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The authentic speaker revisited: A look at ethnic perception data from white hip
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The Authentic Speaker Revisited: A Look at Ethnic Perception Data from White Hip Hoppers

Cecilia Cutler

1 Introduction

The ever-expanding popularity of rap music and hip hop culture exposes urban and suburban white youth to the speech of urban black youth. This paper examines how nine white middle class hip hoppers are identified in terms of ethnicity on the basis of their speech by undergraduate students. Additionally, it makes reference to past debates about what constitutes an authentic speaker and proposes that we reconsider the value of a socially-defined authenticity.

In 1976, Eileen Hatala completed a study of the speech of a 13 year-old white girl ("Carla") who grew up in a predominantly African-American working class neighborhood in Camden, New Jersey. After hearing her voice on tape, all 46 African-Americans surveyed believed that Carla was African-American. Hatala claimed that Carla had effectively acquired the phonological and grammatical system of African-American English (AAE), and was indeed an authentic member of the AAE speech community.¹ But Labov (1980) later pointed out that Carla had actually only acquired certain phonological and prosodic features, and none of the benchmark morphosyntactic features that many linguists consider to be part of native speaker competence such as the zero copula and third person verbal /-s/ absence.

Labov's contention that morphosyntactic features are the basis for speaker competence rather than phonological and prosodic features sparked a debate among sociolinguists about who is an authentic member of a speech community and what should be the criteria for such a decision (cf. Jacobs-Huey 1997). It also raised questions about whether or not speakers can and do learn certain kinds of features of another dialect more readily than others.

Butters (1984:34) agrees with Labov's assertion (1969: 376) that for many AAE speakers, verbal /-s/ insertion is a late morphological rule of a superposed variety. But he concludes (contra Labov) that the reason would-

¹ Following Spears (1998) and Morgan (1998), I use African American English (AAE) as a cover term for the collection of standard and non-standard varieties or dialects used by African-Americans in the U.S., but I acknowledge that not all African-Americans speak AAE, nor are all of its speakers African-American. White hip hoppers are targeting a style that is commonly used by rap artists and young, urban African-Americans.

be learners of AAE don't tend to pick up a feature like verbal /-s/ absence is because it occurs infrequently, not because it is more difficult to learn. From the standpoint of frequency, suprasegmental features, not morphosyntactic features, should be seen as more salient according to Butters (32). Butters (1984) also questions the idea that native speaker intuitions should be ignored in favor of "objective data" when assessing a person's ability to be accepted as a native speaker. The fact that members of the African-American community overwhelmingly believed Carla to be African-American led Butters to conclude that Carla was indeed an authentic member of the AAE speech community.²

A further question is what aspects of speech are most salient for listeners as markers of identity. Labov (1980) points out that Carla was able to create the social impression that she was African-American through her use of "typically black" lexicon, but that her use of stress, pitch, and tempo was the most effective aspect of her linguistic performance (379). Preston (1992: 334-5) made a similar observation when he asked white male college students to imitate AAE.

Pitch, rate, and vocal quality changes were common and were even more consistent throughout the tasks than were the segmental changes. Some of these strategies were slow speech, falsetto voice, deep voice, raspy voice, nasalization, and rapid speech.

And John Baugh's research on racial profiling over the phone demonstrates that people can make very accurate judgements about race on the basis of very little speech input. The voice recognition test on the ABC website (see references) in which ten speakers recite "Mary had a little lamb..." shows how easy it is to make accurate judgements about race based on phonological and suprasegmental cues alone.

In sum, there is disagreement about which kinds of linguistic features one needs to use in order to be considered an authentic member of a speech community and whether linguists or non-linguists are to be the judges of a speaker's authenticity.

² Naro (1981) claims that saliency plays a role in language change. The elimination of subject/verb agreement in Brazilian Portuguese began to occur in forms where there is very little surface differentiation. Change then occurs throughout the language "in inverse proportion to the degree of saliency of the surface differences between these systems" (63). The lack of similarity between a feature of AAE and its mainstream American English equivalent probably means that it is more salient to outsiders and therefore more easily employed as a way to index AAE speakers. I am indebted to Greg Guy for supplying me with this reference.

Rather than addressing who gets to decide, I propose that we complicate the notion of authenticity to include a social definition as well as a linguistic one. The linguistically defined authenticity or what is also called linguistic competence subsumes the ability to use primarily morphosyntactic features in addition to the other patterns that characterize a speech variety. A socially defined competence is more about being able to manipulate intonation, pitch, and voice quality in conjunction with phonology and lexical usage.

Social salience refers to features that have achieved semiotic and ideological meaning within society as markers of a particular group of speakers. A feature may be socially salient for the same reasons it is linguistically salient (i.e., due to frequency, morphemic weight, or surface differences) but is not necessarily so. Intonation and voice quality are probably socially salient because they underlie all the other speech markers, forming a kind of omnipresent backdrop.

2 The Survey

The present work is based on two years of sociolinguistic fieldwork in New York City involving 35 white, middle class young people who draw on a speech style that is derived from African American English which I call Hip-hop Speech Style (HHSS). The data for the present paper comes from two surveys I conducted in 2000 and 2002.

I do not mean to imply that HHSS is a true language or dialect. It characterizes the speech of many young people of diverse backgrounds who affiliate with hip-hop and overlaps to a large degree with urban youth varieties of AAE. But to my knowledge, no consensus has emerged about what to call it and what its status is, nor has its relationship to AAE been investigated empirically.

HHSS clearly has many of the qualities of stylized performance and is a significant part of the symbolic repertoire that individuals employ to signal their affiliation with hip-hop. The white, middle class young people I interviewed were not exposed to this variety in the home and consciously began to use it at some point during adolescence through their consumption of rap music CDs and videos.

Coupland (2001) uses the term "persona management" (198) to describe the way in which members of one group employ linguistic cues from another group in order to be seen as individuals with attributes associated with that group (cf. Eastman and Stein 1993:188). Bell (1984) refers to this as "out-group referee design."

Crucially, speakers choose stylistically relevant forms in order to do this—forms, according to Coupland (2001) that "have achieved their semi-

otic value by being distributed unevenly across status groups within the community" (193). The task becomes to sort out what the socially salient forms of this speech style are and to identify patterns in the ways speakers employ them to index the speech of another group.

For the first survey, I selected four speakers who vary in the degree to which they employ markers of HHSS. I then played short samples of their speech to 108 New York University undergraduates of various ethnic backgrounds. The respondents were asked to guess each speaker's ethnicity. In 2002, I conducted a second survey with five additional speakers whose speech I played for an undergraduate class of 35 students also of various ethnic backgrounds.³ For one of the speakers, Mike, I included two different samples of speech with different interlocutors to see if there would be an addressee effect (cf. Bell 1984).

In both surveys, the students were asked simply to identify the ethnicity of the speaker without being told anything about his or her background. They were given five ethnic categories from which to choose: African American, European American, Asian American, Latino/Hispanic and a blank space ("Other") where they could write in an ethnicity of their choice.

I was interested in looking at the extent to which any of these speakers might be identified as African American or something other than European American given that the speech style they employ overlaps with AAE.

The majority of the respondents (80% in the first survey and 88% in the second survey) are native speakers of English. I argue that these undergraduates make good judges because they were close to the speakers in terms of age. Most of them are also familiar with the multicultural nature of hip-hop and are thus less likely to label speakers African-American simply on the basis of their use of hip-hop terminology.

There are obvious pitfalls in conducting this kind of survey. It is less objective than a classic matched guise in that each speaker and each utterance is different. None of the respondents chose the "Other" category, which I took to mean that they only perceived four "real" choices. The small number of respondents in the second survey is a further limitation. Nevertheless, the findings are provocative and suggest that listeners are indeed picking up on linguistic cues in identifying speakers.

³ The respondents in the first survey identified themselves as follows: 44% European American, 16% Latino, 15% Asian American, 7% African American and 19% Other. Respondents in the second survey identified themselves as 28% African-American, 23% European American, 9% Latino, 11% Asian, and 28% Other. There was no statistically significant correlation between the respondents' ethnicity and the way they identified each speaker, but European American respondents were more likely to label a speaker African-American than the African-American respondents.

3 The Results

Table 1 contains brief bios for the speakers included in the survey. All the speakers are white and all, except Eminem, come from middle class families. Following Table 1 are excerpts from the speech samples that were played to the survey⁴ respondents.⁵

Ivy , white, female, 18. Born in U.S., raised in Israel until age 6, returned to U.S., and was raised in Ann Arbor, Mich. where she graduated from a small public alternative high school. Now lives in New York City where she performs with Harlem-based women's hip-hop collective as an MC.
PJ , white, male, 16. Born in US. Lives in Borough Park, Brooklyn, during the week and in Canarsie on weekends. Russian-Jewish heritage. Attends public school in <u>Borough Park</u> , Brooklyn.
Ghetto Thug , white, male, age 16. Born in U.S. Raised in Forest Hills, New York. Parents of Armenian heritage. Attended private junior high school and now attends elite public high school in Brooklyn.
Trix , white, male, 18. Born in U.S. Greek-American heritage. Raised in Queens. Attends large elite public high school in Brooklyn. Performs as a hip hop DJ.
Benny , white, male, 17. Born in U.S. Jewish American heritage. Raised in New York City. Lives in Manhattan. Attends small private high school in Brooklyn.
Mike , white, male, 16. Born in U.S. European American heritage. Raised in New York City. Lives in exclusive Manhattan neighborhood. Attends private high school in Manhattan. (Mike 1: sociolinguistic interview with Cutler; Mike 2: informal conversation between Mike and a friend.)
G Robot , white, male, 19. Born in U.S. Raised in Jamaica Plain, Boston. Attended wealthy suburban public high school in Boston. Attends college.
Eminem , white, male, 29. Born in U.S. European-American heritage. Raised on East Side of Detroit. Rap artist (MC).
Kevin , white, male, 20. Born in U.S. Raised in Westchester, NY. European-American heritage. Attends college. Performs as an MC with a rap.

Table 1. Bios for speakers included in surveys

⁴ I am indebted to John Singler, Renée Blake, and their undergraduate students at New York University for assistance in conducting these surveys.

⁵ Transcription conventions: (()) stage directions; ((1.0)) pause in seconds; **bold** = hip-hop lexis; ↑ rising intonation; [] IPA transcription; ((click)) teeth sucking

- (1) Ivy: ↑ I onno but it's gettin' ['gɛʔm] – it's gettin' [gɛ:n] there. It really gettin' ['gɛʔm] there. Umm ((.86)) people are really gettin' ['gɛʔn] their **shit** together and like I said, there's hope now that – heh – that Detroit is – ((raspy voice)) Detroit (is) ↑ really comin' up. Label. are *lookin'* for people *from* Detroit. So, it's good.
- (2) PJ: ((click)) Basically, ((click)) the companies is like this. You got the FUBU, you got the Tommy, you got the Nordicas, ((click)) Mecca, Phat Farm – basically baggy clothing. That's, you know, baggy clothing, doo rags and bandanas. It's part of the hip-hop culture. **Word on the street, for real.**
- (3) Ghetto Thug: ((hip pitch)) like it don't make sense for you go out like on a farm or whatever and see like a white person listen to rap or whatever. ↑ You know? It – ↑ I mean **word**, I mean if you go out there an – and you ask that **nigga**⁶ what's weed, **nigga** be like "MARI-JU-ANA. What the fuck is like MARI-JU-ANA," ↑ you know?
- (4) Trix: **Ayite**. Well, ((.5)) Nas as my favorite – is my favorite rapper. ((click)) What happens is that he grew up in uh Queens Bridge and um ((click)) like ((click)) his first – his second album, it was written, settin' ['sɛʔm] out just a powerful message to ↑ everyone.
- (5) Benny: ((deep, raspy voice)) . . . and that's just a easy way of getting around the real issue of uh — like what does he represent — he just — he represents the truth, that's him. He has money, but he knows where he come from.
- (6) Mike 2: Yo, yo, yo! I finally found money — I mean ((click)) paper that can be created into money. It has those ((raspy voice)) strings through it ↑ you know, like cotton ['kaʔm] shit ↑. Yo, it's mad — it's just like that **shit** except it's blue ((deep voice)).
- (7) Mike 1: ...but I don't know whether to trust that or not because a lot of my friends are telling me don't *trust* that because I do remember last year when I – when I uh jammed my finger, he just taped it up and told me, "All right do everything!"
- (8) G Robot: ...and that was like ((1.0)) the first time I *ever* ((.6)) heard hip-hop, basically; ((1.0)) and that, ((.47)) to me, ((1.8)) rubbed off like a lasting impression.

⁶ The generic/positive ingroup use of "nigga" so common in the speech of young urban African-Americans has been taken up by many if not most white hip hoppers who use it to address or refer to their friends (whether they are white, black, or of another racial background).

- (9) Eminem: We were like we're gonna form this group and it's gon' be like a battle team. And we're gonna make records. We're gonna go in the studio and cut tracks, but if one of us gets a solo deal, then whoever gets a solo deal comes back and gets the rest of us and that was kinda like the pact that we had between the group.
- (10) Kevin: Well, I mean I take the -- definitely the tool -- like the -- the rap, the rhyme [ra:m] kinda ['ka:ndə] thing, ↑ you know, and then I like build off -- like all the people that have influenced me -- like you can never say that you're totally unique with your -- your rhymin' ['ra:mən] style [sta:l].

Table 2 shows how the speakers were identified in terms of ethnicity in the surveys. The first thing that stands out with regards to these results is the fact that so many speakers are identified as something other than European American. It's not that they are succeeding overwhelmingly at passing themselves off as another ethnic group. Indeed this is probably not their intention. Their speech style draws on several elements of AAE and HHSS as well as other speech varieties. But each uses a slightly different mix of features.

	African-American	Latino/Hispanic	European American	Asian American
Ivy*	58%	14%	25%	3%
PJ*	44%	45%	11%	0%
G. Thug	26%	57%	17%	0%
Trix*	5%	53%	19%	22%
Benny	29%	21%	32%	18%
Mike 2	17%	26%	43%	14%
Mike 1	11%	43%	46%	0%
G Robot	27%	3%	58%	12%
Eminem	34%	0%	66%	0%
Kevin*	8%	2%	67%	23%

Table 2. Perception of ethnic identity (Survey 1: N=108*; Survey 2: N=35)

The speakers in Table 2 are arranged according to how they were identified in the survey. Those who were identified as African-American by a large percentage appear towards the top. Those who were identified as Latino by a simple majority appear in the middle and speakers who were identified as white by a simple majority appear towards the bottom. None of the speakers was identified as Asian American by a majority of the respondents.

Examining the excerpts, we can see that there is an uneven distribution of features from speaker to speaker. Each makes slightly different stylistic choices. Notably, none of the speakers employs so-called benchmark features of AAE in this sample like \emptyset copula or verbal /s/ absence, although Ghetto Thug has one token of invariant *be*. The features these speakers employ in these examples, particularly monophthongal /ay/, /r/-lessness, and the use of *ain't*, are not unique to AAE or HHSS but they represent speech markers that may have influenced whether a speaker was identified as African-American.

More listeners identified Ivy as African-American than any other category. She employs phonological features found in AAE and white vernaculars like the substitution of alveolar nasals for velar nasals in progressive participles and monophthongization of /ay/. She also employs glottalization in negative contractions and progressive participles, a feature that Morgan (1993) has identified as a hip-hop speech marker. Ivy also employs lexical items associated with hip-hop like *peoples*, meaning friends and *shit* as a substitute noun. But it is quite likely that the reason Ivy was perceived to be African-American by so many of the respondents is because she is the most adept at mimicking the patterns found among young urban AAE speakers specifically her raspy voice and intonation patterns.

PJ's sample contains a slightly different mix of features. His speech is entirely /r/-less and he consistently employs monophthongal pronunciations of /ay/ and affricates in place of interdental fricatives in this sample. And while none of these features is exclusive to AAE—particularly in New York City—it's probable that listeners judge them in the context of the full range of linguistic and extralinguistic cues and hip-hop terms like *word on the street*. PJ also does quite a bit of teeth sucking reminiscent of the type described by Rickford and Rickford (1973). But he employs fewer suprasegmental features than Ivy.

From a linguistic standpoint, Ghetto Thug might be considered the most authentic speaker here because he employs the widest range of morphosyntactic features. But he is identified as African-American by only 26% of the listeners. In terms of phonology he reduces or entirely deletes coda consonant clusters in a way that is very suggestive of Puerto Rican English and other varieties of hispanicized English in New York City. This may explain why he is identified as Latino by over half of the respondents (57%).

In New York City, there is a perception that African-Americans and Latinos are culturally and linguistically close. Many Puerto Ricans and Dominicans live in or near African-American communities and acquire an AAE-influenced variety as a first or second language (Wolfram et al. 1971; Labov et al. 1968). Listeners who thought PJ and Ghetto Thug sounded Af-

rican-American, but were not entirely convinced, may have chosen Latino as a kind of intermediary identity. In short, listeners seem to be saying, “when in doubt, choose Latino.”

Trix draws on many of the same phonological features as PJ such as /r/-lessness, monophthongal /ay/, affricates in place of interdental fricatives, and teeth sucking, but he is identified as Latino by a majority of the respondents. Only 5% identified him as African-American. Here, we can point to the absence of intonation and voice quality as possible explanations.

Benny is somewhat in the middle. Thirty-two percent thought he was European American followed closely by the other ethnic categories. He is doing a few things on the suprasegmental level but his rather conservative use of other features meant that he was not identified as any one category by a majority of the respondents.

The remaining speakers are identified as European American more than any other category. The slight difference in the figures we see for Mike 1 and 2 would appear to be due to the addressee effect. Although small, it points to the fact that Mike is making socially salient stylistic changes depending on whom he is speaking to. When talking with his friend (Mike 2), he does more on the suprasegmental and phonological level and as a result, a slightly larger percentage of the respondents identified him as African-American (17%) than when he was being interviewed by me (11%). Mike 1 was also identified as European American by a higher percentage of the respondents than Mike 2 (46% vs. 43%).

Some of the respondents recognized Eminem’s voice right away. This probably affected the high percentage who identified him as European American although a fair number who did not recognize him thought he could be African-American. G Robot and Kevin are conservative in their use of phonology and employ little or no AAE prosody or morphosyntax. Not surprisingly, they are identified as European American by the majority of the respondents. Their use of filler and quotative *like* may also have contributed to this result.

The one complicating factor here is that G Robot is labeled African-American by 27% of the respondents despite his scant use of phonological or suprasegmental markers. However there is something notable about his speech and that is its rather slow, rhythmic quality – something that Morgan has referred to as an AAE discourse pattern and something that listeners may have been responding to as well.

In Kevin’s case, there may be a conflation between the “European American” and “Asian American” similar to the one we see between African-American and Latino speakers in that listeners perceive Asians as sounding white. Consequently, Kevin is identified as Asian American by 23% of

the respondents. In the follow up discussion, a few respondents mentioned that they thought Kevin sounded like he was from California and interestingly made the assumption he was Asian based on this perception.

4 Style

The data here raise another set of questions relating to style. Do listeners rank speakers on the basis of some hierarchy of features? Can listeners distinguish between symbolic and categorical use of ethnic speech markers and does this affect the way they judge a speaker's ethnicity? Bell (1984) observes that "rare variants are all the more valuable because of their rarity. Just one token can act as a marker of identity" (cited in Rickford and McNair Knox 1994 fn. 20). The fact that some of these speakers are identified as African-American by quite a few listeners attests to the semiotic status of the markers they employ and I think we need to pay greater attention to these symbolic, hard to quantify kinds of features in describing ethnic speech styles.

5 Conclusion

In wrapping up, I would like to reiterate some of the findings that emerge from this paper. It suggests that suprasegmental features rank very highly in listeners' minds when identifying speakers in terms of race or ethnicity. Phonology also plays a large role but many of the features that characterize AAE are found in other vernacular varieties of English are therefore perhaps not as socially salient. Morphosyntactic features are perhaps less socially salient which is not to say they aren't important. They must be accompanied by other kinds of features to function as recognizable speech markers. This is not true of suprasegmental features which can stand alone.

In sum, social salience is ultimately what determines which elements get used in secondary dialect imitation as well as in second dialect acquisition. From a linguistic standpoint, few of the white speakers I interviewed would be considered authentic, because they do not use benchmark features of AAE like the \emptyset copula and omission of the agreement morpheme. But from a social standpoint, quite a few are making effective use of socially salient markers to the degree that many listeners consider them to be either African-American or Latino. I believe we need to develop a framework for analyzing and discussing suprasegmental features and integrating them into our discussions of language and identity in recognition of their centrality to the social definition of the authentic speaker. As Le Page (1979) points out, the study

of this *socially defined* object and the subset of markers that characterize it might ultimately be the most important aspect of a sociolinguistic study.

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