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Contemporary English in the USA

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Abstract

Indigenous and immigrant speakers from a variety of linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds have in different ways contributed to the development of present-day American English, as have the geographical and social dimensions of the country. This paper provides a survey of contemporary usage of American English by describing and illustrating linguistic features documented for social and regional groups in the United States. The focus on variation in pronunciation, grammar, and meaning in American English highlights the diversity of dialects and styles in the U.S. as well as the centrality of sociocultural identities to language use. We group examples of variation according to the social and geographical factors that these features have been associated with in the literature: region, age, ethnicity, and gender. We note though that patterns of linguistic usage differ both within and across communities, with particular features used by different social groups for shifting purposes. The examples here provide a snapshot of the kinds of variation observed in contemporary American English as we move into the 21st century.

Keywords: American English, regional variation, sociolinguistics, identity

1. Introduction

Since the arrival of British English speakers in North America over four hundred years ago, English in the USA has been characterized by a great deal of diversity in its phonology, lexicon, morphosyntax, and semantics and pragmatics. Indigenous and immigrant speakers from a variety of linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds have in different ways contributed to the development of present-day American English, as have the geographical and social dimensions of the country. While it is the case that the growth and widespread availability of transportation and communication technologies characteristic of the 20th and 21st centuries have led to the loss of some historically distinctive dialects of English in the United States (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006), variation in contemporary American English persists, and in some cases is increasing.

In this paper, we provide an overview of some of the major points of variation documented for English in the U.S. and discuss how these variants correspond to sociocultural identities and practices. We group these examples of variation according to the social and geographical factors that these features have been associated with in the literature: region (section 3), age (section 4), ethnicity

(section 5), and gender (section 6). The organization of the paper by these social and regional categories, however, is for purposes of presentation only and should not be taken as claims that these linguistic usages are exclusively tied to one social characteristic or group. Indeed, as Bucholtz & Hall (2005: 586) point out, sociolinguistic identity “does not emerge at a single analytic level—whether vowel quality, turn shape, code choice, or ideological structure—but operates at multiple levels simultaneously”.

2. Language and identity

We begin our presentation with a brief discussion of language and identity, considering in particular the role of social context in identity performance as expressed in speech. Identity is neither immutable nor singular. It is a social and interactive construction (Goffman, 1959, 1967, and elsewhere), produced and constituted through interaction in the context of local sociocultural norms. As Edelsky (1993: 190) puts it, people attribute meaning to categories (ideas, events, objects); they construct and verify these meanings through social interaction, and by so doing, they “produce culture”.

Bucholtz & Hall (2005: 586) define identity as “the social positioning of self and other”. They propose that identity may be in part intentional, in part habitual and less than fully conscious; in part an outcome of interactional negotiation, in part a construct of others’ perceptions and representations, and in part an outcome of larger ideological processes and structures (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

An important part of the formation of sociolinguistic identity is the expression of stance. Du Bois (2007) characterizes stance as social action by which we position or align ourselves with respect to others by our evaluations of items referred to in ongoing discourse. Work on stance in sociolinguistics examines the resources and repertoires that are used to signal positionality (Goodwin & Alim, 2010). The features associated with stance become tied to styles and hence to identity through habitual practice (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005: 597). Researchers on stance have explored how phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical, and gestural variants in interactional talk work together to produce particular, if fluid and dynamic, social indexicalities. These variants are used in an ongoing process of construction and reconstruction of both personal and group identities.

3. Region

Not only do regional dialects index place of origin of speakers of American English, as Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (2006: 163) observe, these varieties also function as social markers of speakers’ regional identities. Dialect boundaries of English in the U.S. reflect patterns of both early settlement and subsequent migration and influx of English and non-English speaking people over the last four hundred years. For example, the existence of r-lessness—the absence of syllable-final /r/, e.g., in the pronunciation of car as [ka:]—occurs in the speech of Americans in both eastern

New England and in the coastal regions of the southern U.S. This feature can be traced to the dialects of early settlers who maintained close ties with southeastern England where the r-less standard of British English was emerging. On the other hand, it was in the mid 19th century when the r-lessness characteristic of New York City speakers spread to that area from New England (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006: 107). Additionally, Labov's (1966) influential study on the use of post-vocalic /r/ among employees in New York City department stores showed that r-lessness was associated with informal speech and with lower socio-economic status.

3.1 Features of southern varieties of American English

Probably the most distinctive and well-studied regional dialects in the United States are varieties of Southern American English. Below we describe and illustrate several salient features of these varieties that serve as markers of regional identity: the second person plural *y'all*, double modals, the construction *fixin' to*, and two phonological features: glide weakening in the diphthong /ai/, and the merger of /i/ and /ɛ/.

3.1.1 Y'all

An important widespread and increasingly popular marker of Southern American speech is the second person plural pronoun *y'all* (also represented as *yall* or *ya'll*). *Y'all* is illustrated in (1), an example which comes from a television news show and is from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA).

- (1) If a soldier gets killed *y'all* cover it. I think it's important that *y'all* cover more about the wounded warriors and - because I mean look around. There's hundreds of wounded warriors here.

Bernstein (2003) summarizes several uses of *y'all* beyond its referential plural function. For example, the pronoun can refer to an addressee and others affiliated with her, such as family or friends; it is also used to refer to institutional collectivities (*Do y'all have any french fries?*). In general, *y'all* marks solidarity and intimacy (Bernstein, 2003: 109).

3.1.2 Double modals

Another distinctive feature of southern varieties of American English is the use of double modals, e.g., I might could *do that*. Using data from the *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States* (Pederson, McDaniel, & Bassett, 1986), Mishoe & Montgomery (1994) report that the most frequent combination of multiple modals is *might could*, followed by *might would*, *used to would*, and *might can*. The usual ordering of multiple modals is with *might* as first modal. Bernstein (2003) notes that in the frequent *might could*, the first modal expresses dynamic meaning (ability, volition), while the second conveys epistemic meaning (degrees of certainty). This combination of modal types gives the construction its polite, mitigating functions, as illustrated in (2) from COCA.

- (2) And I felt like I *might could* help contribute to that.

Bernstein (2003: 111-112) states that *might could* is used by all segments of the population in the South. Even so, as with the other variables discussed here, the use of double modals varies along more than a single parameter. Along with region, there are class, race, and gender differences in the use of these kinds of constructions. Mishoe & Montgomery (1994:6) conclude, however, that the main factor accounting for the occurrence of double modal constructions is pragmatic rather than the influence of class, gender or race. The conditions under which multiple modals occur are: "(1) one-to one conversation (very often in the form of negotiations), and (2) a threat to the "face" (in the terms of Goffman 1967, etc.) of one or more speakers in a conversation."

3.1.3 *Fixin' to*

The use of *fixin' to* 'about to' as a preverbal temporal modifier (*I was just fixin' to leave*) is a strong symbol of Southern identity. Ching (1987: 343) refers to *fixin' to* as a quasimodal and suggests that because it carries with it the notion of delay (p. 334), the construction can be used to express procrastination, for example, as a polite response to a directive from a parent (e.g., *I was just fixin' to do my homework*), but it would be less appropriate as a reply to a query from one's boss or dissertation director.

Two things to note about *fixin' to* which apply to all the variants we discuss are, *first*, that use of the expression requires contextual knowledge, such as the social relationships among interactants. Second, *fixin' to*, like all variants, spreads within and across communities over time. Citing work by Bailey, Wikley, Tillery, & Sand (1993) on diffusion of dialect variants in Oklahoma, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (2006: 158) report that *fixin' to* has extended from rural to urban centers in Oklahoma, a pattern that contrasts with the spread of other features studied, which typically move from cities to rural areas. Bailey et al. (1993: 377) also note that unlike some linguistic features which disappear due to urbanization, *fixin' to* has increased in urban contexts. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (2006: 158) conclude that, "In the face of large influxes of non-Southerners into the state, *fixin' to* has spread from the rural areas where it traditionally has been most heavily concentrated into urban areas as speakers throughout the state seek to assert their Southern identity."

3.1.4 Phonological features of southern varieties

Above we noted that varieties of Southern American English are characterized by post-vocalic r-lessness. Indeed, absence of postvocalic /r/ is a characteristic feature of both the upper and lower South dialect regions (Dorrill, 2003). Two other properties of southern speech are worth mentioning. One general feature is what has been called *glide weakening, monophthongization, or flattening* (Dorrill, 2003) of the diphthong /ai/. This phenomenon is illustrated by the pronunciation of *nice* as [na:s] or *try* as [tra:], in which the glide is deleted (or sometimes shortened) relative to mainstream American English pronunciations. Another phonological feature of the South is the merger of the two front vowels /ɛ/ and /ɪ/ before nasal consonants, resulting in the pronunciation of *pen* as [pɪn] and the name *Wendy* as [wɪndi]. This merger is widespread in the southern United States and has also been documented in states bordering the South, as well as in some areas of California.

3.2 Features of northern varieties of American English

There are several distinctive dialect areas unique to cities in the northeastern U.S., e.g., New York City, Boston. In contrast to the use of *y'all* in the southern United States, in the north (and west), many speakers use *you guys* as the second person plural marker. Additionally, as noted above, the speech of New England and New York City is characterized by the absence of post-vocalic /r/. Here we briefly mention a few of the more prominent and widespread phonological features of English in the northern U.S.: the broad a of New England, and pronunciations characteristic of some speakers in New York City, such as the use of /t/ and /d/ for the interdental sounds /θ/ and /ð/; and the Northern Cities Vowel Shift.

One salient feature characteristic of the speech of eastern New Englanders is the use of /a/, which results in vowel contrasts between words like *father* with /a/ and *bother* with /ɑ/ (Metcalf, 2000). Two features of some New York City speakers are uses of the stops /t/ and /d/ for the fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, as in *this* [dɪs], and the pronunciation of /g/ in lexical items such as *singer* or *Long Island*.

The Northern Cities Vowel Shift is a vowel rotation pattern documented for urban areas in the northern U.S., from upstate New York, through the Great Lakes region and westward (Labov, 2010; Wolfram & Schilling Estes, 2006). These sound changes result in distinctive pronunciation patterns in these regions. For example, /ɑ/ in *got* is fronted and pronounced as /æ/ [gæɪt]; /ɛ/ in *bet* may result in [bæt]; and /ʌ/ as in *bus* may sound more like [bɒs]. While we have noted that technology and urbanization have tended to weaken dialect distinctiveness in the U.S., changes such as the Northern Cities Vowel Shift and others have the effect of creating greater variation in contemporary American English.

3.3 Features of Midland (Midwest) varieties of American English

The Midland dialect area of American English extends from Pennsylvania through the Midwest. In this section we briefly discuss the low back vowel merger of /ɔ/ and /ɑ/ found in that region and then focus on the use of positive *anymore*.

Aside from the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/, the most frequently discussed feature of Midland speech is the Low Back Merger, often called the *cot-caught* merger. This general change affects speakers in the Midwest and most of the western United States. In these regions, the rounded vowel /ɔ/ is pronounced as unrounded /ɑ/, so that words such as *cot* and *caught* rhyme, as do the names *Don* and *Dawn*, both pronounced with /ɑ/.

The adverb *anymore* can occur in all varieties of mainstream English in negative sentences, as illustrated in examples (3) and (4) below from COCA.

(3) well, that's just not true *anymore*

(4) I wish I was shocked but I'm not shocked *anymore*

Youmans (1986) reports that *anymore* in these negative declaratives—and also in affirmative interrogatives, e.g., *Where are the grownups anymore?*—are widely accepted across the U.S. However, the use of *anymore* in positive declarative

sentences, meaning ‘nowadays, lately,’ as in (5) and (6) from COCA, is characteristic of Midland speakers. It is also found in some western states (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006: 152).

(5) it is very tough to borrow money *anymore*.

(6) And I think they’ve been feuding *anymore*.

3.4 Features of western varieties of American English

Due to processes of migration and dialect and language mixing in the West, the clusters of distinctive regional features characteristic of the eastern United States are not found in western regions of the country. In general, western speakers of American English pronounce postvocalic /r/, and they participate in the *cot-caught* merger. Historically, the direction of language variation and change in the U.S. has been from east to west. However, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (2006: 124) observe that some recent innovations, e.g., uptalk (section 4.1) and the newer quotatives (section 4.2) have spread from the west coast to the east and are prevalent in the speech of younger people across the country.

Perceptions and attitudes concerning the existence of unique California speech patterns have often revolved around stereotypes of “Valley Girls”—white, middle class, teenage girls from Southern California (Bucholtz, Bermudez, Fung, Edwards, & Vargas, 2007). Eckert (2011) reported on the fronting of the back vowels /ow/ and /uw/ in the speech of white Anglo elementary school children in Northern California. Specifically she found that the speaker, Rachel’s, pronunciation of /ow/ was significantly more fronted in tokens of the quotative *go* than in non-quotative uses of *go*. Eckert (2011: 93-95) suggests that Rachel’s fronting of /ow/ in the quotative *go*—a construction she and other girls use to dramatically talk about events and relationships in the group—indexes her status in the crowd (to express a “cool teenage persona”), which marks her participation in the “heterosexual market”. As Podesva (2011) observes, while the fronting of back vowels by these preadolescents is viewed as part of the California Vowel Shift (CVS)—a label which indexes geographical location—sociolinguists regularly attend to “the use of regional accent features to construct other kinds of identity not necessarily associated with place” (p. 33).

4. Age

As Coulmas (2005: 54) points out, “chronological age is an important principle of social organization,” with many important social, legal, and personal implications. Sociolinguistic variation associated with age also has significant consequences for language change. As Eckert (1998: 151) observes, “the study of age in relation to language, particularly the study of sociolinguistic variation, lies at the intersection of life stage and history. The individual speaker or age cohort of speakers at any given moment represents simultaneously a place in history and a life stage.” Eckert (1998) and Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992), for example, discuss changes in phonology and lexicon among high school students that signal

adherence to particular social norms, including those of the Jocks, those students who identify as being involved in sports and school activities, and the Burnouts, who identify as being interested in drugs and bored with academics.

A great deal of the research on language variation and age has to do with differentiating those uses that reflect age-grading from those that represent historical change in progress. Another trend in the literature on age and sociolinguistic variation is the study of language socialization (e.g., Eckert, 1998; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). This literature explores the ways in which children acquire speaking patterns and styles of adults in their speech communities. Eckert (2008: 26) speaks of “sociolinguistic variation as a structured set of resources that speakers deploy both intentionally and automatically in their day-to-day practice,” and the research on language socialization looks at how children learn what resources are available and how to use them appropriately.

Below we present three features of American English that have been described as being characteristic of younger speakers: the prosodic phenomenon of uptalk, quotatives such as *be like* and *be all*, and the prefab *all up in*. These examples provide ways of expressing stance. Through repeated choices of these forms in interactions, teenagers display their identities as nerdy or popular.

4.1 Uptalk

There is a great deal of literature examining relationships between pronunciation and social identification related to age (e.g., Bucholtz, 2000; Eckert, 1998; Kerswill, 1996). One phonological variable that is closely associated with adolescents in current American English is an utterance-final pitch fall-rise known as “high rising terminal” or “uptalk”. For example, in (7), the speaker uses uptalk to topicalize the person being discussed before commenting on her (Ching, 1982: 99).

(7) We’ve got a new art teacher? Her name is Ms. Woods? She’s got dyed hair.

Uptalk cannot be said to indicate an interrogative or continuation, nor does it mark uncertainty. According to Wolfram (2009: 268), “the use of so-called uptalk – that is, rising or “question” intonation on declarative statements – is now becoming a prominent trait of West Coast dialects ranging from Los Angeles to Portland.” Additionally, while uptalk was first linked to teenage girls in Southern California (“Valley Girl” talk), it now appears in the speech of both female and male speakers across the United States (Wolfram, 2009: 268).

Uptalk is just one example of phonetic and phonological variation associated with age that has spread to the wider speech community. In the next section, we talk about another variable, a lexical one, that has also spread from adolescents, and specifically female adolescents, to other social groups.

4.2 Quotatives, e.g., *be like*, *be all*, *go*

Wolfram (2009: 268) observes that, “In more recent decades, innovations such as uptalk and the use of *be like* and *go* to introduce quotes (e.g., *He’s like*, “*What are you doin’*,” and *I go*, “*What do you think I’m doin’?*”) in American English spread from west to east rather than the converse, earlier patterns of diffusion.” The use

of *like* to introduce quoted speech is explored in Dailey-O’Cain (2000), and Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang (1990), among others. The use of the quotative *be all*, as in, *She’s like “why did you do that?” and I’m all, “why are you all up in my face?”* has been discussed in Waksler (2001). According to Waksler, 68% of the examples of *all* in her corpus are quotatives. These uses serve to introduce quotations, constructed dialogue, and imitated or constructed nonverbal behaviors which characterize an individual or entity in the discourse as being fully represented by a particular salient property at that point in the story (Waksler, 2001: 135).

4.3 All up in ...

An example of a formulaic construction that is age-graded is *all up in...* According to Urban Dictionary (<http://www.urbandictionary.com>, 6/22/12): *All up in my face* and its alternate *all up in my grill* is “used to describe someone who is excessively annoying and bothering you: *That ho was all up in my grill. Tell him to get his nasty, annoying self outta my face*”. This expression is extended in *All up in my George Foreman*. *George Foreman* is an American professional boxer who is known for promoting his cooking grill; in this example, the metonym, *George Foreman* (referring to the cooking grill) stands in for the slang term *grill* meaning ‘teeth’ or ‘face’.

Another common form of this expression is *all up in my ass*, which *Urban Dictionary* defines as “a conjunction of *all up in my grill and on my ass*: An uncomfortable situation when multiple people are telling you what to do”. Perhaps an even more recent use is in *all up in my facebook*: “When someone likes every status, post and anything you do on fb within 2 minutes of you doing it. They also initiate chat every time you log in”. The example in (8) is from *Urban Dictionary*.

- (8) Jane: I think Alberto likes me.
Denise: Why do you think so?
Jane: He’s been all up in my facebook lately.

These usages have likely led to the development of the general predicate, *all up ins*. This construction is defined by *Urban Dictionary* as follows: “1. characterized by a quality of coolness, usually in describing a person. Coach Z is all up ins; 2. acknowledgment that you are willing, as in (9).

- (9) You wanna go to vegas?
Yeah, im all up ins!

5. Ethnicity

Language varieties characteristic of particular ethnic groups are called *ethnic dialects or ethnolects*. By describing linguistic features shared by communities of speakers in the U.S., sociolinguists have documented ethnically-linked varieties of American English, such as African American English, Chicano English, American Indian English, Irish English, Jewish English, Vietnamese English, and others (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006: 191). While such studies suggest that speakers’

ethnic identities are tied to patterned linguistic usages, analysts involved in ethnolinguistic research acknowledge that links between a given ethnic group and a particular language variety are by no means straightforward. Social categories such as ethnicity and gender are often construed as unitary, sometimes 'natural', constructs. For example, if someone lives in the southwestern United States and is of Mexican ancestry, that person would be considered to be Mexican-American, or Chicano/a *a priori*. But ethnicity is a sociocultural category, not a biological one. Speakers' social and cultural meanings—including those performed and constructed with language—vary *within* groups as well as between them. For example, not all African Americans in the United States speak varieties of what has been labeled African American English (AAE), or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Furthermore, members of these communities who do speak these varieties don't necessarily use all the features that have been described for the dialect as a whole. It is also the case that people outside of a particular ethnic group may use resources characteristic of an ethnic group that they themselves don't belong to, as when white adolescents adopt features of AAE to affect a "coolness" that they aspire to. Bucholtz (2001) points out that the California high school students in her study affect a superstandard language variety associated with one white identity, nerds, as a way of distancing themselves from the youth culture norm of "coolness" which is often expressed with the use of lexical or syntactic features associated with African American or Latino/a American identities.

In response to theoretical problems related to describing ethnic groups and ethnolinguistic variation, Benor (2010: 159) proposes that analysts should consider shifting focus from ethnic varieties of English "to individuals, ethnic groups, and their distinctive linguistic features" by adopting the notion of *ethnolinguistic repertoire*, which she defines as "a fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities" (p. 159). Consistent with Benor's proposal, in this section we briefly highlight some of the salient features documented for African American English, Chicano English, and American Indian English communities in the United States. In doing so, we are mindful that descriptions of these ethnolinguistic features and varieties implicitly represent forms and meanings as marked relative to an unmarked norm (e.g., Standard English, Mainstream English). As Benor (2010, 172) points out, "The notion of an unmarked norm privileges the speech of middle- and upper-class European Americans and others in power".

5.1 Features of African American English varieties

Phonological features documented for speakers of African American English varieties include r-lessness; word-initial /d/ as in *these* [diz]; the use of labiodental fricatives in words such as *south* [soʊf] or *birthday* [bɪrfder]; simplification of final consonant clusters, e.g., *spend* [spɛn] or *left* [lɛf]; and syllable-initial occurrence of /skr/ in words like *street* [skrit] (Green, 2002, 2004; Smitherman, 1977, 2000). As is often the case, ethnolinguistic features documented for one community of speakers may be shared by speakers of other dialects of American English, such as r-lessness and consonant cluster simplification.

Some of the more unique grammatical features of AAE usage are related to the coding of aspectual distinctions. For example, recurring or ongoing actions in AAE are marked with uninflected *be* (aspectual *be*, Green, 2002), as illustrated in (10) and (11), from Green (2002: 48).

(10) She *be* telling people she eight.

(11) I *be* looking for somewhere to waste time.

Green (2002: 49) also notes that aspectual *be* can express stative meanings, for example, in subject complement constructions when the complements convey permanent properties of the subject, as illustrated in (12).

(12) Some of them *be* big and some of them *be* small. (Green, 2002: 49)

For utterances expressing nonrecurring present tense actions, often no copula (13) or auxiliary (14) appears. Examples are from Smitherman (2000: 23).

(13) She ready.

(14) They laughing.

Other grammatical features of AAE include completive *done*, e.g., *He done read all the Little Bill books* (Green, 2004: 80); the use of stressed *been* to express remote past tense, e.g., *I BEEN known him a long time* (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006: 215); existential *it*, e.g., *It be too many cars in that parking lot* (Green, 2002: 80); and the marking of possession with adjacency, e.g., *That was Mr. Johnson store got burned down* (Smitherman, 1977: 28).

5.2 Features of Chicano English varieties

Fought (2003: 1) uses the label *Chicano English* (CE) to refer to varieties of English characteristic of native English-speaking Latinos in the southwestern United States, who may be bilingual or monolingual. Fought defines Chicano English as a *dialect*—“a range of ways of speaking that have certain features in common”—that is distinct from Spanish, California Anglo English, and African American English (2003: 2), even though some features of CE may be shared or influenced by these other varieties. Moreover, because Chicano English is a variety of native American English speakers, it is distinguished from learner varieties of English acquired by native speakers of Spanish (Bayley & Santa Ana, 2004: 375).

Fought (2003) suggests that phonological features account for the most distinctive differences between Chicano English and California Anglo English (CAE). She notes that CE speakers show less frequent vowel reduction than do neighboring Anglo speakers, e.g., as in the pronunciation of *because* with a full vowel in the first syllable, [bikəz]. Another feature of CE is a tendency to monophthongize vowel sounds that would be diphthongized in other varieties of American English, e.g., pronunciation of *least* [lijst] in CE as [lis] (Fought, 2003: 64; Santa Ana & Bayley, 2004: 419). Another distinctive feature of Chicano English discussed by Fought (2003) is the use of a tense vowel in [iɪ] or [in], a variant that she suggests may be spreading from CE to the local Anglo dialect (p. 66).

Bayley & Santa Ana (2004: 388) note that most grammatical features of Chicano English are shared by other varieties of American English, such as the variable absence of past tense and third person singular markings, regularization of past tense verbs, negative concord, and the use of quotatives *be like* and *be all* (Bayley & Santa Ana, 2004; Fought 2003).

There are some morphosyntactic features that appear to be unique to Chicano English. Bayley & Santa Ana (2004: 381) discuss Wald's (1987: 60) finding that East Los Angeles speakers use *tell* as a quotative in direct speech constructions, as in (15).

(15) I told Elinore: "Is that your brother?" She goes: "I don't think so mom."

Finally, both Fought (2003) and Bayley and Santa Ana (2004) discuss uses of some prepositions in these Los Angeles communities that may be influenced by Spanish, as in (16) and (17) (Bayley & Santa Ana, 2004: 382).

(16) And we used to go stand *in* the porch because they never used to let us in the house.

(17) We start *on* July.

5.3 Features of American Indian English varieties

Leap (1993) describes "Indian Englishes" spoken in the United States. These varieties show many features in common with their non-Indian neighboring dialects and also extensive influence from the heritage language traditions. He discusses a range of situations and languages, pointing to differences in pronunciation (e.g., replacement of English labiodental and interdental fricatives with stops; the use of the same vowel for the English words *his* and *he's* in Navajo English, deriving from the distinction in Navajo between long and short vowels, rather than one between tense and lax vowels); lexicon (e.g., the use of *hair* to refer to *head* and *scalp*, in addition to *hair*, in Isleta Tiwa English (p. 79)); and sentence structure (e.g., deletion or double marking of plural on nouns in Lakota English (p. 53); the use/non-use of articles corresponding to Ute topicalization strategies in Ute English (p. 56), and the use of adverbial constructions in English to indicate aspectual distinctions that are obligatorily marked in the ancestral language (pp. 67-69)). Leap also cites the literature on the differing pragmatics of discourse in Indian varieties of English, which also are greatly influenced by the strategies for interaction in the heritage language and which serve to index the speakers' heritage and identity. These differences in communication strategies were also, famously, noted by Basso (1970) on Western Apache speakers' use of silence in conversation.

6. Gender

Gender was often taken as a binary category in the early literature on the topic, but recent work has acknowledged that social groups are very rarely defined by gender, and social behavior is often not gender-normed. As we pointed out in

the discussion of ethnic varieties of English, social variables interact and thus generalizations based solely on one of those variables is bound to be misleading. As Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1999: 191) put it,

With a focus on sex difference, both sociolinguists and casual commentators have emerged with content-based or characterizing generalizations: Women are more conservative, more polite, more cooperative, or more egalitarian than men. But given that such generalizations almost never apply across the board in any community, and can be refuted on a grand scale in some communities of practice, we have two choices: to proclaim exceptions on no principled basis, or to look for quite different kinds of generalizations.

Nonetheless, it is the case that there are ideologies regarding gender in the United States; these are based on sociocultural dynamics, and they are socialized, maintained, and developed through linguistic practices (Ochs, 1992). The social goals of particular linguistic interactions include the affiliations of gender and sexuality that are being indexed at each moment in each interaction.

Researchers in the Communities of Practice framework (e.g., Eckert & McConnell Ginet, 1992) emphasize the diversity among particular social groups and explore, in particular, how gender patterns are related to more general phenomena having to do with prestige systems and the expression of social and personal identity. According to Ochs (1992: 340), although few linguistic features index gender directly and exclusively, “we should expect language to be influenced by local organizations of gender roles, rights, and expectations and to actively perpetuate these organizations in spoken and written communication” (p. 337). Adequate explanations, say Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1999: 198), require a detailed examination of the way that particular speech patterns fit with the entirety of practices in local communities and with the attitudes and values of the members of those communities.

In the following section we briefly discuss some examples from the literature on linguistic variation associated with gender in American English.

6.1 Gender and Conversational Style

Early work, for example, by Fishman (1977) indicated that men were less cooperative and collaborative in conversation than are women, and more engaged in strategies that act to hold the floor and control topics. Similarly, Holmes (1998) discusses potential universals for the ways that women’s talk differs from men’s talk: women, more than men, tend to pay attention to the affective functions of an interaction and use linguistic devices that are associated with the expression of solidarity, such as positive minimal responses, pragmatic particles, and compliments. Similarly, there is research discussing discourse style for affirming masculinity. This style is said to involve topics that center on contests and heroism or on action and violence (Johnstone, 1998). Some authors report a lack of hedging, the use of taboo language, and more interruptive than supportive overlapping, while others (e.g., Cameron, 1998) report the use of collaborative talk among men to affirm “masculine solidarity” (Kiesling, 2004: 283).

Benwell & Stokoe (2006) warn that much of the literature in the area of language and gender provides essentialist claims; gender “is used as an a priori, explanatory resource for analysis” (p. 85). This leads to a kind of circular reasoning where the analyst is looking for characteristics that reinforce previous decisions about gender. Further, it assumes that the category of gender is always relevant in the analysis of language use, when this might not be the case. It is important to bear in mind that people can identify themselves and others for the purpose of a single conversation, and they can also resist those identifications. The notion of resistance or subversion in discourse was explored in Butler (e.g., 1990) and is exemplified here by the examples in the following section showing the use of particular linguistic features to parody or re-invent identities.

6.2 The Overlap among Gender and Other Variables

Many lexical or style elements that are associated with one social parameter are adopted and repurposed to express a different aspect of identity. Barrett (in press) for example, talks about the use of southern dialect features among certain gay men; that is, the use of a regional feature to express a gender identity.

Features linked to gender can also diffuse throughout the larger speech community: uptalk (section 4.1) and the quotative *be like* (section 4.2), and the use of the vocative *dude* were originally features associated with gender that have now come to index youth in general. The use of *dude* as a vocative, in particular, has become a strong marker of youth in the U.S., as in *Dude!* or *Dude! Why are you all up in my grill?* Like uptalk, the popularity of *dude* began as a marker of gender, but was associated with males rather than females. According to Kiesling (2004), *dude* as a term of address is used mostly by young men in addressing other young men, but its use has expanded to include women and same- or mixed-sex groups. *Dude*, like the other features discussed in this section, is a stance marker. Kiesling observes (2004: 282) that *dude* is used to express “a stance of solidarity or camaraderie, but crucially in a nonchalant, not-too-enthusiastic manner.” *Dude*, then, indexes a stance of “cool solidarity,” embraced by boys and girls, and also by older speakers, often ironically, as in its use as a name for the aging hippie, played by Jeff Bridges, in the 1998 film, *The Big Lebowski*.

7. Summary and conclusions

In this brief overview of contemporary English in the USA, we have provided examples of linguistic variation in current American English that are used by particular groups for particular social purposes. The linguistic strategies for self and group identification illustrated here have ranged from pronunciation and lexical choice to morphosyntactic and pragmatic variants. We have approached this overview from the perspective offered by scholars in the area of language ideology who study how particular linguistic forms come to be used as indexes of the social group that uses them. As Gal (1998: 326) puts it, we are interested in understanding the “semiotic processes by which ‘chunks’ of linguistic material gain significance as linked to, or representative of, socially recognized categories of people and activities.”

We have highlighted the fact that language varieties are fluid and dynamic constructs. The traditional social parameters used to identify language varieties that we have used here (region, age, ethnicity, gender) do not represent homogenous or unified groupings. Patterns of linguistic usage vary both within and across communities. Moreover, particular features can spread from community to community, sometimes losing, or parodying, their original indexical value. This essay serves as a snapshot of the kinds of variation observed in contemporary American English as we move through the 21st century.

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