A linguist explores what Kamala Harris's voice and speech reveal about her identity

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Every now and then, a scholar's niche expertise lines up with a cultural or political moment and finds an audience hungry for the details. Nicole Holliday is having one of those moments.

Holliday is an acting associate professor of linguistics at UC Berkeley who studies what politicians say, how they speak and what their speech reveals about their identity. Perhaps more than any other scholar, Holliday has spent years examining the speaking style of a politician who is also having a moment: Kamala Harris.

What does Harris's enunciation of vowels say about her California roots? How do a few choice words on the debate stage speak to her background as a Black woman? And how does that all change when she's working a crowd in Georgia or delivering a policy statement in Washington?

"I'm really interested in what happens with the voice, with the body, to inhabit these different parts of a person's style," said Holliday, who has also researched Barack Obama's speaking style. "Politicians are the best people to study this on because you know what their motivations are—they're all trying to get elected, or they're trying to get money, or they're trying to get voters."

Journalists and the general public have become increasingly interested in Holliday's work ever since President Joe Biden dropped his reelection bid and Harris soared to the top of the ticket as the Democratic presidential nominee. Holliday's TikTok videos describing the science of Harris's tone, style and word choice have gone viral, as have her explanations on why, linguistically, it's problematic when people intentionally mispronounce her name. (It's "comma-la.")

Individuals shifting how they speak based on their goals isn't reserved for politicians, and it shouldn't be viewed as inauthentic, Holliday said. Regular people vary their tone and word choice from their workplaces to their homes. Those variations fascinate Holliday.

"Most of the stuff that I'm talking about happens way below the level of consciousness," Holliday said, "It would be really hard to control, even if

you were trying."

Berkeley News asked her what her research on Harris says about Harris's culture and identity, why it matters that some people—including Donald Trump—continue to mispronounce her name, and what language can teach us about the current political moment.

Berkeley News: Can you give me the 30,000-foot assessment of what your research has found especially interesting or special about the way Kamala Harris speaks?

Nicole Holliday: She has a really unique style that reflects her biography. She sounds like an African American woman. She sounds like she's from Northern California. She sounds like a charismatic political figure. But these are different identities that one person would have to inhabit all at once, and they're traditionally seen as in conflict.

Our stereotype of a persuasive politician is not a Black and Indian woman. If you ask somebody to draw a picture of an American politician, they're not drawing Kamala Harris. So she's got to be a politician and, at the same time, sound like herself: a woman and Black and Indian American. And rep her hometown because she is a hometown girl, which can be a little bit of a liability for her now on a national stage because of the way that California is painted.

But damn, she is so California.

Say more. As a linguist, what do you hear in her speech that signals her California roots?

When people describe the features that are geographically unique to California in the linguistic literature, they focus on a few things. There is this thing called the California vowel shift, where the back vowels move forward, and this is something that we see Harris do.

She doesn't say "cool." She says "kewl." She doesn't say goat. She says "gewt," with the tongue far forward in the mouth. This is also a change that's been in progress across America, so a lot of young people, even in the Midwest, will pronounce their back vowels far forward like this. But it started in California. It would be very strange if she had those vowels and she was her age and she was from New York. This is not something that they do over there.

Another example: She has this interesting thing going on with what we call the low back vowels. Her low back vowels are distinct, which is not the case for most Californians, but they're both kind of shifted up.

What that means is that words that are like "cot" and "caught," those for me, a person from Ohio, are the same. But for her, they're slightly distinct, but higher than we would expect. That's a really interesting interplay, because I think that has to do with her being a Black woman from California.

If she were a white woman, or if she were a Black man, we might not see this exact pattern.

You also say she's embodying what's called African American English. What do you mean?

I looked at her debate speech from when she was running as a primary candidate for the 2020 nomination. And when she talks about things that have to do with her biography, specifically about race or about

immigration—these things that she can speak on from personal experience—she uses a set of tones that is more what we would characterize as an African American charismatic style. So she kinda sounds more like Obama.

When she talks about things like the economy or gun control or the climate, she uses a more typical, average white politician style, in terms of her tone. It is very interesting. And in this situation, it's not a function of talking to different audiences, because she's just in the same debate. It's really what she's talking about.

Lastly, she has this very occasional strategic use of casual features that are, for white Americans, just seen as really casual, but can also be what we call "camouflaged features of African American English." This is my favorite thing. African American English is stigmatized. People call it "bad English." They say it's "improper." All of this kind of stuff. But as a result, middle class and upper middle class Black people have found a way to kind of index their Blackness—highlight this part of their identities—without getting chastised for using "bad grammar."

And she does this even in the super formal debate speech.

She uses "gotta" and "gonna" in these particular ways. And of course, yes, white people say "gotta" and "gonna." Everybody in America says "gotta" and "gonna." But in a debate context, that is a little bit surprising, given how formal the rest of her style is.

Is there an example of her doing this that comes to mind?

My favorite quote from her is from Oct. 15th, 2019, in the fourth primary debate. She said, "This is a crisis of Donald Trump's making,

and it is on a long list of crises of Donald Trump's making. And that's why dude gotta go."

"Dude. Gotta. Go." Not "Dude's gotta go." No. For a while, her primary campaign was selling T-shirts that said, "Dude gotta go." It became a catchphrase. When I say that she's doing this as part of a stylistic performance, that's what I mean. Maybe it wasn't premeditated. She didn't think about it ahead of time. But that became a zinger, a one-liner. And when she has these strong zingers, particularly against Trump, they tend to go viral.

The last one is with "I'ma," which is actually the most distinctively African American of these features. She says, "Cause I'ma tell you as a prosecutor" and "I'ma tell you what I saw."

We hear her do it now, too, once in a while. This is her being able to be like, "Look, look, look. I have these fancy degrees and I'm a prosecutor. And yes, I'm the vice president of the United States. But don't forget that I'm from Oakland, and I'm Black."

How much of this is conscious? And how much of this is just the deeply ingrained way we speak that's been honed from decades of talking?

Political figures have debate coaches, speech coaches, things like that. But my sense is that the stuff that she's doing in this case would be really hard to control. Maybe you can make a little argument about the "I'ma" and the "gotta."

But the vowels? I'm a professional linguist, and if someone was like, "Make your vowels more California," I don't think I could do that. Especially not when I'm trying to, like, deliver a policy position. The

cognitive load is too high.

That holds even more for what I'm saying about the stuff that she does with her tone. It's not really possible to do this at the level of consciousness. We choose our words, for sure, but even those in a debate kind of context are a little bit difficult. Those are the things you prep.

But your speech coach is never gonna be like, "All right, so you need to raise the pitch by exactly 50Hz on the first syllable of prosecutor." It doesn't happen. It may be that she has a style in mind, but controlling the specific features that are attached to it is not really possible,

I could see some people with a cynical reading of all of this being like, "Nothing is real, everything is prepared, they're all politicians, and they're all trying to manipulate us." It sounds like you're saying, "Yeah, maybe." But also that it's unlikely because of the more technical parts of speech that linguists spend their careers studying.

I would actually maybe turn that on its head and say, "Yeah, that's every human." We notice them doing it because we know that they're selling something to us.

And this isn't just her. This is Trump. This is J.D. Vance. This is Pete Buttigieg. It's everybody who has that job, because selling the brand is part of the job. That's how they keep their jobs.

Do you think that highlighting your New York-ness if you call the New York DMV is going to get you further than if you sound like you're from California? Sure it is. And nobody had to tell you that. It's not a conscious process. But arguably, we all do it.

It's just that with the politicians, because we know what they want, it's clearer that they're doing it. And the line between a politician doing

something as a cynical ploy and doing something that really is part of their biography that I actually connect with as a voter is very fine.

As a linguist, what do you make of the deliberate mispronunciations of 'Kamala' that have continued, despite her being a prominent national politician for many years now?

The right way to say anyone's name—anyone's name—is how they tell you to say their name. Period. That's the first point.

I know a guy named Christopher. People call him Chris. He doesn't want to go by Chris. It's disrespectful. The third time that he tells you, "My name is not Chris," and you keep doing it, unless you have some kind of really good excuse, it's disrespectful.

For years, Kamala Harris has been putting out [videos](#) saying, "My name is Kamala," and the stress is on the first syllable.

Yes, there are many reasons that regular people can get it wrong in conversation, especially if you're a person that hasn't heard her name very much, you've only read it.

Some people have trouble hearing stress differences. If English isn't your first language, that might be interfering with your ability to hear the way that she's pronouncing her name with the stress. I'm not at all saying that your pronunciation of her name as an everyday person is an indication of your politics. I'm not making that claim.

What I am saying is, if you're the former president of the United States, or a U.S. Senator, or a media personality with extensive training who's had to say her name thousands of times in your life and you've never

bothered to try to say it the way that she says it, that's on purpose.

You've also studied Maya Rudolph's portrayal of Kamala Harris on Saturday Night Live. What makes that parody so good?

My first published Kamala Harris paper was about Maya Rudolph. She takes literally the exact phrases and the tone of those phrases that Kamala Harris uses, and then she dials them up to 11. I'm sure that Maya Rudolph doesn't actually know how to do this the way that I would coach her as a linguist.

She's not looking at the waveform and the pitch up and down and being like, "All right, well, I need to raise myself by 50Hz here." We don't do that. But it's like she really hears what Kamala Harris is doing. She internalizes it. And then when she goes to put on the Kamala Harris costume, it's like a caricature.

This is why parody is funny. Everybody that plays a politician on SNL does this to varying levels of effectiveness. But I would argue that Maya Rudolph is just a really skilled comedian anyway. I'm so glad that they just announced that she's going to play Kamala Harris for the next year. I was really worried that we wouldn't get more Maya Rudolph.

But now I have to write another paper.

There are going to be a lot of speeches in the months ahead. There are going to be a lot of campaign stops. What's next on your list of things to study?

What I didn't have in the earlier analysis was her in different situations.

Now, I hear her being different in Atlanta than in Philadelphia than in Los Angeles. And I want to know: Where is the California-ness? Where is the Black woman-ness? Where is the politician? I think she's doing all of these things all the time. But I'm also interested in how people respond to her.

What's your sense of that response, so far?

Speaker Mike Johnson said to members of Congress that they should not leverage racist and sexist attacks against her, that it would not help their cause. And they cannot seem to stop doing it.

So if she gets portrayed as inauthentic by her opponents, I'm interested in how she responds. Does she shift something about her language in that response, or does she not? Maybe she shouldn't. Maybe the way is to just let this roll off. I'm not a political consultant. But I do think she's got a really fine line to walk.

And there's something really challenging for her, too. With Barack Obama, he did get the criticism that he wasn't really Black. But in his case, the only other option was that he was white, and that didn't work. His opponents were not going to go around saying he was white.

For her, because she has all of these identities at the same time—she is Indian American, she is Black American, she's Jamaican American—there can be a little bit of a whack-a-mole where everyone will always accuse her of not being X enough.

This is disconcerting because it comes from a cultural and linguistic assumption that people can only ever be one thing. But that's not the world we live in. So when we talk about Kamala Harris as a modern candidate, she is in some ways—with her biography, her ethnicity, her gender—embodying all of the ways the country has moved on from the

idea that you can only be one thing at once.

So I'm very interested to see how she manages to stay true to herself to respond to those never-ending critiques, and what she does with different audiences.

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