

NEWFIES, CAJUNS, HILLBILLIES, AND YOOPERS: GENDERED MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF AUTHENTIC LOCALS

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1. AUTHENTIC LOCALS AND IDEAL SPEAKERS

This paper investigates how popular media representations of Newfies, Cajuns, Yoopers, and Hillbillies maintain gender-based language stereotypes.¹ The authenticity of these locals is in part due to their language use; they are also the “best” speakers of the local variety. In addition, the stereotypes include the notion that the “best speaker” and the “authentic local” are male, and that the standard speaker and non-local is female, or males who do not fit traditional notions of masculinity (Schilling-Estes 1998).

Media representations are key in shaping folk perceptions, and folk perceptions of regional varieties are significant in reinforcing and maintaining language attitudes (Edwards 1982; Preston 2002). Likewise, folk perceptions of gendered language use help to maintain gender stereotypes. Schilling-Estes (1998) explains that language attitudes and gender identity are linked by the notion that the authentic local is “authentic” because *he* is the “best” speaker of the local variety. The best speaker is usually identified by his use of stereotypical linguistic features, and because these features are tied to “masculine” language, they not only carry the symbolic capital of “authentic” local, but also of “male” and “masculinity.”

However, variationist studies show that restricted features that characterize a variety are used by both women and men, and yet these are not typically used in popular representations of dialects or portrayals of local speakers (Dubois and Horvath 1999, 2003; Eckert 1998; King and Clark 2002; Labov 1990; Schilling-Estes 1998; and Schönweitz 2001). These studies, among others, demonstrate that stereotypical features are identity markers for both “local” and male, while restricted features that characterize a variety are used by both women and men. Thus, restricted features are identity markers of “local,” but not gender, since both women and men

¹“Newfie” refers to regional speakers from Newfoundland, “Cajun” from Louisiana, “Yooper” from Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, and “Hillbilly” from the American South. In addition to gender, race and class are equally significant factors; however, given the scope of this paper, they will not be discussed in detail.

use these features. Women, and men who do not fit the traditional masculine ideal, often draw on restricted features to symbolize their local identity, but they generally do not participate in activities that would characterize them as “authentic” locals. In addition, stereotypes based on gender and sexuality reinforce these notions and interact with expectations for local speakers. These local women and men, therefore, fall outside the norm of what it means to be an “authentic” local by way of gender, sexuality, and activities, and are perceived to speak a standard variety.

2. THE STUDY

This study relies on Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the discourses of regional stereotypes constructed by popular media. Questions that the study aims to answer include: What discourses of regional stereotypes are constructed by popular media? How are notions of the authentic local and best speaker connected in these representations? Do popular representations of the ideal speaker and the authentic local interact with gender and language attitudes to maintain language-based gender stereotypes, where authentic speakers are male and standard speakers are female, or males who do not enact traditional male roles? In order to excavate the roots of these relationships, the study examines how Canadian and American regional speakers—Newfies, Cajuns, Yoopers, and Hillbillies—are represented in popular media, including film, television, radio, and comics.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Gendered descriptions

Popular representations of authentic locals tend to be of males, who are often described according to their attitude, intellect, and behaviour. Women in these representations, on the other hand, tend to be characterized according to their appearance and sexual availability. These descriptions mirror findings of gendered descriptions of women and men in language and gender research (cf. Shulz 1975; Spender 1980; Sutton 1995). In addition, these descriptions are often contrasted with those of standard speakers. Although popular representations tend to be of males, they do include females, yet typically as secondary characters, absent third parties, or in stereotypical roles of homemaker or sex kitten.

3.2. Gendered domains

The activities of “authentic” locals typically take place within traditional male domains of hunting, fishing, excessive drinking, music-making, boating, and the cooking of local specialties.² These men are generally depicted as dimwitted, sim-

²See Dubois and Horvath (1999) for discussion of representations of gendered cooking practices.

ple, impoverished, loners, and musicians living in rural areas.³ For example, Ruban Soady, the main character of Jeff Daniel's play and film, *Escanaba in Da Moonlight*, is portrayed as the typical Yooper: he hunts, drinks beer, and enjoys scatological humour. Similar portrayals of authentic locals are found on radio programs such as *The Prairie Home Companion* and *The Humble Farmer*, on television shows such as *The Cajun Cook* and *The Red Green Show*, and by musical groups who draw on regional stereotypes such as Da Yoopers and Conge Se Menne (both from Michigan's Upper Peninsula).

3.3. Discursive constructions

These gendered domains are discursively constructed through stereotypical speech genres such as story and joke telling, and through themes relating to traditional male activities, scatological humour, and heterosexual sexual practices and relationships. The discourse takes the form of narratives, jokes, song lyrics, folklore, and dialogue, and often juxtaposes locals against outsiders.

In addition, these representations are discursively constructed through the use of stereotypical linguistic features, which are often juxtaposed with standard features. However, the stereotypical features are typically used in isolation, rely on one or two marked features, and are often used inconsistently. The linguistic stereotypes are reinforced through discursive strategies that reflect stereotyped values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with "authentic" locals and through local/outsider and socio-economic contrasts such as class, dress, literacy, and health.

3.4. Folk humour

Folk humour often links notions of "authentic" local and "ideal" speaker through narratives based on traditional, local activities and parodies of the dialect. The jokes typically rely on stock characters: Newfies are usually Jack, George (or Garge), Aggie, and Little Johnny; Cajuns are typically Boudreaux and Thibodeaux or Gautreaux, and sometimes Clotilde; Yooper stock characters are Toivo and Eino, and infrequently, Helvi; and Hillbilly jokes include Clem, Buddy, Billy Bob, and Luther. Common themes focus on conflicts between locals and outsiders, laughing at oneself, poverty, frugality, stupidity, cleverness and ingenuity, local language use, creation myths, death, sex, bodily functions, and traditional male activities such as hunting and fishing. The jokes discursively reinforce stereotypical linguistic practices and gendered descriptions and domains. The following joke, representing authentic Cajuns, is common throughout various dialect regions; however, the names

³These stereotypes contrast with attitudes about Québécois French, where the "purest" French is spoken in rural areas by women and where urban Québécois is perceived as "corrupt". In the US, the stereotypical urban, street-smart male tends to be portrayed as an African American English or Chicano English speaker. Ironically, these speakers used to be positioned as the rural "bumpkins". These perceptual changes reflect socioeconomic population shifts in the US during the latter half of the 20th century.

and places change to represent the stock characters and the economic ecology of the particular region, including names for the type of fish caught and local bodies of water. The telling also varies with stereotypical features of the given dialect, yet similar to visual representations of ideal speaker's language use, features are limited and used inconsistently.

- (1) Boudreaux came up to Thibodeaux and said: "Thibodeaux, I've got some good news and some bad news."

Thibodeaux says: "What be the bad news?"

Boudreaux replies: "Your wife, Clotilde, she be found in the bayou, she done pass away."

Thibodeaux: "Oh my God, that is purtty bad, what be the good news?"

Boudreaux: "Well, when we found her, she had over a dozen crab on her, so in another hour we gonna make another run!"

The joke portrays the "authentic" Cajun as a heterosexual male whose activities include fishing (crabbing). Along with marked linguistic features such as French-derived names, use of 'be' for *is*, and metathesis of [perti] from [priti], the characterization functions to reinforce the regional stereotype, and thus the notion that the authentic Cajun, and thus best Cajun speaker, is male.

4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Results indicate that media representations of ideal speakers and authentic locals maintain gender-based language stereotypes. Attitudes linking language use and masculinity are the basis for descriptions of regional speakers and their language use, characterizations of stock characters and themes in folk humour, as well as activities of authentic locals. Representations of regional speakers are thus based on notions of hegemonic masculinity, which then reinforce relationships among notions of "authentic" local, "best" speaker, and gender. Through omission and silence, women, and men who do not fit these traditional notions of what it means to be male, tend to be depicted as standard speakers.

The dynamics among gender, identity, and language attitudes reflect ideologies about language use and gender. These ideologies are embedded in an androcentric worldview that fosters traditional masculine values based on stereotypical gendered language use. This perspective reinforces the dichotomization of gender as well as the polarization of speakers as either "local" or "outsider". These binaries contribute to normative notions of language use where men are "authentic" locals and the "best" speakers, and where men who do not fit traditional notions of masculinity and women are perceived as non-local and dialectless, despite their use of restricted features. Although sociolinguistic studies demonstrate that women often use more standard features than men, they also show that they too use local features. Moreover, this polarization reinforces the notion that there is one way of speaking the local variety, which ignores the reality of language variation, and

perpetuates language attitudes about regional speakers and their dialects, thus maintaining gender-based language stereotypes.

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