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Abstract

Use of African American English features among whites with significant social contact with African Americans may signal familiarity and alignment with African American loved ones and peers. But larger cultural ideologies surrounding the use of an ethnically-marked language variety by a phenotypic outsider may cause a performance to be judged inauthentic, especially by those outside of speakers' immediate intimate social networks. This paper examines the linguistic practices of urban white women from Columbus, Ohio with life-long affiliations and alignments with African Americans, and compares them to popular media depictions of "white women who act black." Metalinguistic commentary from fieldwork suggests that the practices of these real-life speakers are assumed to match the social and linguistic practices of current popular television figures such as Buckwild from the *Flavor of Love*, and Rita, a character on the 2003 NBC sitcom *Whoopi*, both of whom create an iconic white female embodiment of blackness through use of selective syntactic, phonological, lexical, and discursive features of African American English. These media performances have generally been labeled as inauthentic. Qualitative and quantitative comparisons between AAE features used by these media personalities and speech data gathered from the white women with African American ties in my subject sample indicate hyperperformance on the part of the media personas that surpasses the "real" community members.

Representations of Blackness by White Women: Linguistic Practice in the Community versus the Media

Sonya Fix

1 Introduction

Use of African American English features among whites with significant social contact with African Americans may signal speakers' familiarity and alignment with African American loved ones and peers. But larger cultural ideologies surrounding the use of an ethnically-marked language variety by a phenotypic outsider may cause a performance to be judged inauthentic, especially by those outside of speakers' immediate intimate social networks. This paper examines the linguistic practices of urban white women from Columbus, Ohio with life-long affiliations and alignments with African Americans, and compares them to popular media depictions of "white women who act black." Metalinguistic commentary from fieldwork suggests that the practices of these real-life speakers are assumed to match the social and linguistic practices of current popular television figures such as Buckwild from *Flavor of Love*, and Rita, a character on the 2003 NBC sitcom *Whoopi*, both of whom create an iconic white female embodiment of blackness through use of selective syntactic, phonological, lexical, and discursive features of African American English (AAE). These media performances have generally been labeled as inauthentic. Qualitative and quantitative comparisons between AAE features used by these media personalities and speech data gathered from the white women with African American ties in my subject sample indicate hyper-performance on the part of the media personas that surpasses the "real" community members.

2 Media Icons and Community Ideologies

Upon hearing my research topic on language use and discourse on race and identity among white women with significant life-long social ties with African Americans, an African American friend replied "Oh, like Buckwild! I *hated* Buckwild!" She went on to describe the white participant on the reality show *Flavor of Love*, and her own zealous participation in the *Flavor of Love* internet message boards where she repeatedly questioned Buckwild about "why she felt the need to talk like that." The feelings of this African American woman were echoed by others I encountered in my research; Buckwild was considered to be both "fake-sounding" and offensive by whites and African Americans alike. While pejorative sentiments about the subjects of my study from peers and community members were not new to me, I found this discussion particularly intriguing because of its deeply metalinguistic nature. I was curious to observe what Buckwild was doing linguistically to garner such disapproval.

2.1 Buckwild on *Flavor of Love*

Flavor of Love is an unscripted reality show on VH1 in which female participants compete to win the love of Flavor-Flav, the famous Hip Hop hype-man of the group Public Enemy. The contestants are mainly, but not exclusively, African American women. Buckwild¹, aka Becky Johnston, a southern California stand-up comedian, was a contestant on this reality show in its second season in 2006 and was the only white contestant to make it past the third episode elimination. Her behavior on the show was characterized by an exaggerated use of AAE phonological and syntactic features, a humorous persona, and a personal fashion aesthetic that consisted of athletic sportswear and "bling" in the form of large, decorative belt buckles, necklaces, and earrings. The authenticity of Buckwild's linguistic behavior was continually called into question by fellow reality show participants, internet commentators (Milam 2007), and eventually, by Flav himself. When Buckwild quit the show in episode six in anger, many noted that she "dropped" her "accent" and "sounded white," making her an object of ridicule among show participants and viewers alike.

¹Becky "Buckwild" Johnston went on to appear on the VH1 *Flavor of Love* spin-off, *Charm School* (2007) which was hosted by the African American comedian and actress Mo'nique.

In their 2008 article “Performing Race in *Flavor of Love* and *The Bachelor*,” Dubrofsky and Hardy characterize Buckwild as talking using “heavy ‘Black slang’” (385). Her linguistic behavior was often described to me in metalinguistic commentary (although not directly in interviews with subjects) as variously inauthentic, “put-on,” and obtuse. From the first episode on *Flavor of Love*, Buckwild makes variable use of a range of salient AAE phonological and syntactic features, including copula absence, the tense marker *fitna*, /r/-lessness, /l/ vocalization and deletion, and lenition of interdental fricatives in her interactions with Flavor-Flav and the other contestants, as well as in her taped confessions (i.e., one-on-one taped interviews with the producers in which contestants offer commentary on the events of the show). Buckwild also seems to produce some of these phonological variables with exaggerated affect—/r/’s and /l/’s are not just vocalized variably, but strongly deleted, especially in slang phrases such as “tore [to:] up from the floor [flo:] up.” Table 1 shows some examples of Buckwild’s use of AAE features with various interlocutors. (A note on coding in transcripts: features of AAE are **bolded**; (0)=deletion of t/d/nasals and vocalization or deletion of /l/ and /r/. (t)/(d)/(r)/(l)=realization of the consonant.)

<i>Interlocutor</i>	<i>Transcript</i>	<i>AAE features</i>
<i>Flav:</i>	That’s cool(0) . I’m down. You’re gonna throw me in the water(0) , I can swim. Just(t)lemme take my Puma’s off fir(r)st because they brand new kicks and I ain’t(0) fittin to mess em um for real(l).	/l/ vocalization; /r/-lessness; copula deletion; cons. cluster reduction, <i>fittin to/fitna</i>
<i>Other (African American) contestants:</i>	You love where(0) you come from, that’s it. You got(0)s (gos) to have love for where you come from.	/r/-lessness, word final stop deletion, verbal –s marking
<i>In taped confessions with the producers of the show:</i>	I got to kick it with Flav for a few minutes. It was cool(0) . I hope he got to feel(l) me a little(l) bit. I don’t(0) know if he did cause there was a couple(0) a other girl(0)s you know, tryin to snippet in their snippets, but he was sittin next to me so I’m sure he could feel(l) the Buckwil(l)d(0) body heat radiating.	/l/ vocalization; cons. cluster reduction; <i>was</i> for <i>were</i> ; alveolar –ing

Table 1: Examples of Buckwild’s speech on *Flavor of Love* in several contexts.

Buckwild’s linguistic and cultural authenticity is called into question throughout her time on the show by one of her competitors—Like Dat, an African American woman from Jersey City, New Jersey. In the following exchange, Buckwild reveals that she is from the predominately white, middle class community of Rancho Cucomunga, California, causing Like Dat to question her linguistic behavior and affect. Note that Like Dat aligns use of AAE linguistic features with a “ghetto” identity—an identity that, for her, seems to require an authentic urban African American experience.

- Like Dat: You live in Rancho Cucomunga? (laughing)
- Buckwild: That’s where I live! That’s my hood, girl, that’s my hood!
- Like Dat: *(to the show producers)* I’m havin a hard time being-seein that Buckwild is ghetto like she’s actin like she’s ghetto.
- Buckwild: You love where you come from, that’s it. You **gots** to have love for where you come from.
- Like Dat: *(to the show producers)* You can’t be ghetto if you ain’t from the ghetto. Alright? You can’t, redo that shit. And to me it feels like it’s redone.

In a later episode shortly before Buckwild leaves the show, Buckwild and Like Dat have a lengthier and more incendiary dialogue in which Buckwild defends her linguistic behavior:

When I talk to people, my voice changes. It definitely does. But I talk like this all the time. But I will definitely talk a little bit different when I talk to you than when I talk to,

like if there's a person who speaks Spanish, I'll definitely talk a little more Spanish. When I get around English people, I start to get English, like "oh uh uh uh uh." When I work at my job, people are from Afghanistan, I start to talk like them.

Buckwild is questionably conscious of her performance—in a 2006 interview with *The Trades*, she purports that her language use was not an act (Roberts). But indictingly, the moment Buckwild loses control in anger and quits the show is when her use of AAE disappears, replaced by more standard American English (AE) phonological features indexing whiteness (Bucholtz 2001, Fought 2006). This leads the ever-diplomatic Flav himself to question the authenticity of what Dubrousky and Hardy label as "her ghetto voice" (385). Copula absence is replaced by copula presence; /r/-lessness is replaced by /r/-fullness, /l/ vocalization and deletion are replaced by strong l-articulation, final stop deletion is replaced by fully articulated final /t/ and /d/, monophthongized /ai/ is replaced with diphthongal [ai] and her prosody becomes less varied. Buckwild's shift during her final ceremony with Flav demonstrates both anger and a linguistically "white" style. Flav notices this shift and calls attention to it with incredulity. In the coded transcript of this exchange, AAE features are **bolded** and standard AE features are underlined.

Buckwild: **I(a):'ma have to** give this back to you. That girl(l) disrespected(d) your(r) house, she smoked(d) in here(r), she assaulted somebody in here(r), and I(a): don't(t) think it's right(ai) that you keep her(r). She insulted the people(l) in the house. And I(ai) think it's disrespect(t)ful(l).

Flav: Don't go no place Buckwild.

Buckwild: I(ai)can't stay here(r). I(ai) really don't(t) trust(t) her(r). I(ai) don't(t) trust(0) her(r). I(ai) don't(t) trust(t) her(r). If you put her(r) in hand(d)cuffs and cuff her(r) to the bed I(ai) will(l) stay here(r). Other(r) than that, I(ai) don't(t) trust(t) her(r). She drinks too much, she goes crazy, I(ai) don't(t) know what(t) she's gonna do.

Flav: Can I ask you a question?

Buckwild: Yes.

Flav: Where the fuck did your accent go?

Buckwild: Fuck, it went(t) out the window with the fucking(ng) rest(t) of them bitches. Very very far(r) away right(ai) now....That's what happens when I(ai) get pissed(d).

This revealing style shift *away* from use of AAE features illustrates one of Labov's sociolinguistic axioms (1972) which states that the less attention the speaker pays attention to his or her speech, the more natural the vernacular. In this case, Buckwild, in her moment of anger and frustration, with seeming lack of control, moves away from the vernacular phonological features of AAE and into a more standard, "white" vernacular.

2.2 Rita on *Whoopi*: A Scripted Enactment of a White Woman Who "Acts" Black

As I watched Buckwild, I recalled a short-lived TV sitcom from a few years prior, *Whoopi*, which featured a character named Rita. On this sitcom, Whoopi Goldberg played the central character, hotel-owner Mavis Ray, among a multicultural cast, including her "white-acting" lawyer brother Courtney and his girlfriend Rita, a white woman who acted, talked, and dressed "black." The basis of Rita's character was that she not only embodied Blackness, but also that she was what *Jet Magazine* described in 2003 as "blacker than her [Black] boyfriend." In a 2003 article by Baz Dreisinger in the *New York Times*, Elizabeth Regen, the actress who played Rita, recalls that "The casting call sought 'a white girl who talks, moves and acts like a sister'." On the show, Rita wears fashionable urban attire, large earrings and other prevalent jewelry, styles her long blonde hair in a variety of African American styles, including cornrows, and has an exaggerated affect meant to invoke stereotypes of African American women. Linguistically, she uses a wide range of AAE phonological, syntactic, and prosodic features, AAE discourse markers, and African American and urban youth-oriented lexicon and slang.

While Butler (1990) encourages us to understand all identity as inherently performative in na-

ture, there is a range among the subjects considered with regard to the level of consciousness with which they enact their personae linguistically. Rita, a character overtly scripted to act and embody a certain role—that of a white woman who acts black—may be seen as the most performative of the speakers examined in this data sample. In all quantitative measures of use of AAE features, she exceeds the community speakers I encountered during my fieldwork, as well as Buckwild, her media cohort. Note Rita’s use of AAE features such as /ai/ monophthongization, /l/ vocalization, /r/-lessness, alveolar *-ing*, lenition of fricatives, consonant cluster reduction, metathesis, copula absence, and sub/aux inversion—and Whoopi/Mavis’s overt disapproval of this AAE use—in the following coded dialogue from the show’s pilot in which Mavis and Rita interact for the first time alone at the bar of the hotel Mavis owns. AAE features are **bolded**.

- Rita: *(on the phone with her father)* Oh daddy you know it’s about **ti(a:)me you came through hel(0)pin my ma:n(0) out and(0)** everything. **I(a:) mean straight(glottal stop)** up, props to you! Oh **ai:ght dad I(a:)’ma** talk to you **later(0)**, okay? Peace **out(0)**.
- Rita: *(to Mavis)* Woman do not **interrupt(0)** me when I’m **havin a cellular(0) conver(0)sation**, okay! Because **I(a:)** would not do it to you.
- Mavis: Listen. If you wanna hang around here, you need to be white.
- Rita: Girl, **I(a:) don’t(0)** know what **you talkin** about. **I(a:) mean(0) what(glottal stop) el(0)se could I(a:) be?**
- Mavis: You right, my bad.
- Rita: But **girl let(0)** me **tell(0)** you. **I(a:) had ask(ks)ed my daddy to get(0) Cour(0)tney** a job. **And(0)** today he finally came through! **Cour(0)tney** starts tomorrow! Big up! *(Goes in for a high-five with Mavis)*
- Mavis: *(blocks Rita’s high-five gesture with a raised finger)* I will CUT you.

3 Buckwild and Rita: Range and Frequencies of Use of AAE Features

Buckwild and Rita both make use of a fairly wide range of similar AAE features (cf. Rickford 1999), although Rita makes use of a slightly wider subset of AAE features than Buckwild, and aside from Buckwild’s use of *fittin to*, they do not make use of many of the tense-mood-aspect markers of AAE, implying perhaps a more superficial competency of the AAE grammar.

<i>Morphosyntactic</i>	<i>Phonological</i>
Copula deletion (<i>is, are</i>)	/ai/ monophthongization
Prefective <i>done</i>	/r/-lessness
<i>ain’t</i> for <i>isn’t</i>	/l/ vocalization
Verbal -s absence	Lenition of interdental fricatives
<i>Is</i> for <i>are, was</i> for <i>were</i>	Reduction of word-final clusters: t/d
Multiple negation	Alveolar <i>-ing (-in)</i>
<i>y’all</i>	More varied intonational contours
Reduplication of <i>-ed</i>	Deletion of word final consonants: nasals and t/d
Demonstrative <i>them</i> (Rita only)	(Rita only)
Preterite <i>had + ed</i> (Rita only)	Metathesis of adjacent consonants (Rita only)
<i>Fittin to/Fitna</i> (Buckwild only)	

Table 2: Qualitative range of AAE features used by Buckwild and Rita².

²Rita also routinely makes use of AAE discourse markers such as *girl* and *girlfriend* (Spears 2009), phonological features indexing Black and Latino urban youth in NYC such as glottalized /t/ and monophthongal /o/, and lexical items and idiomatic expressions aligned with AAE and urban youth slang, such as: *buggin out, fierce, tight, straight up, gettin busy, bitch-slapped, melon-booty, I hear you girl* and so on. She alone calls Whoopi’s character Mavis Ray the intimate and reduplicated nickname “May-Ray”.

Figure 1 shows Buckwild's and Rita's frequencies of use of selected AAE features³ salient within both of their speech styles: Copula absence (*is*, *are*) /r/-lessness, /l/ vocalization, t/d deletion in consonant clusters, /ai/ monophthongization, and alveolar *-ing*. Rita's use of AAE exceeds Buckwild's quantitatively across all variables. Buckwild's normal style on *Flavor of Love* is contrasted with her "angry style"; when she genuinely exhibits anger on the show, her use of AAE features all but ceases.

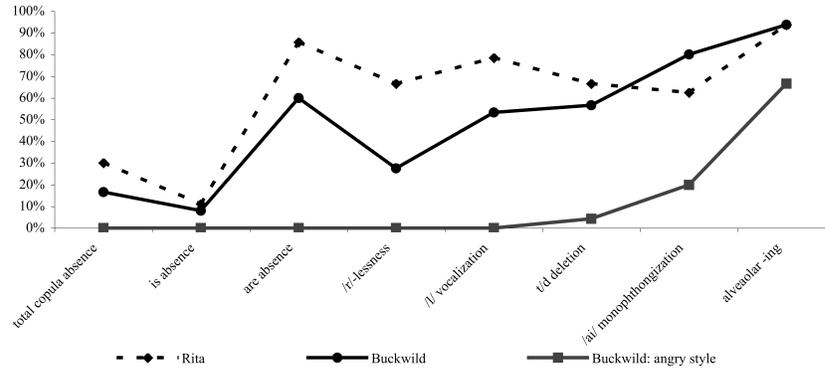


Figure 1: Buckwild and Rita's frequencies of use of selected AAE features.

While Buckwild and Rita do not parody African Americans directly, their personas and performances struck a chord of unease and disapproval both with my African American cohorts and with the on-line community, perhaps due to their evocation of the American performance tradition of minstrel of the 19th and early 20th centuries in which white performers, through blackface makeup, dress, and mocking use of AAE linguistic features, would parody African Americans and African American culture for comedic ends (Dubar 1999). The white women with African American networks in my study were often pejoratively aligned with these types of iconic TV figures by community members outside their social networks. However, as a group they were quite varied in their qualitative and quantitative use of AAE features. I wondered if Buckwild's and Rita's linguistic performances were at all accurate portrayals of the women they characterized.

4 White Women in the African American Community

Ten white women from young adulthood to middle age with close contact with African Americans through marriage, partnerships, and friendship, in Columbus, Ohio, make up the community sample. The speakers are similar to those in Hatala 1976, Ash and Myhill 1986, and Sweetland 2002. Data were gathered from recorded sociolinguistic interviews and natural speech episodes, and speakers' African American partners and families were present during many of the recordings. Variation among speakers exists with regard to degree of contact with African Americans over the lifespan (especially during childhood), neighborhood of current residence (degree of racial integration), orientation toward and social networks with African American women (friends and in-laws), and metalinguistic acknowledgment of "sounding black."

Among the subjects who I encountered in my fieldwork in Columbus, many make some use of AAE features, although they vary substantially from one another with regard to the qualitative range and rate with which they use these features. However, even those who showed relatively low rates of use of AAE features in their speech data commented on perceptions about their way of speaking. In the following interview excerpt, Nicole, age 43 at the time of recording, who grew up in a predominately African American neighborhood and has close, life-long friendships with African Americans, comments on how she is often told that she "acts black"—a description that

³Not all of these features are unique to AAE; many of the phonological features are shared with other white vernacular varieties, especially those of the South. However, these features are often understood to index Blackness, as we see among middle class white Californian youth in Bucholtz (2002) and Fine and Anderson (1980).

she remonstrates:

Nicole: I mean you know—the whole term "actin black." What is actin black? Because I have a swing in my head when I talk? Because I- you know I break my words apart- that's acting black?

Sonya: Have you been told that?

Nicole: Uh huh. And like, you know, not so much now, over the- over the past few years where I have just removed myself from a lot of things. Um, I've been told that I'm a black woman trapped in a white girl's body. I've been told that several times. I've been told that I'm, I'm ghetto. I've been told that um, you know you (0) actin black, or you talk black. Well what is black? It's- it's it's me. Well I'm not black. I'm a white woman. I grew up in a black neighborhood. I fell in love with a black man and I have biracial children. That doesn't make me black. Why am I acting a color? You know why am I acting a race because of who I am. This is me. This is all I know.

A subset of my subjects exhibits a qualitatively wider range of grammatical and phonological features of African American English compared to Buckwild and Rita, evidence of more authentic second dialect acquisition. However, these speakers make extremely sparing use of salient AAE grammatical features such as copula deletion, even around their African American loved ones and peers, unlike Rita and Buckwild. This differentiated use of AAE features may indicate speakers' larger awareness of and sensitivity to the use of ethnically-marked linguistic features.

Table 7 is a summary of the features used by community members versus the two TV personalities. It shows that the community speakers in my study use a wider range of AAE features than Buckwild and Rita, both morphosyntactically and phonologically (although not all community speakers make use of the full range of features). Many of the morphosyntactic features of AAE used by community speakers occur very infrequently within the data set, especially features not shared with local white vernaculars such as *is* copula absence and verbal *-s* absence, and stressed and unstressed *been*. This contrasts with Buckwild and Rita who show relatively high rates of copula absence. Community speakers also make use of different AAE discourse markers than their TV cohorts—many in the sample use paralinguistic clicks (as well as tooth suck) as a disapproval marker (Rickford and Rickford 1999), but do not show use of the discourse *girl* (Spears 2009) or *girlfriend* which are used by Rita with frequency. AAE features shared with the local white vernacular features of the community sample are marked with an asterisk (*).

AAE Features	Community Speakers	TV cohorts
<i>Phonological Features</i>		
/ai/ monophthongization	+	+
/oi/ monophthongization		
Merger of I/E before nasals	+	
/r/-lessness		+
/l/ vocalization*	+	+
Lenition of interdental fricatives	+	+
Reduction of word-final clusters: t/d*	+	+
Reduction of word-final clusters: sk	+	
Deletion of word final consonants: t/d & nasals	+	+
Alveolar <i>-ing</i> *	+	+
Metathesis of adjacent consonants	+	+
Realization of <i>-ing</i> & <i>-ang</i> as <i>-ink</i> & <i>-ank</i>		
Realization of /v/, /z/ as /b/, /d/ word medially		
Word initial str- as skr-		
Stress on 1 st syllable	+	+
More varied intonation	+	
Deletion of unstressed syllables		
<i>Morphosyntactic Features</i>		
Stressed <i>BEEN</i>	+	

Unstressed <i>been</i>	+	
Aspectual <i>steady</i>		
Invariant <i>be</i> (habitual aspect)	+	
Invariant <i>be</i> for future	+	
<i>Fin/Fitna</i>		+
Completive <i>done</i> *	+	+
<i>Come</i> (indignation)		
<i>ain't</i> for <i>didn't</i>		
<i>ain't</i> for <i>isn't</i> *	+	+
Copula absence	+	+
Possessive -s absence		
Verbal -s absence	+	+
<i>Is</i> for <i>are</i> , <i>was</i> for <i>were</i> *	+	+
Multiple negation	+	+
Reduplication of <i>-ed</i>		+
Preterite <i>had +ed</i>	+	+
Non 3 rd person singular verbal -s		+
Aux/verb inversion		
<i>be done</i>		
<i>y'all</i> *		+
Demonstrative <i>them</i> *	+	+
<i>Discourse Level & Paralinguistic Features</i>		
<i>Girl, girlfriend</i> as discourse marker		+
Click, toothsuck as disapproval marker	+	

Table 3: Qualitative range of use of AAE features among community speakers vs. TV cohorts

5 Quantitative Analysis: /l/ Vocalization and t/d Deletion

5.1 /l/ Vocalization, a Global Variable with Local Significance

/l/ vocalization is a robust variable feature within both the media and community data sets. Buckwild and Rita make use of both strongly vocalized and fully deleted /l/, as well as fully-articulated /l/ variably. A sound change in progress in English with global reach (Horvath and Horvath 2005), American English /l/ vocalization has been attested primarily in Southern English varieties, African American English (Bailey and Thomas 1998, Green 2002), and in the Midwest (Ash 1982, McElhinny 1999, Fix 2004, Dodsworth 2005, Durian 2008). Fix and Durian both found higher rates of /l/ vocalization among working class African Americans compared to whites in Columbus, especially when /l/ is in coda and syllable final position. This work, coupled with Dodsworth's findings of upper middle class white suburbanites' avoidance of /l/ vocalization, signals that /l/ vocalization in Columbus may be emblematic of urban, and specifically African American, working class identities.

Thirty tokens of /l/ were coded auditorily for all 12 speakers. The external factor groups considered were: speaker, community vs. media, social class, education, racial makeup of neighborhood of residence, and orientation toward African American women.⁴ The internal factor groups considered were: preceding segment, following segment, and /l/'s position within the word.

In the first GoldVarb run, which included all ten community speakers as well as Buckwild and Rita, the factor groups of speaker, preceding segment, and following segment were significant. Among all speakers, /l/ vocalization was favored when preceded by back and low vowels and followed by front vowels and labial and coronal consonants. Rita favored /l/ vocalization the most, vocalizing at the highest rate, 78.6%, followed by three of the community speakers who vocalized at rates of 71.4%, 56.7%, and 54.8%, then Buckwild, who vocalized at a rate of 53.3%.

⁴This category was based on speakers' observed and reported orientations toward and interactions with African American women in their social networks.

The remaining seven community speakers vocalized /l/ at rates ranging from 37.5% to 16.7%. In the second GoldVarb run, only community speakers were considered and the following factor groups were significant: racial makeup of neighborhood of speaker’s current residence, speaker’s orientation toward African American women, preceding segment, and following segment. Table 4 lists the factor weights and frequencies for a selection of social categories only, as they tell us the most about the patterns of inter-speaker variation within the community sample. Community speakers who currently reside in predominately African American neighborhoods favor /l/ vocalization, while those community speakers who currently reside in predominately white neighborhoods, regardless of their other African American social network ties, strongly disfavor /l/ vocalization. A similar pattern is seen with regard to community speakers’ orientation toward African American women; those with positive orientations favor /l/ vocalization, while those with negative orientations disfavor /l/ vocalization.

Factor	Factor Weight	% Vocalization
<i>Neighborhood of current residence</i>		
<i>Predominately African American</i>	0.748	52.0%
<i>Mixed (African American & white)</i>	0.401	30.2%
<i>Predominately white</i>	0.200	16.7%
<i>Orientation toward African American women</i>		
<i>Positive orientation</i>	0.569	45.4%
<i>Neutral orientation</i>	0.486	22.3%
<i>Negative orientation</i>	0.177	23.2%
Total speakers=10, total tokens=309, input=0.320, p<0.467.		

Table 4: Social Factors conditioning /l/ vocalization among community speakers.

5.2 t/d Deletion

Deletion of final coronal stops in consonant clusters is a widespread feature of both AAE (Fasold 1972, Labov 1969, Wolfram and Fasold 1974) and AE (Guy 1980, 1991) and is conditioned by both preceding and following environments as well as morphemic status. Higher rates of t/d deletion occur in AAE than AE in general, especially when the following segment is a vowel (Wolfram and Fasold 1974). Additionally, Labov’s 1972 AAE speakers delete the past tense –ed at much higher rates than Guy’s 1991 general AE corpus (74% and 16%, respectively).

30 tokens⁵ of final t/d in consonant clusters were coded auditorily, with spectrogram images used as a secondary tool for coding⁶. The same social factor groups considered in the previous /l/ vocalization runs were considered for the t/d runs. The internal linguistic factor groups considered were preceding phonological environment, following phonological environment, and morphemic status (monomorphemic or bimorphemic).

In the GoldVarb run with all speakers, the factor groups that were significant were speaker, media vs. community speakers, and following phonological environment. When considered as a group, community speakers deleted less than media speakers—41.8% to 61.8%, respectively. However, when considered individually, some of the community speakers individually deleted at rates equal to or approaching those of the media speakers; Rita and one community speaker exceeded all other speakers in their rate of t/d deletion—66.7%. Another deleted at 60%, but Buckwild, who deleted at 56.7%, exceeded the other eight community speakers in rates of t/d deletion. Among the community speakers, t/d deletion did not follow the same social patterns that were found to condition /l/ vocalization—neighborhood of residence and orientation towards African American women were not found to condition t/d deletion. However, when we consider morphemic status, community speakers showed less of a tendency than their media cohorts to main-

⁵The data set available for Rita did not provide 30 tokens, however, Rita also productively deleted both consonant cluster final stops, as well as those in post-vocalic position.

⁶Released, unreleased, and glottalized t/d were all coded as t/d presence.

tain t/d in bimorphemic contexts. This finding is similar to Wolfram and Fasold's 1974 and Labov's 1972 findings among African Americans, where t/d deletion occurred even when it held a morphemic load, such as past tense -ed, indicating that the community speakers have an internally-conditioned pattern of t/d deletion more similar to that of African American speakers than the media speakers.

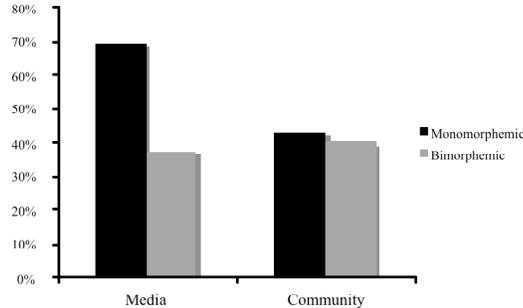


Figure 2: t/d deletion and morphemic status.

6 Social Analysis and Conclusions

Rita, a character scripted to act and embody a certain role—that of a white woman who acts black—may be seen as the most performative of the speakers examined in this data sample, using a range of AAE morphosyntactic, phonological, and discursive features, lexical items, as well as paralinguistic features and exaggerated affect drawn from stereotypes of African American womanhood. In all quantitative measures, she exceeds the community speakers in her use of AAE, as well as Buckwild, her media cohort. Buckwild, while purporting that her language use is not an act nevertheless exhibits use of AAE features in a performative way that her competitors and show viewers deemed inauthentic and at rates superceding most of the community speakers. Most indictingly, at the moment Buckwild loses control in anger, her use of AAE disappears. These TV personalities, while using many of the same AAE features as the community speakers, use a qualitatively narrower set of features, while also making use of many features at higher rates, indicating a linguistic hyper-performance. While neither Rita nor Buckwild is directly parodying AAE, they are appropriating aspects of African American language and affect for the purpose of humor. Rita's character is meant to parody whites who “act black.” Buckwild reflects why she is the way she is on episode 1 of *Flavor of Love*:

I(a:) was raised by(a:) television (*with a rough/creaky grind*). My(a:) mom and(0) dad is probably li(a:)ke Oprah and Jerry Springer(0). That's why(a:) I(a:)’m li(a:)ke crazy, and black. I(a:) think th(d)at’s why(a:).

By revealing the media input that has shaped her persona, Buckwild admits to a process that Kitwana describes as “appropriating distorted representations of Black youth culture, not Black youth culture itself” (2005:123). While no one is free from the distorted images of Blackness that Kitwana describes, the community speakers in my data set have an additional source of input: the actual African Americans with whom they have been in close contact with throughout their lives; those who, in the words of Nicole in section 4, they “*know*.” In the case of the community speakers, where conscious use of language ends and unconscious use begins is not so clear, but the community speakers’ differentiated use of AAE features may indicate their larger awareness of the cultural stereotype within the media with whom they are aligned.

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