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**Sociolinguistic Interviewer Style Variation: Hyperconvergence in the Other Informant**

## Sociolinguistic Interviewer Style Variation: Hyperconvergence in the Other Informant

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One of the goals of this study is to reevaluate the significance of the sociolinguistic interview as an important linguistic register for extending and refining the discussion on style variation (theory). More specifically, I attempt to use the basic assumptions that can be made about the sociolinguistic interview to inform a variation analysis of a bidialectal interviewer who re-enters a familiar vernacular speech community to collect data. Thus, the sociolinguistic interview register functions not only as a well defined situation for its interlocutors, but for the interviewer, it functions as one of the contextual factors that shapes his/her style.

SK is an African American graduate student who conducted several interviews in Robeson County, NC, for the North Carolina Language and Life Project. The data that I have compiled for this study suggest that he varies his speech style in order to accommodate informants within the sociolinguistic interview register. The purpose of my research has been to assess SK's sociolinguistic adjustments and subsequently move toward evaluating why an African American interviewer uses particular forms. It should also provide a window into the socio-psychological perspectives that might motivate the interviewer's behavior.

Several types of linguistic variables should enable researchers to quantify style variation in a particular register for one speaker. For this study we selected word-final postvocalic *r*-lessness (e.g. *remember, more*) copula deletion (e.g. *you ugly*) and third person -s absence (e.g. *he like him*). I tentatively classify these variables as microstylistic because they can be readily subjected to small scale quantitative sociolinguistic analyses. The other variables including habitual *be* use (e.g. *he be acting stupid*), pseudo performance phrases (e.g. an AAVE speaker performing a stigmatized Lumbee English variant such as *far for fire*), and certain interview questions (e.g. *How do blacks talk?*) all operate predominantly on a larger scaled qualitative level, conveying ethnic distinctiveness and/or social status; these I have classified as macrostylistic variables.

The speech patterns of interviewers in the context of the interview yield suggestive information for the analysis of style variation in this (the S. L.) register. The interviewer linguistically negotiates his/herself into a casual conversational situation by employing different linguistic variants from her/his sociolinguistic interview register and by manipulating topical design.

In Peter Trudgill's 1974 study he concluded (from empirical results) that he glottalized his *r*'s in concert with his various informants from a speech community in Norwich. He integrates consciousness or awareness into his explanation of interviewer style variation and lists language change as a critical factor in his own results. Those features that are undergoing linguistic transformations become more recognizable to speakers and more distinctive for accommodation strategies (see summary of explanations, below). These factors become crucial instruments for determining the style variation in the register of the sociolinguistic interviewer who most often must approach or return to a community where his/her standardized speech will be an impediment to the casual atmosphere essential to the collection of data for vernacular analyses.

**Trudgill's Explanations for Speaker Awareness**

(from Trudgill 1986: 11)

- (1) Greater awareness attaches to forms which are overtly stigmatized in a particular community. Very often, this overt stigmatization is because there is a high-status variant of the stigmatized form and this high-status variant tallies with the orthography while the stigmatized variant does not.
- (2) Greater awareness also attaches to forms that are currently involved in linguistic change.
- (3) Speakers are also more aware of variables whose variants are phonetically radically different.
- (4) Increased awareness is also attached to variables that are involved in the maintenance of phonological contrasts.

Sociolinguistic expectations vary from speaker to speaker and from community to community, but they seem to weigh significantly in the mind of a sociolinguistic fieldworker who re-enters his/her speech community. This re-entrance anxiety is incited by a variation of the observer's paradox (Labov 1972), that is peculiar to the African American community. This distinct observer's paradox not only explains various pressures on the fieldworker, including socio-ethnic acceptance and the necessity of putting the informant at ease, but also the pressure of dialectal conformity and/or accommodation.

John Baugh, provides a glimpse of an observer's paradox that operates in African American communities:

"The issue [of attaining naturalness in sociolinguistic interviews] has to do with how the researcher makes informants feel sufficiently comfortable to talk on tape in a manner that is similar to their speaking style when they are not being recorded. In my case, I always carried a tape recorder; thus, when I met prospective informants, my research interests were obvious. In many instances, *I was chided for not having a "box" with a built-in radio*; most other of the other young men on the street had fully equipped "jam boxes" to record popular music directly. *My inability to record music was the object of considerable amusement*, but it also provided me with repeated opportunities to discuss the research and my desire to conduct interviews with those who were most familiar with life in the African American community. (Baugh 1983: 155)

Note Baugh's recognition of the social forces at play when he enters a speech community whose members assess their ethnic expectations of him immediately. Although in this situation Baugh is able to turn the ridicule into productive discussion concerning the importance of his work, it is clear that the black fieldworker must deal with issues of in-group/out-group associations that can influence the way he/she interacts with the community under study.

The interviewer analyzed in this study experiences some of the same cultural assessments when he re-enters Robeson County, NC, to collect sociolinguistic data from his relatives. The distinctiveness of this *black* interviewer's paradox is directly related to the African American community's ongoing search for a racial identity. In order for Baugh "to be down" with members of his speech community he has to fulfill certain expectations. Comparable expectations are present in the interactions between SK and his informants, particularly his relatives. Their cultural expectations vary and are more subtle than those of the informants in Baugh's story. Thus SK's response to them is more subtle and probably

over-anticipated to a degree. His response is largely sociolinguistic. That is, he varies his speech in order to meet what he perceives to be the cultural expectations of a particular informant so that he can facilitate the most natural conversational setting for the sociolinguistic interview. Navigating the (black) observer's paradox and successfully conducting sociolinguistic interviews require the (bidialectal) interviewer to make various social and psychological negotiations with him/herself. The sources for directing this navigation is the primary subject of Giles' Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles 1973).

SAT attempts to explain the motivations behind speech variation. The contextual explanations center around discussions of social hierarchies and their effects on linguistic interactions. The psychological explanations tend to focus on how these social hierarchies influence an interlocutor's cognitive processes, which in turn create certain style variations in his/her speech. SA theorists address their research to the contexts as much as the behaviors of participants (Giles et al. 1991), simply because the contexts and their corresponding social behaviors are inseparable when attempting to determine a speaker's psychological operations in discourse situations.

Generally, SK converges in the interviews. He adjusts his speech, employing various vernacular variants, in order to sociolinguistically assimilate himself to his perceptions of the informant. However, on one of the most marked features of AAVE, habitual *be*, SK diverges from some of his informants. Within a SAT framework, SK's divergence and convergence would be described as a socio-psychological predisposition to establish himself as a member of a specific speech community. In this case, he apparently believes that identifying with a *young*, black, male, southern community, will allow him to be a successful sociolinguistic fieldworker. Obviously, convergence and divergence are not mutually exclusive and can entail qualitative and quantitative varieties of feature accommodation.

The four interviews analyzed for this talk will be referred to as SK1, SK2, SK3, and SK4. In SK 1, SK interviews two of his elder relatives, one African American male age 70 and an African American female age 66. In SK2, SK interviews a 31 year old African American female relative. In SK3, SK interviews a 19 year old African American female relative. And in SK4, SK interviews his friend (from college), a 21 year old Lumbee Native American from Robeson County, NC.

Table 1 presents SK's *r*-lessness in each of the interviews. The percentages reflect his tendency towards *r*-lessness. SK is *r*-less throughout all of the interviews.

# of Tokens	25	125	42	53	248
r realized	10	33	8	13	64
r-less	15	92	34	40	181
% r-less	60.0%	73.6%	80.9%	75.5%	72.9%

Table 1: SK's *r*-lessness

It may be relevant here to discuss the inversion of a paradigm outlined by Wolfram (1991) in his chapter from *Dialects and American English* entitled "Dialects and Style." Following an explanation of Ash and Myhill's 1986 study Wolfram recognizes that the "...differential status of white and black varieties [exists] in the broader context of American society and ... the pressure is always on socially subordinate groups to adjust to superordinate ones not the converse" (Wolfram 1991: 141).

For SK, the objective is to collect sociolinguistically usable data (some of which should be natural conversation). This goal positions him in a role subordinate to the informant even though he is related to three out of the four of the informants. Thus the linguistic pressure is upon him to shift into a dialect that is not preferred in a mainstream context, but is privileged in the interview setting where he is attempting to construct an atmosphere that is conducive to a natural language interaction.

In order to capture a vivid picture of how SK's variation compares to the vernacular informants in each of his interviews I have compiled comparable tabulations for each of the informants' postvocalic *r*-lessness (Table 2). (For SK1 I am only counting the African American woman's potential tokens.)

# of Tokens	30	25	25	25	105
<i>r</i> realized	10	2	8	11	31
<i>r</i> -less	20	23	17	14	74
% <i>r</i> -less	66.7%	92.0%	68.0%	56.0%	71.2%

Table 2: The informants' *r*-lessness

If we rank the percentages from highest to lowest for SK's *r*-lessness and compare this with his informants' degrees of *r*-lessness we will begin to outline SK's microstylistic convergence. The ranking of the informants' *r*-lessness is helpful for addressing debates over consciousness and attention paid to speech (Labov 1972) when it is juxtaposed with SK's ranked *r*-lessness. SK's microstyle shifts are not completely sensitive to the vernacularity of his audience. The fact that he shifts may be (and probably is) a conscious decision, but we cannot determine whether or not he is increasing or decreasing his attention paid to speech in these sociolinguistic interviews. The data from this study suggest that we can map a positive relationship between attention paid to speech derived from preconceived (initiative) designs upon the audience and initial microstylistic shifts into a vernacular variety.

In Figures 1-4, I have graphed SK's *r*-lessness against each of his informants. The *x*-axis enumerates the total number of tokens and the *y*-axis enumerates the number of unrealized postvocalic *r*'s. The square is the symbol for SK's postvocalic *r*-lessness. The diamond represents the different informant in each of the four interviews. The graphs depict SK's tendency to be *r*-less in his interview register, regardless (and sometimes despite) of the *r*-lessness of his informants.

Figure 1: Graphed  $r$ -lessness (SK1)

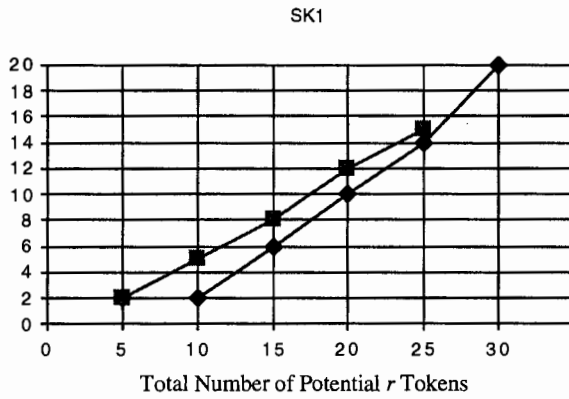


Figure 2: Graphed  $r$ -lessness (SK2)

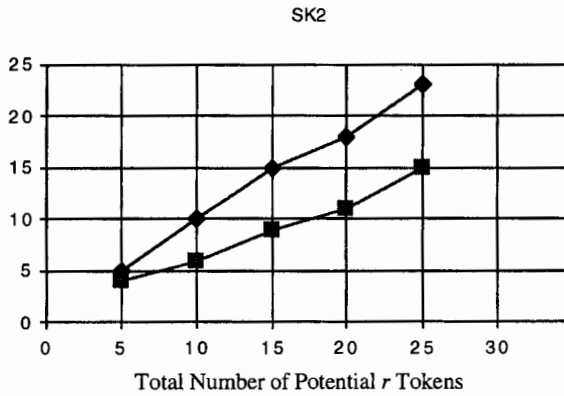


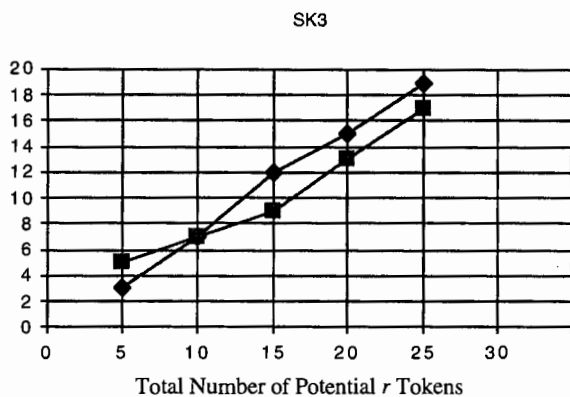
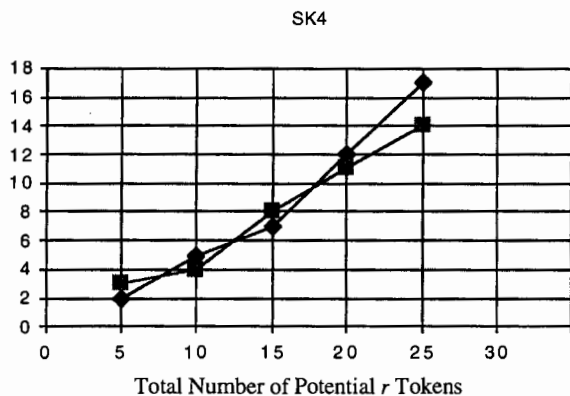
Figure 3: Graphed *r*-lessness (SK3)Figure 4: Graphed *r*-lessness (SK4)

Table 3 is a compilation of SK's copula *be* deletion in each of the four interviews. SK deletes copula *be* consistently in all four interviews. The overall consistency in total percentages across each interview reiterates my earlier point that SK's shift into a vernacular register may be conscious, but his microstylistic employment of particular variables (to or not to varying quantities) does not correspond to the vernacularity of his informants.



Interview	SK1	SK2	SK3	SK4	Totals
# of Tokens	11	13	10	39	73
# of NP's	4	2	1	12	19
# of Pro.	7	11	9	27	54
# of <i>is</i> Del.	3	4	3	12	22
# of <i>are</i> Del	4	5	2	15	26
Total Del.	7	9	5	27	48
% Del. <i>is</i>	42.9%	44.4%	60.0%	44.4%	47.9%
% Del. <i>are</i>	57.1%	55.6%	40.0%	55.6%	52.1%
% Del. NP	75.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	31.3%
% Del. Pro	57.1%	81.2%	55.6%	77.8%	67.9%
Total % Del	63.6%	69.2%	50.0%	69.2%	63.0%

Table 3: SK's copula deletion

Table 4 lists the compilations of SK's third person -s absence in each of the four interviews. In SK3, SK had no potential third person -s forms. Therefore, SK3 was not included in the table. In each interview the potential tokens for this variable are relatively low. This low count made me skeptical about drawing conclusions from the data, but third person -s forms would naturally suffer the most from the structure of the sociolinguistic interview compounded by a low grammatical inventory.

Interview	SK1	SK2	SK4	Totals
# of Tokens	4	5	17	26
# of -s present	1	0	5	6
# of -s absent	3	5	12	20
% of -s Absence	75.0%	100.0%	70.6%	76.9%

Table 4: SK's absence of Third Person -s

SK1 and SK4 show similar percentages of third person -s absence, while SK2 shows 100.0% third person -s absence. This high percentage suggests that SK strategically employs this variable to a convincing degree in order to converge upon the vernacularity of the informant in SK2. It would be hasty to imply that this confirms some conscious attention paid to vernacular speech within SK's vernacular, interview register. I am more comfortable with the fact that SK knew this informant prior to the interview and he recognized that her vernacularity was distinctively high. Thus when he shifts into his interview register for SK2 he consciously considers accommodating the speech of the informant in SK2.

In short, the data set for each of the three variables support the conclusion that SK designed microstylistic shifts in order to successfully conduct the sociolinguistic interview with the each of the informants.

I will now discuss the larger scaled qualitative shifts within the sociolinguistic interview that fall within the rubric of macrostyle (Bell 1984). In SK2 and SK3, SK directs a macrostylistic shift into performance and pseudo-performance registers for himself and the informant, respectively. I call the informant's register pseudo-performance, in order to

distinguish it from the performance register employed by an indigenous vernacular speaker to display his or her own dialect (Schilling-Estes 1995). In the pseudo-performance register the speaker emulates *someone else's* dialect. In all cases of this register found in my study, pseudo-performance of a stigmatized variant of a dialect entails negative and humorous connotations for the purpose of promoting solidarity between the informant and SK. The shift into this register is prompted by a perception question that asks whether or not the informant is aware of linguistic variation across dialects.

### SK3 Typescript A

SK: What do you think about the way the black people talk and the way the Indians talk and the way white people talk around here? Is it different the way they talk?

Inf: You know black people use slang you know like what's up, you know? And um and you know white people they try to talk like hypothetically and all that stuff, respectable and big ... Oh lord. They have to pronounce all their vowels.

SK: How do uh, you heard the Indians say 'fire'?

Inf: **Far. Far.**

SK: You heard the Indians say that before?

Inf: And they don't never say children they say **younguns**, and they be trying to say young ones, but them **younguns**. And if they say, and if they do say children they say them **chillens**.

SK: What about when you whip somebody? It's all right to get a whipping, but how do you know you got it bad, how do you pronounce it?

Inf: Whipped.

SK: **Whapped!** Now you know what time it is. **Whapped.**

Inf: Buddy I'm gonna **whup** your rump.

SK: And when your going to fight somebody, I'm going to whup you. Am I wrong?

Inf: You right. You right.

### SK2 Typescript A

SK: Man she was something else boy. Tell me about like uh the Indians and the blacks and stuff. You think the Indians talk different from the blacks talk? You think the Indians talk different from the way white people talk? You think all three of them talk different?

Inf: Um-huh, yep.

SK: How do you think they talk different?

Inf: Got this Indian man work out there now where I work at. I pick at him all the time. The say he prejudice, but I don't think he's prejudice because me and him get along real good, but he'll help me with the parts and stuff I need. And if I have any problems and things I can go to him and things like that (um huh). Now he talk funny. I **be** mocking him sometime when he **be** talking.

SK: How he **be** saying... Tell me something he'll say that sound funny.

Inf: He **be** telling me Ernestine you a crazy gal.

SK: That's what he **be** saying, gal?

Inf: Yeah gal. I say I ain't no gal. I said I'm a girl. I say I'm a young lady, he say um no you a foolish gal. I **be** picking at him and um I asked him something. I

might ask him something about the clock or something and he'll say ain't nothing wrong with them clocks. I say yes it is. I say you see its a bad spot right here you can't use that one and um he say you can use it if I tell you to use it. His name Ted. He **be** tripping.

SK: You ever heard him say 'fire'? How he say 'fire'?

Inf: **Far. Far.** I say what? He say **far.** I say its not **far** man its fire... He a trip.

SK: Say he **be** cracking you up?

Inf: Um huh, I **be** picking at him all the time. Mocking him talking...

In SK3 Typescript A note SK's use of the discourse scenario established by the question to construct an in-group/out-group framework during this phase of the interview. He coaxes the informant to perform a stigmatized vowel variant from the Lumbee English Vernacular. Then he proceeds to offer a stigmatized vowel variant (in his own performance register) from AAVE in his pronunciation of "whipped." His style shifting success can be measured by the informant's agreement with both his varied pronunciation and the pragmatic contexts that he provides to support his assertions.

Macrostyle configures significantly in this discussion of microstylistic shifts in the sociolinguistic interview. SK's macrostyle strategy uses a racially marked question within the interview to promote solidarity between himself and the informant, as shown in both SK2 and SK3 Typescripts A. He knows that solidarity between himself and the informant will relax the informant and consequently produce natural conversation. This result is a primary objective for the sociolinguistic interviewer. His responsive habitual *be* employment functions in a similar manner in SK2, above, and the following example:

#### SK4

SK: You're joking. What's the name of it? You don't know what the name of it is? What, what, what they **be** telling them?

Inf: They **be** telling them stuff like uh you got you get twenty members by the time you get in here. You get saved, then you got to get twenty members or you can't stay in this church.

When interlocutors exchange linguistically distinctive grammatical variants, as in these examples, the exchange clearly marks some social affinity between them. SK is probably aware of how habitual *be* can function in this type of discourse. Even though habitual *be* operates within the discourse macrostylistically, because it is a linguistic variant, it can also be considered one of the most conscious **microstylistic** shifts initiated by SK.

I reviewed an assortment of linguistic features from SK's stylistic repertoire for the sociolinguistic interview: three microstylistic variables, two macrostylistic variables and habitual *be*, the feature that archetypally intersects both categories. In Table 5, I provide a table that lists each of the features in their corresponding categories. X marks the primary category in which the variable functions and Y marks the secondary category in which the variable functions. Through this primary-secondary sketch I'm attempting to alleviate the limitations of the micro-macro binary.

In Figure 5.2 I have constructed a general framework for a speaker's style variation. The speaker is detached from the discourse mechanisms, but still contained by the social parameters. This allows for the speaker to not participate in a register and/or not engage in style variation within that register. This paradigm only incorporates one speaker, but obviously a speaker must have designs upon an audience if he/she is operating from a communicative framework. The micro and macro input boxes would include all of the micro/macro stylistic features incorporated in the style variation model. Beneath the model is a functional continuum that measures the range of style variation (e.g. divergence to convergence, casual to formal, or responsive to initiative). Finally, from this mechanism each speaker has desired outcomes. These could include social acceptance, group identification, and/or a successful sociolinguistic interview (i.e. natural conversation

Linguistic Form	Microstylistic	Macrostylistic
Copula Deletion	X	Y
Postvocalic <i>r</i> -lessness	X	Y
3rd Person Absence	X	Y
Pseudo-Performance	Y	X
Ethnically Marked ?	Y	X
Habitual <i>be</i>	X	X

Table 5: The micro/macro breakdowns

elicited). To see how this framework works for any one of the SK interviews see Figure 5.2a.

In Figure 5.2a SK is the speaker and the register (SL Int.) is the sociolinguistic interview. The micro- and macrostylistic variable inputs noted in the framework are postvocalic *r*-lessness and habitual *be*, but all features analyzed in this study should be considered as either micro-, macro- or both (Table 5). The variation model that best describes SK's behavior is Bell's Audience Design. Not only is SK somewhat familiar with each of his informants before the interview, but as noted throughout my thesis, SK has the specific goal of promoting natural conversation in each of the interviews. The most appropriate strategy for accomplishing this task is to establish himself as a member of an AAVE vernacular speaking community.

The Responsive-Initiative continuum derives from similar concepts outlined by Bell (1984). Most of SK's stylistic shifts (marked by employing certain linguistic forms) are closer to the Initiative end of the continuum. Initiative intraspeaker variation refers to those stylistic shifts that are not functions of the immediate interview setting. An initiated style variation is a shift that is incited by forces external to the engaged interviewer(s) and interviewee(s). This external force is known as a referee (Bell 1984). Thus, a referee design is conceived by SK according to a figurative third party. The referee/third party is not present, but the title of referee denotes a level of control over the speaker. SK's referee is a combination of his ethnic consciousness and his research goals. Together, they facilitate his tendency to vary his speech micro- and macrostylistically in the sociolinguistic interview.

Figure 5.2: A communicative framework for style variation

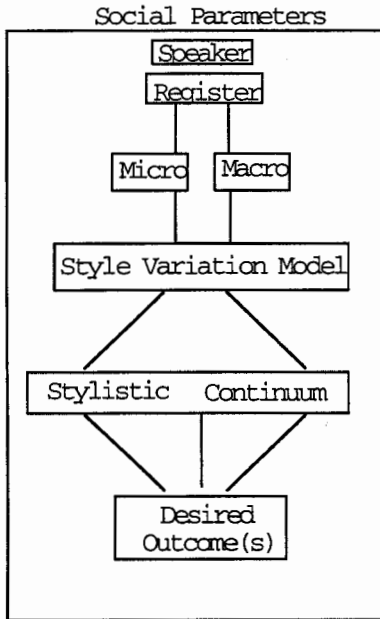
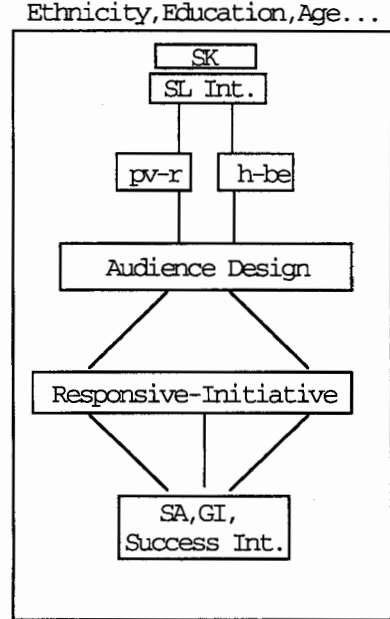


Figure 5.2a: A communicative framework for SK's style variation



SK's Responsive variation focuses more immediately upon the persons present at the interview. Thus, his macrostylistic strategies, such as the elicitation of pseudo-performance registers, and using habitual *be* (SK1 and SK2) and not using (SK3 and SK4) habitual *be*, are closer to the responsive end of the continuum because they are controlled by the people present at the interview in question. Here again the linguistic peculiarity of habitual *be* deconstructs binarily opposed analyses of it. It also operates along the Initiative end of the continuum because SK is aware of its distinctiveness as an AAVE feature entailing ethnic markedness.

From the various analyses and compilations presented in this study I have devised a simple, yet productive framework to depict SK's style variation in the sociolinguistic interview. Therefore the framework tends to simplify the plethora of social and linguistic mechanisms that operate on a speaker/interviewer confronted with several intuitive goals for one conversational register. SK (as well as any other fieldworker confronted by similar situations) must balance his attempts to facilitate natural conversation in the sociolinguistic interview register with his desire to be ethnolinguistically consistent with an AAVE speech community; an act, not easily accomplished, because it must be spoken.

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