, like, stand up and do it, just sort of like... give it a flavour?" (08:05). As one can see, Aja extensively uses the discourse marker "like". This discourse marker is often described as a part of "Valleyspeak", a sociolect originating in South California (Woo). Although this Valleyspeak is often associated with young girls and often stereotyped as "dumb" or "superficial", it is quite widespread through media, even outside of California. Therefore, even Aja, who is from Brooklyn, uses the typical discourse marker. A study shows

that discourse markers are more often used by women, but and younger people in general. The gender difference, however, vanished the older the participants of the study got (Laserna et al). Looking at Aja's vocabulary and Lakoff's criteria, this scene is not very telling, since Valleyspeak cannot be seen as a gender marker only.

The episode *Reunited* looks specifically at Aja and another Queen with whom they were in conflict. The audience gets to see a clip backstage that demonstrates Aja's reaction to another contestant's (Valentina) successful challenge. Aja says the jury "eat [her] up" ("Reunion", 18:47) every time she is on the stage. To eat someone up, as the Urban Dictionary defines it, means "to overwhelm someone with loving, but non-sexual, affection". Once again Aja uses vocabulary that is not necessarily representing their status as a Drag Queen, but rather their very young age and their belonging to a "cool", "hip" Brooklyn group. This scene is very interesting when comparing it to Lakoff's criteria. Although Aja mockingly asks Valentina if she did "stone those tights" – referring to gluing rhinestones on her clothes, commonly done in Drag – which is indeed again "linked to women's supposed interests" (Barrett 222) like the "vocabulary of sewing" it is more linked to Drag practises than anything else. Furthermore, Aja says that Valentina "could walk out in a fucking diaper" on

that "damned stage" (18:52) and would still be seen as beautiful. Using curse words does not match Lakoff's criteria.

Talking about their outburst later on, Aja remarks that "if you're in the moment and you have some shit to say, say it" (19:16). This is one more instance of where Lakoff's "non-cursing" rule is broken. Drag Queens often do speak without minding curse words, so Lakoff's criteria for this instance are misleading. Speaking about Valentina, Aja also uses the word "girl" (19:33) to address her. There are many instances of Aja referring to someone as "girl", just like other contestants do that. One could argue that this is to signify that they acknowledge them as their Drag personality and their performed femininity. However, "girl" can rather be understood as a discourse marker such as "dude". Scott F. Kiesling defines "dude" as "a discourse marker that need not identify an addressee, and more generally encodes the speaker's stance to his or her current addressee(s)" (281). He explains that it is used "mainly in situations in which a speaker takes a stance of solidarity or camaraderie, but crucially in a nonchalant, not-too-enthusiastic manner" (282). The same can be said for the use of "girl" in this context. It is often used when criticising someone or in astonishment. "Girl" does not refer to someone's gender, the same way "dude" does not, since "girl" is also used by the contestants when out of Drag.

Another instance of Drag slang is when Aja then says: "I don't want to say I read her, I just aggressively complimented her" (19:40). To "read someone" means to criticise them in a funny way, or to roast them. To read someone is typical in Drag slang. In a common instalment on RPDR, it is said that "the library is open" and "reading glasses" are given. Then the contestants ridicule each other in a joking way. In this context, critique of other Queens is often referred to as "being read" or "reading someone". How typical for Drag slang this is, is also shown by a song RuPaul released: "Read U, Wrote U".

These four scenes illustrate that Aja is not imitating female speech patterns but adhering to a very distinct Drag slang. Their use of swear words does not fit into Lakoff's categories of female speech patterns and therefore not to Barrett's theory of Drag Queens imitating female speech. Furthermore, Aja uses a distinct vocabulary that is typical for the Drag scene. Drag Queens do not just imitate female speech pattern but use a distinct vocabulary and speech pattern to stylise themselves as Drag Queens, not as women. Women as a category in itself could be considered as practically non-existent, since they are, according to Butler, not a group that

shares essential values and traits.

Rather than seeing Drag slang as a high performance only, I would argue that it can be seen as a sociolect, since language is "the chief signal of both permanent and transient aspects of our social identity" (Crystal 364). Drag slang is a very prominent, distinct slang that is not only used when in Drag, but also out of Drag: because it shows the belonging to a certain group, that is not only limited to stage performances.

However, studying the idea of female speech patterns in Drag Queens and reading more about the idea of female and male speech patterns, it becomes clear that there is still a gender binary prevailing in linguistics. Yet Drag is a way of overcoming these categories and a lot of its performers do not fit into this binary, they often identify neither as female or male. For instance, the focus of this study, Aja, identifies as gender-queer. Can someone like this even fit into binary categories? Are these categories even necessary? I believe this analysis showed that academia should detach from the outdated binary system. This does not only give more freedom to people but also gives way to new grounds and new research in linguistics.

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