

ABSTRACT

SHIVONNE MARIE GATES. Style and intra-speaker variation in African American English: A multi-dimensional approach. (Under the direction of Professor Erik R. Thomas.)

This paper takes a micro-analytical, multi-dimensional approach to exploring style-shifting and identity. Although it is widely acknowledged that identity construction is a complex and dynamic process (Mendoza-Denton, 2002), traditional work on style focuses on particular linguistic features on a single level, which provides limited information about the many tools speakers incorporate in their identity construction. This study demonstrates the importance of taking a more comprehensive approach that encompasses a variety of linguistic variables and extensive ethnographic knowledge.

The data examine the naturally occurring speech of Ricky, a 47-year-old African-American male from Charlotte, NC. He was recorded for a total of seven hours in four different settings: the professional setting of his workplace (a car dealership) and the social settings of his son's high school football game, a casual family lunch at his home and eating dinner in a pizza restaurant with some of his children. The resulting data includes a variety of interlocutors of varying gender and ethnicity. Narratives, morphosyntactic variables and intonation were analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The discourse analysis focuses on the narration of small stories, an area aligned with identity (Schiffrin, 1996; De Fina, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2011), and considers how positioning is utilised within these narratives (Bamberg, 2004). Eight stories (two from each setting) were examined within this framework and for intonation. Morphosyntactic variables analyzed are features of the African American English canon (Rickford, 1999), which are then quantitatively compared for the four situations. For intonation (Tarone 1973; McLarty and Thomas 2010) an instrumental analysis was conducted, using the Tones and Break Index (ToBI) annotation to describe pitch variation (Beckman and Elam, 1997), whilst considering the effects of nuclear accents (Ladd et al. 2009) and Tonal Centre of Gravity (Barnes et al. 2012).

The resulting analysis clearly demonstrates the complexity of identity construction for Ricky, and the importance of a multi-dimensional approach in describing style. Within each framework, for each setting he manipulates different tools to index different dimensions of his identity simultaneously. The comparison of the quantitative data show statistical significance in different settings while the qualitative discursive-analytical results show the manipulation of conversational and narrative strategies in establishing his differential identities.