

STYLISTIC VARIATION AND THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC INTERVIEW: A RECONSIDERATION

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ABSTRACT. *Although sociolinguists have long questioned the value of the traditional Labovian sociolinguistic interview for obtaining data on and explanation for stylistic variation, I suggest that we revisit the sociolinguistic interview as a valuable site for obtaining a range of speech styles and insight into what motivates these styles. In so doing, we must move beyond traditional, rather unidimensional conceptualizations of stylistic variation to embrace more multidimensional ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistic approaches (e.g. so-called ‘speaker design’ approaches). Further, we must move beyond sociolinguists’ persistent focus on unselfconscious, ‘vernacular’ speech and consider a full range of styles, including highly self-conscious performative speech. Once we admit the importance of self-conscious styles in the sociolinguistic interview and consider the wide range of factors that shape speech styles, including speaker-internal factors such as speakers’ conceptualizations of the interview event, the sociolinguistic interview can indeed serve as a rich source of data on stylistic variation.*

RESUMEN. *A pesar de que en sociolingüística se ha cuestionado el valor de la entrevista sociolingüística de tipo tradicional o laboviano para obtener datos sobre la variación lingüística, sugiero que reconsideremos de nuevo el tema con el fin de usar la entrevista para obtener información sobre los tipos de habla y lo que los motiva. Persiguiendo este fin, es preciso ir más allá de la conceptualización tradicional, más bien unidimensional, de la variación lingüística y abrirnos a enfoques etnográficos multidimensionales y sociolingüísticamente interactivos (enfoques de ‘diseño del hablante’). Además, es preciso ir más allá de la persistente focalización de los sociolingüistas en el habla subconsciente y ‘vernácula’ y considerar una amplia gama de estilos, incluyendo el habla preformativa inconsciente. Si admitimos la importancia de los estilos de habla en la entrevista sociolingüística y tomamos en consideración la amplia gama de factores que los conforman, incluyendo los factores internos del hablante como conceptualizaciones de la entrevista misma, la entrevista sociolingüística puede servir como una rica fuente de datos sobre la variación lingüística.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Although sociolinguists have long questioned the value of the traditional Labovian sociolinguistic interview for obtaining data on and explaining stylistic variation, in this paper I suggest that we revisit the sociolinguistic interview as a valuable site for obtaining a range of speech styles as well as information on what might be shaping these styles. In so doing, we need to move beyond traditional, rather unidimensional conceptualizations of stylistic variation as conditioned mainly by attention paid to one’s speech or by the expected speech of one’s audience, to embrace more multidimensional ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistic approaches (e.g. Schilling-Estes 2002). Further, we need to recognize the limitations of an even more fundamental principle behind the sociolinguistic interview, and indeed sociolinguistic study in general – namely, that the ‘best’ type of data is that which is least self-conscious, since unselfconscious, ‘vernacular’ speech traditionally is considered to provide the most accurate reflection of speech as it patterns in everyday, non-research-related contexts. Variationists increasingly are recognizing that people’s everyday speech repertoires include a variety of self-conscious as well as unselfconscious styles. In addition, sociolinguists are coming to believe that there is an element of self-consciousness or performativity to *all* speech styles, even the most seemingly ‘natural’, since speakers always shape their speech to fit the situation at hand and suit their various purposes (e.g. Milroy and Gordon 2003: 50).

Once we admit the importance of self-conscious styles in the sociolinguistic interview and consider the wide range of factors that shape speech styles, including not only readily observable factors external to the speaker such as audience but also speaker-internal factors

such as how speakers conceptualize the interview event (e.g. as a formal interview or casual conversation), the sociolinguistic interview can indeed serve as a rich source of data on stylistic variation and its motivations.

I illustrate my points with examples drawn from interviews conducted in a number of communities in the Southeastern US, with members of several different cultural groups. However, my points are widely applicable and are relevant to data gathered in many communities throughout the world, and to interviews conducted from the earliest days of quantitative sociolinguistics to the present day.

2. THE LABOVIAN SOCIOLINGUISTIC INTERVIEW AND THE ATTENTION TO SPEECH APPROACH

As most sociolinguists know, the traditional Labovian sociolinguistic interview is a loosely structured interview designed to yield large quantities of speech from interviewees that is as casual and natural as possible. As originally conceived, the sociolinguistic interview was also comprised of several different subsections designed to elicit a range of speech styles. The conversational portion would yield either casual or slightly more careful speech, depending on context, a point on which I elaborate further below. In addition, interviewees would produce increasingly careful speech in subsequent sections: a reading passage, a word list, and a list of minimal pairs (Labov 1972a, b). The predicted style shifts were based on the view that speech style was conditioned primarily by how much attention interviewees were paying to speech itself rather than what they were talking about. Unselfconscious speech was predicted to be more casual and more nonstandard, while more self-conscious speech would be more formal and yield more standard language variants. Such predictions were often borne out in early studies, for example Labov's 1966 study of the Lower East Side of New York City. In this study, it was found that, whereas speakers in different social class groups showed different usage levels for various features of vernacular New York City English (e.g. *r*-lessness, interdental fricative stopping), all speakers showed decreasing usage of vernacular variants and corresponding increased use of standard variants as they moved from casual to careful to reading passage to word list to minimal pair style (see, e.g., Figures 4.1 and 4.2 in Labov 1972b: 113-114).

In addition to yielding interesting information on patterns of stylistic variation, the underlying reason for obtaining a range of speech styles in the traditional interview was to elicit, and be able to identify, each interviewee's most casual, least self-conscious style – the vernacular. This focus, and the reasoning behind it, is captured in Labov's Vernacular Principal, which states that “the style which is most regular in its structure and in its relation to the evolution of language is the vernacular, in which the minimum attention is paid to speech” (Labov 1972c: 112). Hence, the main goal in conducting the sociolinguistic interview was, and still often is, to minimize attention to speech, or to overcome Labov's often-cited Observer's Paradox, which states: “To obtain the data most important for linguistic theory, we have to observe how people speak when they are not being observed” (Labov 1972c: 113).

According to Labov (1966, 1984, 2001), no matter how ingeniously we design the conversational portion of the interview to approximate a casual conversation, much of the conversation will still be rather guarded or careful. In order to separate out this careful speech from the real focus of interest, genuinely casual speech, Labov, working with his students at the University of Pennsylvania, devised a ‘decision tree’ based on eight contexts we typically find in sociolinguistic interviews (2001: 94). This tree is shown in Figure 1. As indicated, the four contexts on the left side of the tree are predicted to yield careful, self-conscious speech, and the four on the right to yield casual, vernacular speech.

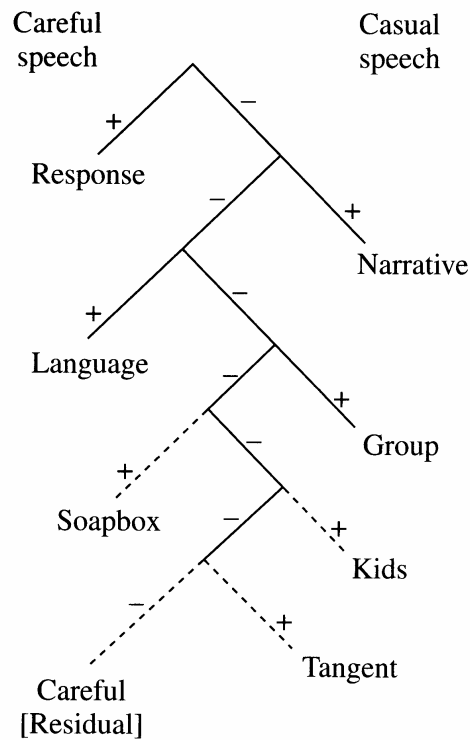


Figure 1. Labov's decision tree for stylistic variation in the sociolinguistic interview (Labov 2001, Figure 5.1, p. 94)

After a number of years of using these contexts to delimit speech styles, Labov and his students conducted studies of interviews with more than 180 residents of Philadelphia showing that indeed the decision tree seemed to be quite useful (Labov 2001). Figure 2 shows results for two of the three vernacular variants whose usage levels were examined across the eight contexts in the decision tree: initial fricative stopping, as in [dIs] 'this', and velar fronting in the *-ing* suffix, as in [rUnIn] 'running'. Index scores were constructed such that higher scores indicate higher usage levels for the vernacular variants.

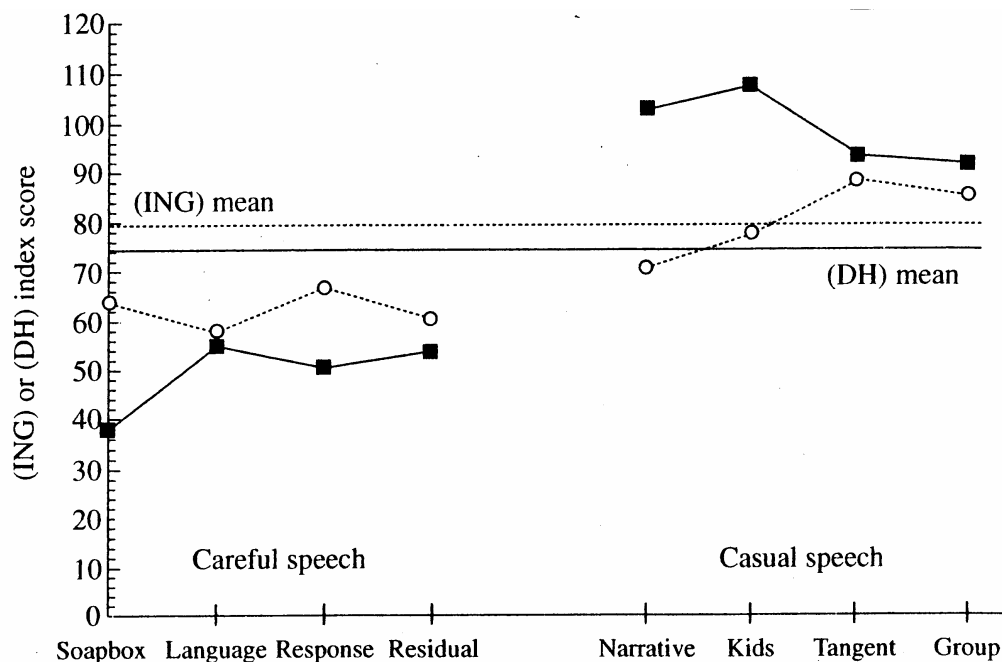


Figure 2. Stylistic differentiation of velar fronting (ING) and initial fricative stopping (DH) across the eight categories of the decision tree (Labov 2001, Figure 5.7, p. 104)

The figure shows that in all four careful contexts, on the left, usage levels for the nonstandard variants [d] and [In] fall below mean levels for these variants; while in the four casual contexts, usage levels are above the mean for all but [In] in the narrative context. Thus, for the most part, Labov maintains that we can fairly reliably distinguish careful from casual style in the sociolinguistic interview using these eight contexts and following the basic idea that style can be arrayed along a continuum based on attention to speech.

However, not long after its formulation, Labov's Attention to Speech approach to stylistic variation began to be criticized for a number of reasons, including its focus on only the single dimension of attention to speech, the difficulty of actually quantifying attention to speech, and the practical issue of being able to reliably identify the contexts in Labov's tree, despite his relative success in this regard. Further, researchers have also questioned the focus on vernacular, unselfconscious speech that underlies the Attention to Speech model, arguing that there is no one single, 'genuine' vernacular for any one speaker, since speakers always shape their speech in some way to fit the situation or suit their purposes, even if they're not feeling particularly self-conscious (e.g. Hindle 1979; Eckert 2000; Milroy and Gordon 2003: 49-51; Schilling-Estes 2001, 2004).

In addition, researchers have also been criticizing the sociolinguistic interview for decades, arguing, for example, that it is actually *less* rather than *more* natural than more typical types of interviews, since people expect interviews to be relatively formal and to follow a set questionnaire (e.g. Wolfson 1976). In addition, even though sociolinguistic researchers are supposed to do their best to relinquish control to interviewees, it has still been argued that there are insurmountable power asymmetries in the sociolinguistic interview. The interviewer usually holds the more powerful conversational role of questioner and a more powerful social role as a researcher associated with a university rather than, for example, a member of a vernacular-speaking and/or minority community (e.g. Labov 1984; Milroy and Gordon 2003: 61-63). Further, it has been argued that the types of discourse that surface in the sociolinguistic interview are very different from these discourses in natural conversation, and so even if the sociolinguistic interview does yield a range of speech contexts and styles, it

reveals little about what these styles are actually like in everyday speech. For example, Wolfson (1976), Schegloff (1997), and others have claimed that because narratives in sociolinguistic interviews are often directly elicited rather than naturally emergent, they are very different in structure from conversational narratives. For example, interview narratives may be monologues rather than joint productions among participants, as we often find in conversations; in addition, interview narratives may be more summary in nature, while conversational narratives may be more elaborate.

3. NEWER CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF STYLISTIC VARIATION

Researchers' dissatisfaction with the Attention to Speech approach has led to a good bit of development in the field of stylistic variation, much of it hearkening back to earlier multidimensional conceptualizations of style in sociolinguistics and related fields, for example, Hymes's Ethnography of Speaking approach, featuring his well-known SPEAKING grid outlining a range of types of factors that might shape speech style, including physical and psychological [S]etting, [P]articipants, and [E]nds or goals (Hymes 1972: 58-65).

One highly influential model in variation studies is Bell's (1984) Audience Design model, which holds that style is contingent primarily on audience. However, the model is not predicated on a simple conceptualization of audience as the immediately present persons one is directly addressing but rather on a more nuanced understanding of various levels of listenership (for example, auditors and overhearers in addition to addressees), as well as the inclusion of both present and non-present (or even imagined or ideal) audience members, or so-called 'referees'. Further, Bell also recognizes topic effects on stylistic variation, further widening the earlier unidimensional conceptualization.

More recent formulations of stylistic variation and individual speech style are even more multidimensional, as researchers recognize that quite a wide range of contextual factors can shape people's speech, including not only speaker-external factors such as formality of the situation, audience, and topic, but also matters more internal to the speaker, especially the desire to project a particular type of persona, maintain or bring about a particular type of relationship between oneself and one's interlocutors, and/or position oneself with respect to wider social groups or societal values or norms (e.g. Coupland 2001b; Schilling-Estes 2002). Because of this focus on speaker-initiated shifts, or speaker agency, these most recent conceptualizations have come to be known as 'speaker design' approaches (Coupland 1996; Schilling-Estes 2002).

Coupland (2001a, forthcoming), Kiesling and Schilling-Estes (1998), Schilling-Estes (2004), and others have also suggested that in addition to broadening our focus to encompass a range of factors impinging on stylistic variation, we should also look more deeply into unfolding discourse, in order to gain insight not only into *how* people use stylistic resources but also *why* – that is, what meanings do linguistic resources have and what functions do they serve in ongoing talk? In particular, Kiesling and Schilling-Estes (1998) and Schilling-Estes (2001) have suggested that it may be fruitful to bring together studies of style in the variationist tradition with some key notions from Interactional Sociolinguistics, namely, framing, footing, and participation framework (e.g. Goffman 1974, 1981; Schiffrin 1994: 97). These may be roughly defined as follows:

- *framing*: participants' sense of what sort of interaction is taking place (e.g. formal interview, conversation between friends)
- *footing*: the roles participants cast themselves and others into as they engage in discursive interaction (e.g. researcher, subject; questioner, answerer)

- *participation framework*: the positions that participants may take in relation to the talk at hand, for example, author, the one who creates a particular stretch of talk; or animator, the one who utters a stretch of talk, perhaps authored by someone else, as in quotation or constructed dialog (Tannen 1989).

Finally, newer conceptualizations of stylistic variation have moved away from focusing on seemingly unselfconscious speech to embrace a wider range of types of styles, including the highly self-conscious speech we find in overtly performative speech events. This is partly because sociolinguistic interviews indeed are rich with self-conscious speech, as I illustrate below, and also because, as noted above, if we adopt the view that speakers use linguistic stylistic resources to enact particular types or facets of identity, it can be argued that all speech is performative, since speakers are continuously displaying some type of identity, even if it is an identity marked by relaxedness and nonstandard speech.

4. ILLUSTRATIONS

Let us now turn to an examination of several illustrative examples. The data are drawn from sociolinguistic interviews my colleagues and I have conducted in various historically isolated communities in the Southeastern US, and also one very different community, a group of inner city African American teenagers in Washington, DC (Froyum Roise 2004). This latter set of interviews are actually sociological rather than sociolinguistic, but they can still be used to examine issues regarding the value of interview data for investigating stylistic variation. The examples demonstrate that indeed traditional conceptualizations of stylistic variation cannot always account for how speech styles actually pattern in interviews. However, they also illustrate that, using more nuanced approaches, the sociolinguistic interview remains a rich site for obtaining and explaining data on stylistic variation. In presenting the examples, I use Labov's decision tree as an organizational framework, and as a way of illustrating that attention to speech is not the only factor differentiating the different contextual 'branches', and that these other factors may provide a richer understanding of stylistic variation than older unidimensional conceptualizations. For example, Eckert (2001) notes that Labov's categories have to do not only, or even primarily, with attention to speech, but also such matters as audience (as in individual vs. group style), topic (as with kids, or childhood games), conversational control (as in the case of a direct response vs. a tangent) and perhaps even genre (as for example with narrative style vs. soapbox style).

4.1. *Narratives*

As a reminder, Labov's decision tree is arranged so that supposedly careful styles appear on the left and supposedly casual styles on the right (see Figure 1 above). In addition, the various contexts are arranged so that those which supposedly can be identified most objectively and reliably appear at the top, with identification becoming increasingly less objective as one proceeds downward (Labov 2001: 89).

Let us begin our examination at the top of the decision tree, with the type of casual speech that should be easiest to identify, the narrative. Many researchers following Labov have maintained that narratives are the most sought-after speech in sociolinguistic fieldwork, since they are allegedly the site of the most unselfconscious, most vernacular speech. However, this may not always be the case, since narratives are often highly performative and hence self-conscious. Sometimes this performativity leads to what seems to be vernacular speech, and sometimes it does not. The examples in (1) and (2) illustrate the complex

interrelation between performative narratives and vernacularity. Both narratives come from interviews conducted in Robeson County, North Carolina, a rural, tri-ethnic community in Southeastern North Carolina comprised of about equal numbers of Lumbee Indians, African Americans, and Whites. In excerpt (1), the interviewee is a young adult African American female, “Felicia” (F), and the interviewer is a young adult African American male, “Alex” (A). Another interviewer is also present, a young adult Lumbee male called “Lou”, but he does not talk in this excerpt. The excerpt is part of story about a hurricane or tornado that hit Robeson County some years ago. Morphosyntactic features characteristic of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) are indicated in bold; two phonological features, *r*-lessness and /ay/ monophthongization are indicated with [Ø] and [a:], respectively, where they occur. I omit portions of the narrative (indicated with ellipses) for considerations of space.¹

- 1 A: Do you remember any hurricane or storms or anything around here?
 2 F: Well, I remember[Ø] um the eighty-four hurricane.... All of a sudden we you know we heard this thing
 3 like a train you know. And I looked outside[a:] and oh lord[Ø] the wind was just blowing, you know, and the
 4 outside[a:] **toilets and stuff was** all up in the air. Okay and you know, it was like boards[Ø] flying
 5 everywhere[Ø], and it was like a red, red whirl just coming. And daddy was asleep, oh lord. I was like,
 6 “Daddy wake up wake up wake up wake up!” Then when he finally woke up, **he gonna try** to drive[a:] to
 7 **granddaddy house**. Toilets flying everywhere[Ø] and then **he gonna try**[a:] to drive[a:]! I said, “Oh, Lord!”
 8 I said, “**We gone**, Lord[Ø]!” I was just like lord I just knew **we was gonna**
 9 die. But **we ain’t** die....

At first glance, this excerpt seems like a perfect illustration of an animated narrative in which the interviewee is so caught up in her story that she forgets all about the interview and so produces unselfconscious speech, rich with features of AAVE, including the two pronunciation features noted above and also such morphosyntactic features as regularization of past be to *was* (“toilets and stuff was”, lines 4-5; “we was”, line 10), auxiliary and copula *be* deletion (“he gonna try”, line 8; “We gone”, line 10), possessive *-s* absence (“granddaddy house”, line 8), and *ain’t* for ‘didn’t’ (“we ain’t die”, line 11). However, an examination of the narrative in (2) suggests reconsideration of the vernacularity of this first narrative. The story in (2) occurred during an interview with Lou, the Lumbee, conducted by Alex, the African American male. Both were good friends at the time of the interview. In this case, it is the interviewer rather than the interviewee who tells the story, about his first night in the university dormitory. For present purposes, I focus on just one variable feature, the alternation of monophthongal /ay/ [a:] with [aI].

(2)

- 1 A: And one n— I’ll tell you what happened the first night[aI]. We got here, my—the first night[aI] we stayed
 2 here Frank came over to the room and he said, “Yeah, because we had some guys[aI] stay over here last year,
 3 and uh, what we’re gonna do is, uh, make a line[aI], a congo (sic) line[aI] from your room to my[a:] room, you
 4 know, and, uh, we’re just gonna party all night[aI]”. And I looked—I looked him straight in the eye[a:], I said,
 5 “Not in my[aI] room, you won’t”. I said, “Now if you want to make a congo line[a:] that’s fine[a:], but it’s
 6 gonna be out of here by ten o’clock”. And after that Frank wouldn’t never mess with me no more after that. He
 7 wouldn’t never mess with more no more after that.

This excerpt, though also an animated narrative, is more problematic than the first, since not only does Alex produce what seems to be his ‘own’ vernacular, but he also performs the voice of Frank, a White friend (lines 2-5), complete with features of Frank’s dialect such as diphthongal rather than monophthongal /ay/. In addition to performing Frank’s voice, we can also say that Alex is also performing his ‘own’ dialect, especially when he quotes himself (lines 6-8). And upon reconsideration, the same can be said for the seemingly ‘vernacular’ Felicia, since her narrative is also very performative and rich with

self-quotation. Thus even when speakers use their ‘own’ voices in narratives, they may be putting them on for effect, not just allowing a default speech style to surface. Further, it is a short step from performance to hyper-performance, or ‘dialect stylization’, to use Coupland’s (2001a) term, and so we must question whether we can automatically classify speech occurring in narratives as casual or vernacular. Indeed, issues associated with performativity and putting on others’ voices may underlie the unexpected unreliability of the ‘narrative’ category as a predictor of casual speech, as evidenced in the fact that it is the only category in Labov’s studies of his decision tree in which a vernacular feature shows unexpected patterning (in this case, unexpectedly low usage levels for [In]; see Figure 2 above). Indeed, Labov himself admits that “the narrative category, which we have relied on as the most substantial and the most objective is doing less work in this analysis than any other. This is contrary to my own initial expectation” (2001: 107).

However, we do not have to omit narratives from our studies simply because they do not always conform to a particular pattern or yield a particular speech style. Whether narratives are animated or stilted typically correlates with factors familiar to variationists, for example, formality, audience, and topic (e.g. danger of death vs. something less dramatic). And further, whether performative narratives yield unselfconscious vernacular speech, performed nonstandard speech, or hyper-performance can be explained by bringing in factors from Interactional Sociolinguistics such as ‘participation framework’ – that is, who is speaking whose words. Thus, in (2), Alex performs different dialects depending on whether he is animating his own or Frank’s voice, while in (1) Felicia may be exaggerating her AAVE dialect when she animates herself as an actor in her story world. Hence, we *can* study narratives and their relation to speech style and identity performance; such study, however, is not as straightforward as we may once have thought.

4.2. *Language*

Now let us move to the ‘careful’ side of the decision tree and consider whether talking about language or dialect necessarily yields self-conscious, more standard speech, as we would expect if indeed it is self-consciousness about language which underlies stylistic variation. Unfortunately this category doesn’t fare any better than ‘narrative’ when we apply such a unidimensional understanding to it. For example, the excerpt in (3), again from Felicia, is a discussion of language, prompted by Alex’s question about how the different ethnic groups in Robeson County talk. (Again, the Lumbee, Lou, is acting as co-interviewer.)

(3)

- 1 A: What—what do you think about the—the way the—the Black people talk, the way the
 2 Indians talk and the way the White people talk around here.
 3 F: {laughs}
 4 A: Is it different?
 5 F: [Most definitely!
 6 A: [Is it different when they talk?
 7 F: Cause, you know, hey, Black people use slang like “Whass::up!” [you know.
 8 A: [Mmhmm. And um, Indians like “buddy jack,” “cuz” and all that stuff.
 9 A: Uh huh.
 10 F: And you know and the White people, you know they try to talk like, “Hypothetically”
 11 and all this {Lou laughs}, you know, it’s all “Respectable” and big— Oh, Lord! They
 12 have to pronounce all their vowels [and honey.
 13 A: [Uh huh. How—how do uh, how—how—you ever heard a Indian say “fire?”
 14 F: “Far?”
 15 L: Hahaha! There it is!
 16 F: Far? {laughs}
 17 L: And tar and—

Despite the focus on language, this discussion is no more stilted or standard than Felicia’s narrative, as evidenced, for example, in the three participants’ laughter and frequent overlapping speech, as well as Felicia’s exaggeratedly lengthened “Whassup?” ‘What’s up?’ (i.e. ‘What’s happening?’; line 7) in demonstration of Black slang, and her exaggeratedly careful enunciations when imitating Whites’ use of formal diction in words like “hypothetically”, in which she pronounces every syllable and uses no reduced vowels (line 12). Further, when Lou (L) enters the conversation in line 17, he is laughing and uses a very high falsetto voice, both indicators of his involvement in and enjoyment of the discussion.

Again, though, just because discussions of language are not always formal does not mean that we have to discard the ‘language’ category in our studies of stylistic variation. Instead, we simply have to determine why in some cases talking about language might yield casual speech replete with vernacular varieties and variants. In this case, we can turn to ‘framing’, since the three participants have framed or conceptualized a seemingly uncomfortable, self-conscious topic as an occasion for good-naturedly making fun of dialect differences, employing a jocular rather than serious ‘key’, to use Hymes’s term (1972: 62). We can also appeal to audience, or more specifically, ‘footing’, since the three participants have positioned themselves, by this point fairly late in the interview, as equals engaged in a casual multi-party conversation to which all contribute fairly equally, rather than as researchers and subjects engaged in a relatively one-sided interview. Thus, for example, Alex helps answer his own question by asking Felicia about a feature he knows about, Lumbees’ pronunciation of *fire* as [far] (lines 14-15), while Lou chimes in with another example, [tar] for ‘tire’ (line 19).

In addition, it should be noted that the contexts in Labov’s decision tree need not be mutually exclusive, since they deal with different dimensions of situation such as participants, topic, etc. Thus, we might just as easily classify the excerpt in (3) as ‘group’ style, which is predicted to be casual, since there are more than two participants.

4.3. Soapbox

Moving down the careful side of the tree, let us examine whether the ‘soapbox’ context is always as careful and standard as it is predicted to be. This context is not always easy to define but can be considered to occur when a speaker ‘gets up on their soapbox’ and delivers “generalized opinions, not spoken directly to the interviewer, but enunciated as if for a more general audience”, often using “an elevated volume level and a repetitive rhetoric” (Labov 2001: 91). For example, strong statements of political views might be expressed on a soapbox, as might strong opinions on personal, family and cultural values. In the excerpt in (4), “Trenton” (T), a 13-year-old boy from the Washington, DC, data set, delivers strong opinions on what an ideal man should be like.

(4)

- 1 I: Before, we talked about, um, what the ideal woman would be like? and you said like C--? What would,
 2 describe for me the ideal man.
 3 T: Person who looks out, for people. His family, carries responsibility, and all that stuff.. **He does what he has**
 4 **to does, he do, I mean, he do what he has to do**, to make a living, provide for his family, or support his family
 5 mentally.
 6 I: And what would he look like?
 7 Normal. He doesn’t have to be.. He could not e—he couldn’t have an ethnic culture. He could just be, between..
 8 He could just be Black or White, Hispanic, Asian, Indian. He could be anything. Because the ideal man is not
 9 what c—race. There’s only one race and that’s the human race. It doesn’t matter what ethnic culture he comes
 10 from. A man comes from, what he makes of his life. That’s what makes the ideal man. What he does with his
 11 life, how he does it, and *why* he
 12 does it.

This excerpt is interesting because, while the soapbox context and standard speech do seem to go together in Trenton's mind, he is not quite able to achieve the level of standardness he is striving for. This is evidenced in the bold text in line 4, where Trenton struggles to find the 'correct' form of *do* and never does end up getting it right. Here the expected style under the Labovian model intersects with another important issue, whether or not one *commands* the particular styles, registers, or dialects he or she wishes to use. Further, there is evidence elsewhere in Trenton's interview that his attempted formal style in (4) is not an automatic correlate of a particular context but is conditioned by a number of factors that apply to the interview as a whole, including audience and formality. The interviewer and interviewee are very different: Trenton is a young Black teenager from the poverty-stricken and violent inner city, while his interviewer is a White middle class female graduate student from the Midwest who has only recently met Trenton. Further, the interviewer uses standard grammar and even a somewhat elevated diction, and she conducts each interview in isolation, in a special room set aside for this purpose. In addition, the interviewer's goals add to the distance: she is conducting sociological interviews in order to obtain particular bits of information rather than vernacular speech, and so she does not always make the efforts sociolinguists do to minimize formality.

Interestingly, though, despite all the factors in this interview working in favor of formality and hence the interviewee's seemingly reactive attempts to produce standard speech, in reality, Trenton is one of the most proactive interviewees in the DC data set, and despite the interviewer's fairly set agenda, Trenton keeps steering the conversation toward one particular topic – his father's seven-year absence from his family and his sudden plan to move back home. This topic underlies discussions such as that in (5), stemming from the question of who Trenton lives with.

(5)

1 I: And who do you live with?

2 T: My mother, and my father's moving back in, but I don't know how long he's gonna be staying.

3 I: Oh, I didn't know your dad was moving back in.

4 T: He's not necessarily moving back in? It's just that he comes and goes. Sometimes he'll stay for like two
5 weeks and then he leaves you for thr—five days or three or seven. And then he'll come back. I don't know how
6 long he's gonna be staying.

Taken in the context of the interview as a whole, we can see the same theme slightly below the surface of the soapbox segment in (4), in which Trenton is adamant that an ideal man should take care of his family, with the subtext being that his father is far from ideal. Thus, Trenton places himself in a controlling footing vis-à-vis the interviewer, even though there are no obvious demographic or overt situational factors that readily explain why he would. Instead, his footing is internally initiated, and it is this footing, I believe, as well as the importance and seriousness to Trenton of the topic of men's responsibility to their families, that actually underlies his attempts to be as standard as possible in the soapbox excerpt, and not just the fact that he is on a soapbox.

In maintaining that there is an inextricable connection between soapbox *topic* and style, I follow Eckert (2001: 120-121), who notes that the style one uses during a soapbox segment depends in large part on what one is on a soapbox about. Hence, while Trenton strives for standardness while on his soapbox about family values, Eckert notes that an African American teenage participant in one of her studies produced a very vernacular soapbox segment about racism, partly to indicate her distance from the White classmates in her audience, and partly to demonstrate her authority to speak on this topic, as a member of a group often subject to racial discrimination.

4.4. *Tangent*

Moving back to the supposedly casual side of the decision tree, let us now examine ‘tangent’, the context defined by interviewers’ veering off on topics of their own rather than simply following up on topics raised by the interviewer. Because interviewees take control over their tangents, we might expect decreased self-consciousness and increased nonstandardness. But this is not always the case, as excerpt (6), again from Felicia, illustrates. Here, the main interviewer, Alex, asks her if Robeson County is a good place to live, but she quickly veers from this topic into a discussion of her future plans. One variable, *r*-pronunciation [r] vs. *r*-lessness [Ø], is indicated where each variant occurs. Again, note that a bit of the excerpt has been omitted (indicated by ellipses) to save space.

(6)

- 1 A: You think this a good place to live?
2 F: Well I mean I think it’s a good place because you don’t get in trouble. I mean, and it’s
3 peaceful. But I’m not gonna be here[r] all my life because I am gonna pur[r]sue a career
4 singing? Cause I can do that?
5 A: Oh yeah?
6 F: Yeah.
7 A: Where—where you want to go?
8 F: My aunt, she um, she wor[r]ks in Char[r]lotte. And **she stay** up there[r], her[r] and my
9 uncle. And there[r]’s a place where[r] she said I could go down in Char[r]lotte. And sing
10 and audition? And I can get into a studio.. and cut a demo.
11 A: Oh really?
12 F: So that’s what **I’ma try** to do. You know, but **I’ma go** to school. I wanna go to school
13 for[Ø] chemistry....
14 L: Would you uh, but I mean, would you like to start at a community college (two-year
15 college) first? That’s what I thought I should have done.
16 F: Well I mean, I think, I mean, I have the ability, and I’m capable of, you know, fulfilling
17 whatever[r] it is that I want to do. So I think that I can you know go to a four[r]-year[r]
18 college and, do just as good as anybody that’s—and finish four[Ø] year[r]s. I mean
19 because I have that—you know, I have that capability.

As we might expect with tangents, this one is vernacular to some extent, since it does contain some vernacular AAVE features, for example third person singular *-s* absence (“she stay”, line 8) and reduction of *I’m gonna* to *I’ma* (“I’ma try”, “I’ma go”; line 12). However, in a number of ways this tangent is actually *less* vernacular than the rest of Felicia’s interview. On the surface, we can see that she uses elevated diction associated with standard rather than vernacular speech, especially toward the end of the tangent, lines 17-20, where she states that she’s “capable” of “fulfilling” what she wants to do, that she has “that capability”. In addition, as shown in Figure 3, a quantitative analysis of one phonological feature of AAVE, *r*-lessness, across the different topical contexts that comprise her interview shows that her *lowest* usage levels are in this allegedly ‘casual’ tangent.

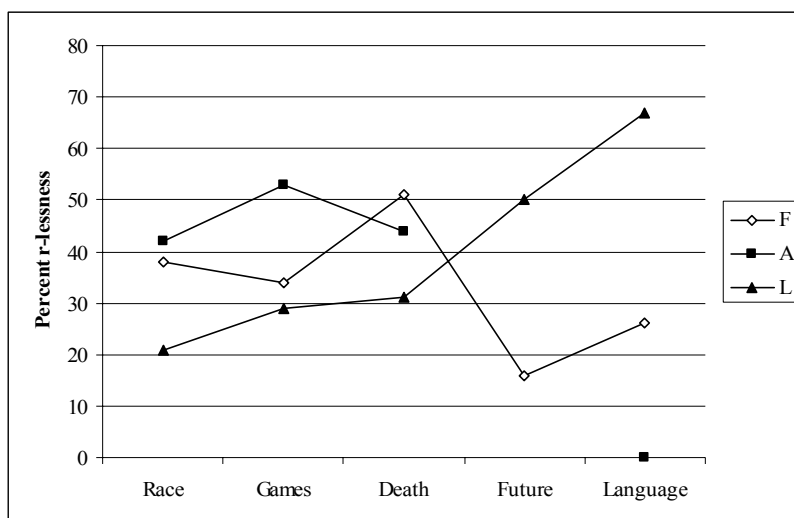


Figure 3. Felicia's r-lessness in different sections of the sociolinguistic interview

Felicia's unexpectedly standard speech in her tangent illustrates that, as with the soapbox context, in tangents too we must consider topic as well as conversational control. In (6), Felicia is talking about her plans to further her education, a topic that is often associated with standard speech; hence, it is not surprising that this tangent would be relatively standard, no matter who has control of the topic.

The issue of conversational control actually pervades the sociolinguistic interview, and we can see the effects of shifting control not only when interviewees go off on tangents but in other places as well, for example when interviewees turn the tables and start asking questions of their interviewers. Example (7), again from Trenton, illustrates.

(7)

- 1 I: Are any of your siblings married?
 2 T: Siblings?
 3 I: Your brothers or sisters?
 4 T: They Ø married. I just said they were.
 5 I: I didn't catch that. I'm sorry.
 6 T: J--, M--, N--.
 7 I: They're all married?
 8 T: Not married, just.. had a child in general. Cause you—you're not always gonna get
 9 married just to be called the rightful father.
 10 I: Right. That's what I was gonna ask you about.
 11 T: I'm sayin, ((c'mon)). You wouldn't—would you ever have—would you ever get married
 12 or just live together and then have a child?
 13 I: That's what I wanted to ask you about.

Although this excerpt is short and I have yet to undertake quantitative analysis of Trenton's usage levels for vernacular features in different sections of his interview, there is not much evidence that he is trying to talk particularly standardly, and indeed a few features of AAVE do surface, for example copula absence in line 4. As a side note, we also see that his question in lines 11-12 seems to disconcert the interviewer, as it might any sociolinguistic researcher, since our goal is to obtain long answers from our interviewees, not provide lengthy stretches of our own speech. However, we as sociolinguistic interviewers might do well to follow Labov's early advice for conducting interviews, when he urges us to relinquish control as much as possible (1984: 40-41). Even though interviewee control does not always yield nonstandard speech, as we saw in Felicia's tangent, if we're interested in speaker agency, then it only makes sense to allow agentivity to come forward, even though interviewees like Trenton will see that it surfaces whether the interviewer wants it to or not.

4.5. *Some styles don't seem to fit anywhere!*

Finally, let us briefly examine a couple of styles that do not seem to fit into the decision tree, or into Labov's model for stylistic variation. As illustrated above, we sometimes find performances and hyper-performances of one's own and other dialects in narratives and discussions of language, but sometimes such performances surface in less expected places. For example, in earlier work (Schilling-Estes 1998), I discussed how an interviewee from Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, Rex O'Neal, launched into an exaggerated performance of the Ocracoke dialect when the interviewer turned the cassette tape over. This caused Rex to re-frame the interview from a casual conversation into an occasion for performing the 'quaint' Ocracoke dialect for the wider audience who would eventually listen to the tape-recording. Rex's performance is given in (8). Note that it is characterized by a number of the defining features of performative language, including exaggerated productions of dialect features (e.g., exaggerated raising and backing of the /ay/ nucleus, in "high tide" and "side"; exaggerated raising of /I/ in [fiIš] 'fish'), exaggerated intonational contours, and the fact that the performance is comprised of a 'pre-packaged' stock phrase we have heard Rex and others use many times, enabling the performer to focus solely on language itself rather than propositional content.

(8)

It's high tide on the sound side. Last night the water fire. Tonight the moon shine. No fish. What do you suppose the matter, Uncle Woods?²

In addition to such short dialect performances, I have encountered a case where an interviewee seemingly performed an entire interview, producing a parody of a serious interview, or what I've called elsewhere a 'mock serious interview' (Schilling-Estes 2001). This parody is marked by such linguistic and extralinguistic features as exaggerated intonational contours, elevated diction, and the presence of background laughter. The excerpt in (9) illustrates and comes from our studies of Smith Island, in Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. The interviewee's pseudonym is Danny (D).

(9)

- 1 D: And I have a sister that was born Easter morning. Which was—was on.. a very rough
2 night.. that she had to travel across the sound, and give birth to it that night going over.
3 I: Now tell me about that. What happened? {background laughter, short laugh by I} Come
4 on, L-- .
5 D: At expect, precisely ten oh—ten fifty p.m., Mother was stricken with a pain.
6 I: {laugh} Well what happened, was it a bad night?
7 D: Yes, it was—it was blowing around forty or fifty.. knots, and.. and mother dear was
8 stricken.. her water bursted. And we had to—she knew she had to get o—over to the
9 mainland right away. And it was nobody.. uh, the doctor was not available. Or to us it
10 was not available, so anyway. Uh, my father got in his boat and, it just happened to be a
11 EMT (Emergency Medical Technician) on this part of the island, that was staying over
12 here this weekend.

As with Rex's dialect performance, the mock serious interview frame seems to be triggered partly by the presence of the tape recorder. However, there seem to be several more central factors. First, the interviewer is not a sociolinguist, and she follows the questionnaire exactly as it is written, setting up a 'serious interview' frame of some sort. Second, the interviewer is a fellow island teenager and close relative of Danny's, and so Danny cannot take the interview completely seriously, since the person who is questioning him about his life and the island community already knows all the answers. Hence, Danny comes up with

the clever idea of providing a ‘fake’ interview in response to the interviewer’s obviously artificial questions.

It seems impossible to fit Rex’s dialect performance and Danny’s performed speech event into a Labovian conceptualization of stylistic variation, since, in each case, highly self-conscious speech goes hand-in-hand with exaggeratedly nonstandard rather than standard speech, at least in terms of phonological features. Further, it does not seem that these performances fit anywhere on the decision tree, since Rex is not talking about language, simply demonstrating it, and Danny maintains the same hyper-performative style throughout his interview, no matter what the context. Again, though, we do not want to disregard even these extremely performative styles, since, as we have seen, self-conscious speech does surface in many contexts, and in order to understand it, it seems beneficial to study the most overtly performative language we can find, namely language used for its own sake, simply to play with language.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I hope I have shown, first, that despite having long been criticized for being too stilted to be of much use, in reality sociolinguistic interviews yield many more types of speech styles than we might expect, ranging from creative performances of narratives, dialects, and discourse, to styles that seem on the surface to be responsive to external stimuli but are actually internally initiated by speakers (e.g. Trenton’s attempted formal soapbox style, which seems to depend more on his overriding concerns in life than on interview context). In addition, I have demonstrated that because of the pervasiveness, even ubiquity, of performative speech, it can be difficult or impossible to classify any speech as truly vernacular and unselfconscious. And even if we can identify some speech as more casual and some as more formal, sometimes casual speech is associated with relatively less self-consciousness, as may be the case with Felicia’s narrative, and sometime with nothing but self-consciousness, as with Danny’s mock interview. Finally, I hope to have shown that we can come to a fuller understanding of the myriad styles that surface in the sociolinguistic interview by adopting agency-centered, multidimensional approaches to stylistic variation rather than relying on reactive, unidimensional approaches, or worse, simply dismissing contextual variation as we aggregate our data for quantitative analysis. I continue to be amazed at how individual each sociolinguistic interview is, and how most individuals we interview persist in shaping things as they see fit and not as we as interviewers intend or expect them to be. And in this, above all, I think the Labovian interview exactly hits its mark, for it indeed give us tremendous insight into what interviewees are really like and how they really talk, if we only know how to listen.

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NOTES

1. Transcription conventions: Parentheses indicate comments/explanatory material inserted by researcher; double parentheses indicate possible but not certain transcription; curly brackets indicate paralinguistic communication (e.g. laughter); square brackets indicate overlapping speech or phonetic transcription; a comma indicates a short pause; one to two periods indicate pauses of slightly longer length; three to four periods (ellipses) indicate omitted material; single dashes indicate false starts; double dashes indicate omitted identificational information such as proper names; colons indicate vowel or consonant lengthening.
2. Note that this phrase literally refers to a traditional island belief that when factors such as high tide in the Pamlico Sound (the body of water that separates Ocracoke from mainland North Carolina), 'water fire' (i.e. glowing phosphorous on the surface of the ocean), and a nearly full moon converge, the fishing will be poor. "Uncle Woods" is apparently one of Rex's ancestors. Again, though, the phrase is not used for its propositional content but as a vehicle for displaying dialect features.

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