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# Production, Perception, and Patterning: "Performance" Speech in an Endangered Dialect Variety

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## **Keywords**

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### 1. Introduction

In this presentation, I examine a speech register that has received little attention in mainstream sociolinguistic literature, performance speech.<sup>1</sup> Performance speech can be defined as the style of speech associated with speakers' attempting to display for others a certain language variety, whether a language or dialect alien to their own speech community or their own language or language variety. Because sociolinguists typically focus on utterances which minimize the attention paid to speech, they have tended to dismiss performance style, in which speakers focus on speech itself as they demonstrate for others what they perceive to be salient features of the language variety on display. Even in discussions of style which downplay the "attention to speech" criterion (e.g., Bell 1984), performance speech is cast aside, perhaps because it is considered unnatural, a mere byproduct of the sociolinguistic interview. However, a number of sociolinguistic studies which focus on dialect imitation (e.g., Preston 1994, Butters forthcoming), as well as anthropology-based studies of communicative patterns (e.g., Bauman 1975) show that performance style does occur in natural conversation and, indeed, may play a central role in the daily speech patterns of certain communities. An examination of performance speech may thus yield essential data on fundamental issues related to language in its social context. In addition, the investigation of performance speech lends valuable insight into specialized sociolinguistic situations, including those that contextualize endangered languages and language varieties. Endangered languages are often characterized by an unusually sharp focus on the language itself, and on the successful "performance" of the rare or dying language for speakers of

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more mainstream languages (e.g., Tsitsipis 1989); endangered dialects of non-threatened languages may share this focus on the performance register.

### 2. The Sociolinguistic Setting

My study is centered on performance speech as it occurs in Ocracoke, an island community of about 600 year-round residents which is located on the Outer Banks island chain off the coast of North Carolina. Ocracoke was first settled in the early 1700s, by people of English descent. The island community existed in relative isolation from mainland dialect areas for two and a half centuries, developing, in that time, a unique dialect which residents and outsiders often call "the brogue." This dialect is characterized by the retention of relic features from the Early Modern English period as well as by a unique combination of elements from various Southern and Northern dialect areas which is unparalleled in mainland North Carolina (Wolfram, Schilling-Estes, Hazen and Craig forthcoming). Since World War II, islanders have come into increasingly frequent contact with tourists and new residents, and the traditional brogue is fading as a result. With this influx of outsiders, islanders have become accustomed to solicitations for samples of their "quaint" speech. In response, community members have developed stock phrases which highlight island features, including the highly salient production of the /ay/ diphthong with a raised and backed nucleus (that is, [ʌ<sup>1</sup>]) which has come to characterize the Ocracoke, or "hoi toider," dialect.

### 3. Informant Characteristics

In this study, I focus on the performance speech of one islander in particular, RO, a 39-year-old male, who has exhibited a strong propensity toward performing the Ocracoke dialect, both for outsiders and community members, since we first met him two years ago. This informant, who has lived on Ocracoke all his life, is a member of a large, well-known island family who can trace their island heritage a number of generations back. RO is a fisherman, so most of his work-related contact is with fellow islanders. However, he is also a key member of a high-profile, tightly-knit group of male islanders who come into a good bit of contact with outsiders, chiefly through tourist-related trade such as hotel or rental property ownership. The members of this group are defined, among other things, by an exclusive weekly poker game, to which outsiders are rarely admitted. Thus, in previous studies, we have termed them the "Poker Game Network," a name I stick with here for convenience. Members of the Poker Game Network place a strong value on the traditional Ocracoke brogue as a marker of islander identity; and a number of them pride themselves on their ability to "lay the brogue on thick" for tourists and prying sociolinguists.

There are several criteria for determining if a particular utterance represents performance speech in Ocracoke. First, performance speech in this community often consists of rote phrases, such as the phrase in (1) below, designed to highlight island dialect features. Note that this phrase allows Ocracokers to display their unique /ay/ vowel, as well as such other dialect features as /I/-raising, as in [fiš] for [fiʃ], and the pronunciation of the *-ire* sequence as [ar], as in [far] for [fayr].

- (1) It's *high tide* ([h<sup>h</sup> t<sup>h</sup> t<sup>h</sup> d]) on the sound side ([s<sup>h</sup> t<sup>h</sup> d]). Last *night* ([n<sup>h</sup> t<sup>h</sup> t]) the water *fire* ([far]), *tonight* ([t<sup>h</sup> n<sup>h</sup> t<sup>h</sup> t]) the moon *shine* ([š<sup>h</sup> t<sup>h</sup> n]). No *fish* ([fiš]). What do you suppose the matter, Uncle Woods?

(Note that [h<sup>h</sup> t<sup>h</sup>] will hereafter be symbolized as [ɔy], for convenience.)

This phrase occurs a number of times in our audio and video taped conversations with our key informant, RO, and portions of it have been recited to us by other speakers on numerous occasions. All acoustic measurements of performance /ay/ in this study are taken from tokens occurring in utterances of this phrase which are clearly performative in nature.

Secondly, performance phrases in Ocracoke derive their relevance, not from their referential meaning but from their being interjected into conversations at points where linguistic display is called for. For example, our informant tells the story of his first meeting with Walt Wolfram, the head of our Ocracoke study, as in (2) below:

- (2) [Walt] came out there, said, said, "I'm studying speech." I said, "Well, it's high tide on the sound side. Last night the water fire; tonight the moon shine. No fish. What do you suppose the matter, Uncle Woods?"

Notice that there is no connection, on the level of propositional content, between Walt's utterance, "I'm studying speech" and RO's reply (at least in RO's narrative). And while performance speech in a number of communities is often signalled by special introductory phrases (Bauman 1975), it is the ritual phrase itself which cues addressees in Ocracoke that performance has begun. In fact, Ocracokers so readily assume that when this phrase occurs, it is a performance, that they don't even need relatively straightforward opening phrases such as, "Well, since you're studying speech, let me demonstrate our dialect for you."

Finally, as in other speech communities where performance speech plays a prominent role (Bauman 1975), performance speech in Ocracoke is signaled not only by its special discourse function but by special linguistic

features. For example, intonational patterns indicative of exaggerated speech and stylistic devices such as rhyme figure prominently in performance speech in Ocracoke. Further, performance speech is characterized in Ocracoke by special phonetic features. These features include exaggerated [I]-raising in [fiš] for *fish* and the exaggerated raising of the nucleus of the /ay/ diphthong which forms the focus of the current study.

#### 4. Acoustic Data

The quantitative portion of this investigation centers on the acoustic phonetic analysis of the nucleus of the /ay/ vowel in performance speech versus two non-performance speech styles. One of these styles is exhibited when our informant speaks directly with the interviewer, and the other occurs when the informant enters into an extended conversation with several of his brothers during the course of one of our interviews with him. The interviewer remained present during this conversation but his role changed, in Bell's (1984) terminology, from that of "addressee" to that of "overhearer"—that is, a known listener who is not ratified to participate in the conversational exchange. F1 and F2 values for the nucleus of the /ay/ vowel in the three styles just outlined are presented in Figure 1 below, in terms of the traditional vowel grid. Mean F1 and F2 values and standard deviations are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Values for the /ay/ Nucleus in Three Stylistic Contexts

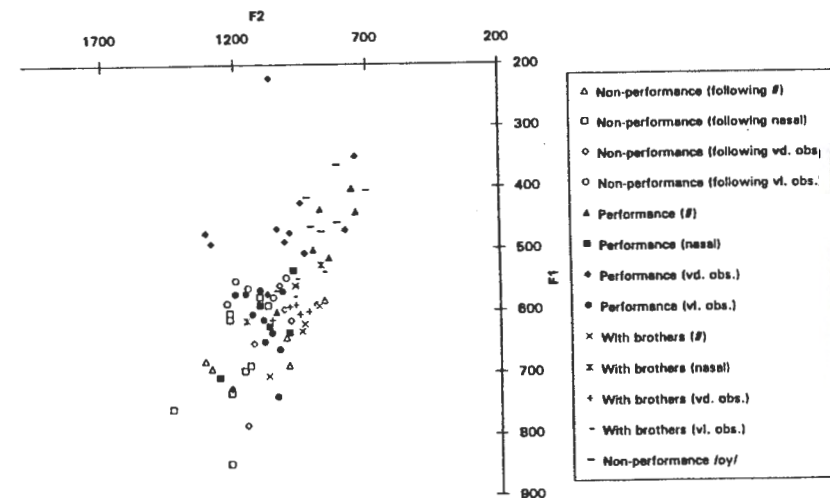
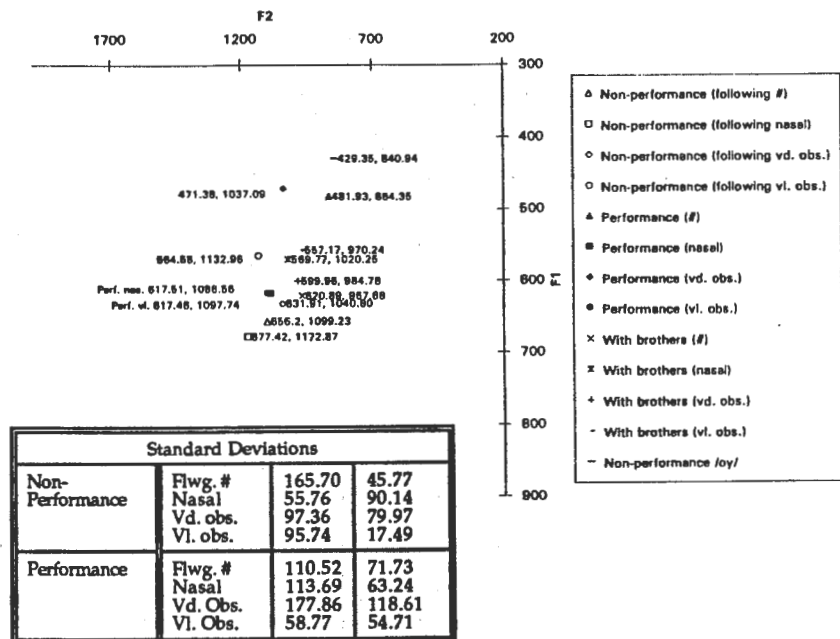


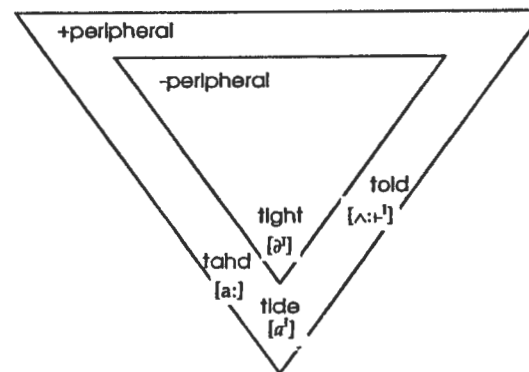
Figure 2: Mean Values for the /ay/ Nucleus in Three Contexts



5. Background: Phonological Constraints on Non-Performance /ay/

Note that tokens are also classified according to following phonological environment—that is, following word boundary or pause, as in *high* or *my*, following nasal, as in *shine* or *mine*, following voiced obstruent, as in *tide* or *rise*, and following voiceless obstruent, as in *night* or *nice*. Previous studies in which I have been involved (e.g., Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1994) show that the nucleus of non-performance /ay/ in Ocracoke is more raised when it precedes voiced segments than voiceless ones. Seemingly, this runs counter to what we expect given the standard American English propensity toward the raising of /ay/ in voiceless contexts, as we hear, for example, in the pronunciation difference between *ride* and *right*. However, in standard English, raised /ay/ is also centralized—that is, it occupies what Labov (1994) terms non-peripheral vowel space. In contrast, the nucleus of Ocracoke /ay/ is backed as well as raised—that is, it is peripheralized. A schematic diagram outlining the peripheral and non-peripheral positions of several variants of /ay/ is presented in Figure 3 below. Southern unglided /ay/, as in [ta:m] for *time*, is included as well, since I discuss it below.

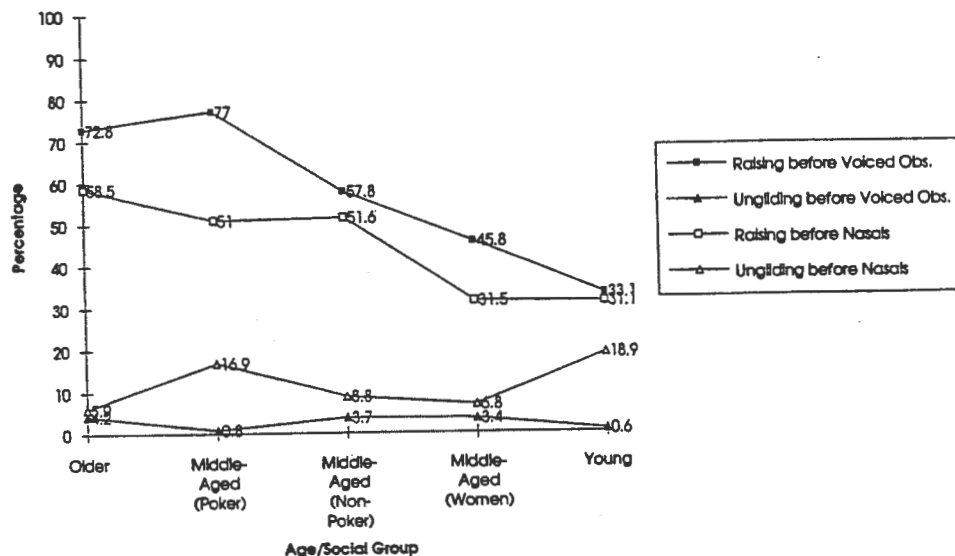
Figure 3: The Various Locations of /ay/ in American English Varieties



If we posit that the constraint hierarchy affecting /ay/ raising in peripheral space is opposite that affecting the raising of the nucleus of /ay/ in non-peripheral space, we can readily explain the seemingly unusual ordering of constraints which affect Ocracoke /ay/.

Further, our investigation of the encroachment of the mainland Southern unglided /ay/ into Ocracoke strongly suggests that there are strong social reasons for increased /ay/ raising before voiced segments. Unglided [a:] can be classified as a peripheral vowel and so should be favored before voiced segments as, indeed, it is in mainland Southern varieties (e.g., Bernstein and Gregory 1994). However, in Ocracoke, unglided [a:] is far more prevalent in voiceless contexts than in voiced, where raised /ay/ prevails. It seems that Ocracokers are defying phonological naturalness and clinging to their traditional raised /ay/ variant where it has become most entrenched and where it sounds most unique when compared to mainland varieties—before voiced sounds. In Table 1, I present figures for raised versus non-raised /ay/ in various phonological environments in the non-performance speech of 22 Ocracoke residents. These figures are displayed graphically in Figure 4. The percentage figures, as well as the VARBRUL analysis results, indicate that raised /ay/ is favored before voiced segments rather than voiceless, while unglided [a:] is favored before voiceless segments.

Figure 4: The Maintenance of Raising/Backing and the Encroachment of Ungliding



6. The Regular Patterning of Performance /ay/: Reconsidering Notions of 'Style'

When we extend our examination of /ay/ to performance contexts, we find that, in general, the nucleus of /ay/ is more greatly raised than in the non-performance speech that occurs between the informant and the interviewer. Further, we find that raising is most exaggerated in exactly that context in which it occurs most frequently in non-performance speech—before voiced obstruents. In addition, we find that, except with voiceless obstruents, /ay/ raising obeys the same constraint patterns in performance as in non-performance speech—/ay/ is somewhat raised before following nasals, more raised before following word boundary or pause, and most raised before voiced obstruents. These findings suggest that self-conscious speech—including speech which is self-consciously shifted toward a more basilectal vernacular variety—does not necessarily display the irregularity of patterning traditionally ascribed to "subordinate dialect shift" (Labov 1972). Certainly, performance /ay/ patterns somewhat less neatly than non-performance /ay/ as evidenced in the greater standard deviations in F1 and F2 values in performance /ay/ which you can see in Figure 2. Nonetheless, performance /ay/ does display a degree of regular patterning and should not be lightly dismissed.

Table 1: Variable Constraints on [ɔy] and [aɪ]

SUBJECT	Vl. Obstr.			Vd. Obstr.			Nasal			Lateral		
	[ɔy]	[aɪ]	Tot	[ɔy]	[aɪ]	Tot	[ɔy]	[aɪ]	Tot	[ɔy]	[aɪ]	Tot
Older (3 M, 3 F)	N 117	20	318	N 139	8	191	N 138	14	236	N 35	17	106
	% 36.8	6.3		% 72.8	4.2		% 58.5	5.9		% 33.0	16.0	
Middle-Aged Poker Player (3 M)	N 71	12	185	N 97	1	126	N 84	28	166	N 37	9	75
	% 38.4	6.5		% 77.0	0.8		% 51.0	16.9		% 49.3	12.0	
Middle-Aged Non-Poker (3 M)	N 29	1	155	N 63	4	109	N 82	14	159	N 15	16	70
	% 18.7	0.7		% 57.8	3.7		% 51.6	8.8		% 21.4	22.9	
Middle-Aged Women (3 F)	N 18	2	86	N 27	2	59	N 23	5	73	N 2	11	19
	% 20.9	2.3		% 45.8	3.4		% 31.5	6.8		% 10.5	57.9	
Younger (4 M, 3 F)	N 25	14	246	N 54	1	163	N 61	37	196	N 6	16	55
	% 10.2	5.7		% 33.1	0.6		% 31.1	18.9		% 10.9	29.1	
Total	N 135	25	555	N 203	5	376	N 202	74	518	N 53	40	203
	% 24.3	4.5		% 54.0	1.3		% 39.0	14.3		% 26.1	19.7	

VARBRUL RESULTS FOR [ɔy]:  
Input Probability = .41

Age/Social Group:

Middle (Poker) = .61; Older = .60;  
Middle (Non-Poker) = .45; Young = .35;

Middle (Women) = .34

Following Segment:

Vd. Obs. = .76; Nasal = .57; Lateral = .35;  
Vl. Obs. = .34

VARBRUL RESULTS FOR [aɪ]:  
Input Probability = .07

Age/Social Group:

Young = .59; Middle (Women) = .53; Middle (Poker) = .52;  
Middle (Non-Poker) = .44; Older = .45

Following Segment:

Lateral = .80; Nasal = .65; Vl. Obs. = .42;  
Vd. Obs. = .26

Chi-Square per cell = 2.824

Chi-Square per cell = 2.679

The regularity we observe here suggests the need to recognize a number of speech styles which are characterized by "self-consciousness," or attention paid to speech. These varieties should include not only exaggeratedly formal or exaggeratedly casual speech but also speech in which certain linguistic features are heightened for reasons of display. This "display speech" may well prove to exhibit more regular patterning, in general, than speech which is self-consciously modified along a formal-informal continuum--whether this continuum is correlated with attention paid to speech as in Labov's early models (e.g., 1972) or with audience design, as in Bell's later work (1984).

A brief look at F1 and F2 values for the /ay/ nucleus in our informant's conversation with his brothers further points to the need to reshape our notions of style to include the performance dimension. Referring back to Figure 1, we see that, in general, /ay/ as used with the informant's brothers falls between performance and non-performance /ay/ with respect to backing and raising. This suggests the inadequacy of a simple correlation between formality and speech style. It is safe to assume that the conversation the informant holds with his brothers is less formal than that he holds with the fieldworker. This lessened formality leads to increased usage of the traditional raised/backed Ocracoke /ay/ and diminished usage of more standard-sounding variants. How, then, should we classify performance speech, with its extremely heightened /ay/ vowels, along the formality-informality continuum? Should we say that it represents very informal speech, since it enhances features exhibited in the informant's informal conversation with his brothers? If so, we have to admit that a high degree of attention paid to speech does not always correlate with a high degree of formality, since performance speech is quite self-conscious. And further, we'd be left with the questionable assumption that stock, ready-made performance phrases are not very "formal"--that is, are not pre-fit to certain forms--an assumption which certainly runs counter to our intuitive understanding of performed speech, whether this speech occurs during the course of a conversation or as rehearsed lines in a play. Similarly, models of style based on audience design fall short when we bring performance speech into the equation. Working within such a model, we would be hard-pressed to explain the widely differing values for /ay/ in performance and non-performance speech which we find in speech directed to the exact same audience--a fieldworker with whom the informant was somewhat acquainted. (Of course, we could assert that performance speech falls along the Initiative rather than Responsive axis of style (e.g., Bell 1984), as would most speech addressed to a single addressee, and would thus pattern quite differently; however, such considerations are beyond the scope of the present discussion.)

## 7. Perception and Performance

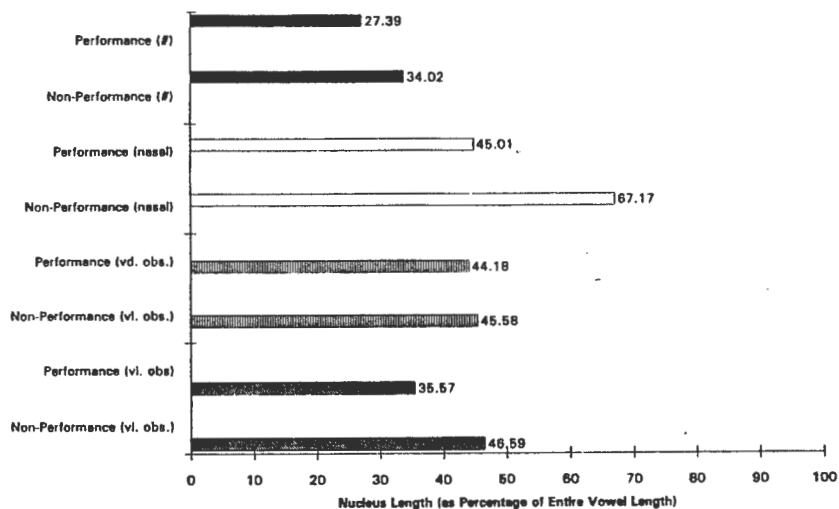
Not only does performance speech raise issues related to reformulating sociolinguistic definitions of "style" or "register," it also lends insight into the recent sociolinguistic focus on speaker perception of dialect variants. As Labov makes clear, merely asking informants about their linguistic perceptions is likely to yield dubious information about speakers' actual perceptual abilities and practices, since, as Labov says, the reliability and validity of the "ask the informant" method "depends on the doubtful assumption that informants have free mental access to their language" (Labov 1994:352). And even if we do credit speakers with thorough knowledge of their own perceptual abilities, we must not assume that they are able to clearly articulate this metalinguistic knowledge--that they are able to adequately perform what Labov terms the "labeling function" with respect to linguistic variants (Labov 1994:403). Further, there is evidence that while non-linguists enjoy reasonable success in accurately reporting their usage patterns at such suprasegmental levels as the intonational (e.g., Preston 1994) and the pragmatic (e.g., Silverstein 1981), their metalinguistic ability diminishes significantly at the level of the phonological variable (e.g., Silverstein 1981).

Thus we must seek ways other than direct elicitation for obtaining information on perception. We may devise tests, such as Labov's Coach Test (Labov 1994), in which information on perception is obtained indirectly, perhaps through means of an artificially constructed story whose interpretation depends on speaker perception of a particular phonetic variant. Or we may try to discern perceptual information through a speech event that can occur in natural speech--the speech performance. When speakers attempt to "put on" a dialect for an audience, they enhance what they perceive to be the salient features of that dialect variety. Thus, through examining performance speech, we can gain insight into which aspects of linguistic production are most salient to the performer and his or her audience. For example, a number of studies of vowel perception indicate that height differences are more perceptually salient than fronting/backing differences (e.g., Labov 1994, DiPaolo 1994, Flanagan 1955). The positioning of performance /ay/ in Ocracoke speech bears out this conclusion; when the speaker under study wishes to exaggerate what he perceives to be distinctive about Ocracoke /ay/, he exaggerates raising moreso than backing. In fact, the mean F2 value for performance /ay/ in the crucial category of following voiced obstruent is nearly identical to the non-performance mean F2 value in this context, suggesting that, in general, backing plays little role for this speaker in perceptual differences between the traditional Ocracoke [ɔy] and the more mainstream /ay/.

A further pattern we observe with respect to performance /ay/ in Ocracoke is that the length of the nucleus, as a percentage of the entire length

of the diphthong, is consistently shorter than the nucleus of non-performance /ay/ in all phonological contexts. Figures for nucleus length are presented in Figure 5 below:

Figure 5: /ay/ Nucleus Lengths in Performance and Non-Performance Speech



The /ay/ vowel in mainland Southern American English is characterized by nucleus lengthening and glide shortening (e.g., Thomas and Bailey 1994) or complete ungliding, and this glide shortening is highly salient among Southerners and outsiders to the region. In Ocracoke, which borders the mainland South but prides itself on its unique, non-Southern-sounding speech, the traditional /ay/ vowel is set apart not only by the position of its nucleus but also by its relatively unglided status. Our Ocracoke performer seizes upon this aspect of island /ay/ in his performance, shortening the nucleus of /ay/ so that it sounds as non-Southern as possible. Only in the context of following voiced obstruent are the nucleus lengths in performance and non-performance speech nearly equal, most likely because the extreme height of performance variants in this context is sufficient to render the performance vowels distinctive. Interestingly, in his discussions of Ocracoke pronunciation, our informant never explicitly contrasts Ocracoke /ay/ with unglided variants, focusing instead on the differences between Ocracoke and standard English /ay/. Thus, performance speech reveals to us a facet of vowel perception for one speaker which we otherwise might not have been able to discern.

We can also examine performance /ay/ with respect to its relationship to the /oy/ phoneme. Ocracokers are often characterized by outsiders as pronouncing the /ay/ vowel as /oy/, and non-islanders often imitate Ocracokers by saying [hoy toyd] for [hɔy tɔyd]. However, Ocracokers readily perceive the difference between their raised/backed /ay/ and the /oy/ phoneme. Even in exaggerated performance speech, in which some tokens of /ay/ overlap with /oy/, as you can see in Figure 1, the mean F1 and F2 values for performance ay and non-performance /oy/, shown in Figure 2, indicate that a slight margin of safety is maintained between the two phonemes. This ability to perceive fine-grained differences in pronunciation is reflected, not only in performance vowel values, but in overt comments from Ocracokers, who sometimes make statements such as that in (3) below, which comes from RO:

- (3) RO: You know, I think we're slowly losing our accent or whatever kind of accent it is we're supposed to be loo--supposed to have, you know. [hoy toyd] on the sound [soyd]." You know that accent?  
 FW: Do you remember when people talked like that?  
 RO: Yeah. Some of the older folks really talk like that, more, so, you know, like uh--  
 FW: But you're exaggerating still, you know.  
 RO: What?  
 FW: [hoy toyd] on the sound [soyd]?  
 RO: Yeah, that--yeah. I say [ha:<sup>1</sup> ta:<sup>1</sup>d] on the sound [sa:<sup>1</sup>d].  
 MM: How did your dad talk?  
 RO: I say [ha:<sup>1</sup> ta:<sup>1</sup>d] on the sound [sa:<sup>1</sup>d]

(Note that vowel length marks indicate a tendency toward nucleus lengthening and glide shortening; MM is RO's fiancée.)

## 8. Language Death and Performance Speech

In our examination of the regular patterning of performance /ay/ in Ocracoke speech, we have to consider what this patterning entails not only for issues of perception and stylistic language variation but for the study of language endangerment and death. Ocracoke English can be classified as an endangered language variety for a number of linguistic and socio-cultural reasons, especially increased contact with mainland dialect areas and decreased usage of traditional dialect features in favor of mainland variants (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes forthcoming). Though no study of dialect endangerment in monolingual situations has been conducted prior to our Ocracoke study, we believe that the linguistic and sociolinguistic patterns that



characterize endangered dialects parallel those found in endangered languages.

Endangered and dying languages are often characterized by a reduction in the number of different contexts in which the endangered variety can be used, or what Campbell terms "stylistic shrinkage" (e.g., Campbell and Muntzel 1989:195). Accompanying this reduction in stylistic diversity is an increased focus on the dying language variety, and the language itself becomes a frequent topic of conversation, or "object language" (Tsitsipis 1989:121). This reduction in stylistic diversity and focus on language form may lead to an increasing reliance on the performance register in the speech of residents of the endangered language area who may wish to prevent the language from dying (e.g., Tsitsipis 1989). Such focus on performance is found in endangered dialect areas such as Ocracoke as well. Thus, the insights we gain from examining performance speech in Ocracoke helps advance our understanding of endangered languages in general.

For example, a common assertion in studies of language endangerment and death is that variation in endangered languages is minimal and is not expected to display highly regular correlation with internal linguistic and external social constraints (e.g., Dorian 1981, King 1989). The current study has shown that linguistic variation is commonplace in Ocracoke—even in the speech of a single speaker and within a single stylistic context, including in the performance speech that often pervades endangered language areas. Further, the variation that we find in performance speech is regularly patterned along both linguistic and social dimensions. As we have seen, performance /ay/ in Ocracoke patterns according to following phonological environment as well as such social factors as the heightened social value ascribed to /ay/ raising before voiced obstruents. Such regular patterning may well be uncovered in endangered languages as well as dialects through a careful examination of performance speech in endangered language areas.

## 9. Conclusion

Summing up, I suggest that we need to rethink our notions of "style" to accommodate the performance register. Performance speech occurs in natural conversation and is indeed quite pervasive in certain sociolinguistic settings, particularly endangered language areas. Further, performance speech exhibits regular patterning which may lend insight into such diverse sociolinguistic issues as the relationship between speaker production and perception and the characteristics of dying languages and language varieties. Anthropologists and sociologists have long recognized the prominent place of linguistic performance in speech communities throughout the world (e.g.,

Bauman 1975); sociolinguists can no longer afford to treat this type of truly natural speech as if it were a mere aberration.

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