Situated ethnicities: Constructing and reconstructing identity in the sociolinguistic interview

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1 Introduction

Over the past several decades, numerous quantitative variationist investigations have demonstrated how linguistic variables are used to indicate—and create—ethnic distinctiveness (e.g., Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, Labov 1972). However, traditional variationist studies are limited in that (1) they are often based on the assumption that individual ethnic identity is clear-cut and static, even though relations between ethnic groups may change over time, and (2) they do not show how individual speakers use language features in actual discourse to shape and project ethnic identity. Instead, they focus on the aggregate patterning of data which have been abstracted from the speech events in which they were originally situated.

Following researchers such as Bell (forthcoming, Bell and Johnson 1997), Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994), and the California Style Collective (Arnold et al. 1993), I present an analysis in which language features are investigated in the context in which they occur, in this case the sociolinguistic interview. I focus on one interview from a large-scale sociolinguistic study of Robeson County, North Carolina. This is a rural tri-ethnic community whose residents include Lumbee Native Americans, African Americans, and Anglo Americans (e.g., Wolfram 1996). The interview takes place between a Lumbee Native American and an African American from Wilmington, a small city on the North Carolina coast.

Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, I examine the interview in terms of (1) usage levels of several ethnic and regional dialect features in different sections of the interview, (2) co-occurrence of features, and (3) strategic use of features during key moments. I also show the importance of discourse-level features in creating and marking alignments. The analysis reveals that ethnic identity is not static or monolithic but is shaped and re-shaped on an on-going basis during conversational interaction. In addition, ethnicity is not the only component of individual and group identity, and

speakers must balance considerations of ethnicity with such other matters as regional and family background and current social affiliations. And finally, even if we focus only on the ethnic component of identity, we find that speakers must perform balancing acts of various sorts—for example between locally defined and globally defined notions of ethnic group membership.

2 Community Background

Robeson County, located in Southeastern North Carolina, is home to approximately equal numbers of Whites, Blacks, and Native Americans (approximately 40,000 each). Apparently, the Lumbee have existed as a coherent people in this region since well before White and Black communities were firmly established in there. Their ancestral language is unknown, since the first records of Native Americans in the Robeson County area, in the early 1700s, describe an indigenous people who spoke English. Despite their early exposure to and apparent assimilation of White culture, the Lumbee have continually struggled to carve out a niche as a separate people who are neither White, Black, nor a mere amalgamation of better-known Indian tribes. Over the centuries, they have developed a distinctive dialect of English. This dialect is comprised of a few features not found in neighboring varieties (e.g., the use of *I'm* in present perfect contexts, as in *I'm forgot* for *I've forgotten*), as well as features which have been adapted from other varieties so that they pattern in unique ways (e.g., the use of *bees* rather than *be* in habitual contexts) (Dannenberg and Wolfram 1998).

3 The Interview

The interview that forms the focus of this analysis takes place between two young adult males, a Lumbee university student (the interviewee) and an African American (the interviewer) who attends the same university, has African American family connections in Robeson County, and self-identifies as part Cherokee Indian. The two met at the university a couple of years before the interview takes place, and they are good friends with many friends in common. The interview lasts approximately an hour and 15 minutes; I analyze all but the last few minutes, which are on a separate tape from the bulk of the interview.

I divided the interview into several sections based on topic. The interview begins with a discussion of race relations which can be broken into several subsections: race relations in Robeson County in general (7 minutes, 8 seconds), race relations in the county during the Civil War (3:15), and

race-related issues in current politics (1:46). Following the discussion of race relations, the two interlocutors move on to a relatively brief discussion of two of the Lumbee's family members: his brother (1:04), and his uncle (3:17). They then turn to a lengthy discussion of mutual friends at the university. Twenty minutes and 45 seconds later, they abruptly resume their discussion of race relations. This time, the discussion encompasses the following subtopics: race relations in Robeson County (2:55), race relations during the Civil War (2:57), race relations in the South in general (2:16), and race relations on a national and global level (11:31).

I examined the patterning of a number of phonological and morphosyntactic features in each section and subsection of the interview, including (1) postvocalic *r*-lessness, as in *fahm* for *farm* or *cah* for *car*; (2) regularization patterns for past tense *be*, as in *They wasn't there* or *She weren't home*; (3) third-person singular –*s* absence, as in *He walk to the store*; (4) habitual *be*, as in *John always be working late*; and (5) copula deletion, as in *He a nice guy*. Each of the variables I examined has either been the focus of a previous quantitative study of interethnic language difference in Robeson County or is a widespread and well-studied feature of African American Vernacular English. I hope that my case study will shed light on the meaning of the community-wide—and wider—patterns that have been observed in larger-scale analyses.

4 Phonological Variation: *R*-lessness

So far, it has not been easy to either describe or explain the interethnic patterning of *r*-lessness in Robeson County. Both Dannenberg 1998 and Miller 1996 have conducted quantitative analyses that show an intermediate level of *r*-lessness for Lumbee Native Americans vis-à-vis neighboring White and Black speakers. Further, both interpret this pattern as evidence that *r*-lessness serves as a marker of ethnic affiliation in Robeson County: Since the Lumbee consider themselves to be a separate people, their usage levels for *r*-lessness do not conform either to the relatively high levels exhibited by African Americans or the decreasing levels shown by Robeson County Whites. Despite the agreement between the two studies, each shows different alignment patterns among the groups over time, thus making it difficult to tell exactly what the variable really means to speakers in each ethnic group. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate.

The differing patterns for *r*-lessness uncovered in each study are due in part to the fact that the age groups in the two studies are not exactly parallel but more importantly to the fact that there is a great deal of heterogeneity in terms of *r*-lessness even within age cohorts. Thus, for example, speakers in
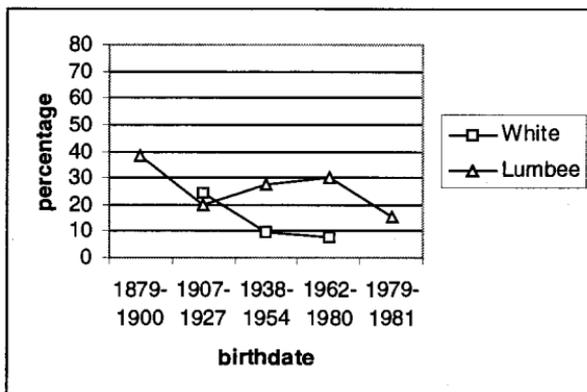
Figure 1: Community-wide patterns for *r*-lessness, adapted from Dannenberg 1998.
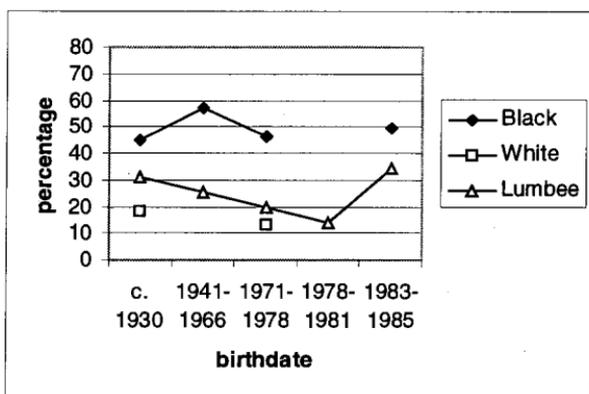
Figure 2: Community-wide patterns for *r*-lessness, adapted from Miller 1996

Dannenberg's oldest age group show levels of *r*-lessness from seven to 73 percent, while even those in the more homogeneous youngest group show levels from three to 29 percent.

The current analysis indicates that the heterogeneity also extends to individuals. This is illustrated in Figure 3, which shows the levels of *r*-lessness for each speaker in each section of the interview. For the purposes of this investigation, I will call the Lumbee speaker Dan and the African American Ronald.

Figure 3: *R*-lessness in the individual interview

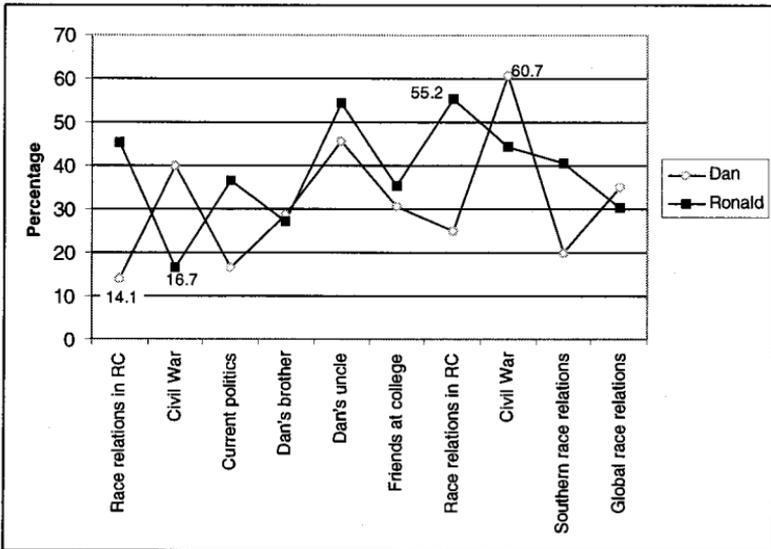If we assume that *r*-lessness is indeed a marker of ethnic group member-ship in Robeson County, then we might expect to see Dan, the Lumbee, us-ing consistently lower levels for *r*-lessness than Ronald, the African American, who will use the higher levels associated with AAVE across the country. However, as we can see, the two do not differ from each other by a consistent amount: They show considerably more divergence when talking about race relations than when talking about family and friends.

One explanation for this is that considerations of ethnic identity and eth-nic group membership are more salient when the two are talking directly about this subject than when they are talking about Dan's family or about friends, at which point it becomes more important to indicate and forge per-sonal bonds through linguistic convergence.[1] This explanation is borne out

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[1] In Kiesling and Schilling-Estes (1998), we point out that linguistic convergence is not always indicative of psychological or social convergence with one's interlocutors, nor is linguistic divergence necessarily indicative of psychological divergence. For example, speakers who are hostile to one another may converge linguistically by hurling insults at one another, while a woman and man seeking increased intimacy may diverge linguistically by adopting prototypically "female" and "male" speech styles, respectively. In this, we follow recent versions of Communication Accommodation Theory (formerly Speech Accommodation Theory), as outlined, for example, in Giles, Coupland, and Coupland (1991). For the purposes

by the fact that the two are most convergent in the brief section about Dan's brother that occurs before the extended discussion of mutual friends. Even though the focus here is on Dan's family rather than common friends, considerations of personal friendship are extremely salient here. Ronald has abruptly shifted the topic from an argument about politics to a discussion of Dan's brother, who had been killed in a motorcycle accident a couple of years ago. Ronald had been under the impression that the accident took place quite a long time ago, and the discussion becomes awkward as he comes to the realization that he has inadvertently brought up a touchy subject. However, the two manage to quickly smooth over the awkwardness, even without overt apology from Ronald, partly through rapidly shifting away from the topic of Dan's brother to the topic of Dan's uncle, which they discuss in a humorous tone, and partly through their mutual convergence with respect to r-lessness.

However, if we accept that levels of r-lessness are dependent on the relative importance of ethnic distinctiveness vs. personal connection in different portions of the interview, we are still left with the question of why the levels vary so much within the two sections on race relations and within the section on family and friends. I suggest that this is because r-lessness serves to index other meanings besides ethnic group membership. Not only is r-lessness associated with AAVE, but it is also a marker of Southern speech in general. Prior to WWII, it was a marker of prestigious speech; since that time, however, it has fallen out of social favor and now serves as a marker of vernacular Southern speech. Thus, Dan and Ronald increase their r-lessness when talking about Dan's uncle, a subject that pertains to the local vernacular culture. Conversely, they decrease their r-lessness when talking about their friends at the university, a non-local matter.

It is important to note here that just because the two speakers show comparatively low-levels of r-lessness in the section on friends does not mean that we should classify this section as more "formal" than the preceding one. The discussion of friends is highly animated, and the two interlocutors demonstrate a high degree of involvement with their subject matter and with each other, as indicated by convergence not only in terms of r-lessness but in terms of other variable features as well, as discussed below. Involvement is also indicated at the discourse level. For example, the two use discourse markers indicative of high involvement (e.g., "you know" and "I

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of this discussion, I will remain, for the most part, within the traditional framework of SAT, which holds that speakers seeking psychological convergence will attempt linguistic convergence.

mean"; see Schiffrin 1987) to a greater extent in the section on friends than in the preceding sections. In addition, they directly address each other frequently in this section, even though there was no direct address in the initial section on race relations. Thus, it seems best to conclude that the section on friends is no less "informal" than the preceding section on Dan's uncle: Speakers simply exhibit a variety of speech styles when conversing informally and unguardedly, and it may be that the persistent sociolinguistic quest for each speaker's one true "vernacular" is somewhat misguided (cf. Wolfson 1976, Milroy 1987:57-60).

Because r-lessness has undergone such dramatic shifts in prestige value and usage levels in the past couple of generations, shifting to high levels of r-lessness carries other meanings besides membership in Southern vernacular communities: It also has the effect of evoking the past, including the speech of prestigious Southern Whites of days gone by. Thus, Dan dramatically increases his r-lessness each time he discusses the Civil War, especially in invented "quotes" from historic Southern whites and in his highly detailed and emotionally charged descriptions of Civil War heroes, such as his description of Robert E. Lee, transcribed in (1) [2].

(1) D: Man, he was dashing, you know. He had that black hair, he just rode around on his horse, [he was—he was bad.
    R: [Uh huh.
    D: By the end of the war, which only lasted four years, he looked o::ld, man.
    R: He was old. He had gray—
    D: [Beat do::wn.
    R: [had gray—had gray—]
    D: [Beat do::wn]
    R: Had gray hair all on his face and stuff.
    D: And he'd—he'd fought for so long. I mean, he really did.
    R: [Uh huh.
    D: [I mean, he really got involved.[3]

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[2] Note that brackets indicate overlapping talk; parentheses indicate inserted explanatory material; hyphens indicate false starts; colons indicate extended vowel length; a series of periods indicates a pause (pauses were not timed for the purposes of this investigation).

[3] Dan's high levels of r-lessness in his discussion of the Civil War are perfect examples of cases in which linguistic divergence is not intended for—and does not lead to—psychological divergence. Dan is primarily evoking images through his r-lessness in these sections and hence heightening rather than diminishing the

We still have one final question with respect to *r*-lessness: Why do the two speakers show convergence at the end of the second section on race relations? This time, the explanation lies in the fact that style shifting with respect to variable dialect features depends on more than one's fellow conversational participants and the topic of conversation. It also depends on speakers' alignment toward one another and toward their topics. For example, throughout most of the second section on race relations, the two speakers not only discuss potentially divisive topics, but they exhibit overt disagreement—arguing over matters ranging from whether Native Americans are genetically predisposed toward alcoholism to whether such figures as Robert E. Lee, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. are worthy of admiration. Near the end of the section, though, they finally reach an agreement: Martin Luther King *is* to be admired, even though Ronald had initially doubted the effectiveness of his non-violent methods.

Even more important than the two interlocutors' alignment with respect to their subject matter, the two have also forged some crucial alignments with respect to one another. At various earlier points in the interview, Dan forges alliances between the Lumbee—and, by extension, himself—and Robeson County Whites and Whites in general. For example, at one point he states that Whites historically have treated the Lumbee differently than they treated Blacks and that the Lumbee "were just like White people, you know, they weren't subservient at all." On the other hand, Ronald is quite insistent, throughout the interview, on his dislike of and disassociation from Whites. For example, he maintains that "the White man will always find your weakness" and that Martin Luther King was taking a big risk indeed when he "gambled that White people had a conscience."

By the end of the second section on race relations, however, Dan has shifted alliances. Like Ronald, he now sides against Whites. For example, he sarcastically "quotes" generic Whites who extol the virtues of segregation by saying, "Why do you call this racism? This ain't nothing but, uh, segregation. Segregation, it works, it's good, it works for everybody." At the same time, Dan minimizes rather than heightens his personal distance from African Americans. He accomplishes this not only via overt statements (e.g., his praise for Martin Luther King) but through rejecting ties with the Lumbee, who historically have been antagonistic toward Blacks. In fact, the crucial argument that serves to convince Ronald that King's non-violent

interpersonal involvement between the two speakers. (See Tannen 1989, Chapter 6, on the role of imagery in creating conversational involvement.)

methods were effective after all hinges on the words of Dan's uncle, whose beliefs are diametrically opposed to Dan's. This passage is transcribed in (2).

(2) I'll tell you why they (White people) were scared of him (King). Because, uh ... He had brought so much change, and people so scared of change, they couldn't believe it. I had, I talked to my uncle, my—my dad's, my mom's uncle. Asked him, you know, what'd you think about Martin Luther King? And uh ... he said, "He's a son of a bitch!" He said, "He's a son of a bitch now, and—and they tried to build him up as something that he ain't, but he's a son of bitch now, and he was back then."

Interestingly, Dan indicates alignment with African Americans only after he and Ronald have shifted the focus of their discussion of race relations from a local to a national level—as if it is easier for Dan to identify with African Americans in the abstract that in a more personal way.

The depersonalization of the second section on race relations is evident not only in topic choice but in more subtle matters such as pronoun use: Although the two make frequent reference to the Lumbee, to Native Americans in general, and to African Americans, they never once refer to these groups with first or second person pronouns (e.g., Dan calls the Lumbee "Indians" or "they" rather than "we"). In addition, whereas Dan makes a couple oblique references to his personal Indian identity (for example, he says, "Indians are a very lone breed. I do myself, I don't stick with other Indians, because I'm, you know, I'm just a lone person."), Ronald makes no reference in this section to his own personal ethnic group membership at all—in sharp contrast to the initial section of the interview, where he makes a number of (unsuccessful) attempts to discuss his Robeson County roots.

Ronald further indicates disassociation from ethnic ties, particularly localized affiliations, through his usage levels for vernacular language features. Thus, in the final section on race relations, he shows 28.6% third person singular $-s$ absence compared with 52.9% in the section on friends, and he shows only 12.5% copula deletion, compared with 55.6% in the first section on race relations and 45.8% in the discussion of friends. In addition, his use of r-lessness decreases steadily as he and Dan shift their focus from local to national matters.

Thus we see that even if we leave aside the other social meanings of r-lessness in Robeson County and focus solely on its role in indicating ethnic alignment, the picture is still highly complex, because ethnic alignments exist on a number of different levels, from the local to the regional to the global, and speakers may align themselves in various ways with respect to

different types of ethnic group memberships during the course of a single
conversation.

5 Morphosyntactic Features

Let us now turn to an examination of morphosyntactic features in this inter-
view. Three of the features I examined may be considered to be markers of
African American identity, since they are widespread in AAVE across the
country. These are third person singular *-s* absence, copula deletion, and
habitual *be*. In addition, past *be* regularization patterns are indicative of eth-
nic group membership in Robeson County. Regularization to *was* and
wasn't, as in *They wasn't there*, is a widespread AAVE feature, while the
Lumbee indicate a distinctive pattern of their own: regularization to *was* in
affirmative contexts but to *weren't* in negative utterances, as is *They was
home* vs. *He weren't home*. This pattern is discussed in detail in Wolfram
and Sellers (forthcoming).

Overall, Dan uses hardly any of the morphosyntactic features associated
with AAVE, and so it is meaningless to talk about differing usage levels in
each different section of the interview. However, it is instructive to note that
when Dan does use AAVE features, they are concentrated in the discussion
of mutual friends, in which, as I have already discussed, considerations of
interpersonal alignment are more important than ethnic distinctiveness. In
addition, the positioning of these features within the discussion is important
as well. For example, not only does one of Dan's two cases of third person
singular *-s* absence occur in this section, but it echoes Ronald's use of the
form, as illustrated in (3).

(3) D: Well, I mean.. I mean, he has found something that **he does** that I
         don't believe **nobody else does** better, and that's the secret to life.
    R: Uh huh.
    D: I mean, and that's the secret to a successful one.
    R: Find something that **nobody else do**?
    D: **Nobody else do** better.

Further, there are only three tokens of habitual *be* in the entire interview,
and they all occur in quick succession, again in the section on friends. Inter-
estingly, this time it is Dan rather than Ronald who introduces the form and
Ronald who picks up on it. This is illustrated in (4), an excerpt from their
discussion of a mutual friend who had joined a cult.

(4) D: It used to be a old, like, sixties kind of church? But they changed?
    R: Uh huh.

D: Jack (term of address), they **be** telling them people some crazy stuff, Ron.

R: How you know that's the one Hunter's in?

D: 'Cause, 'cause, uh, Roger told me to watch it (a TV special on cults).

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

D: They **be** telling them stuff like, uh, you got to 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.

Ronald also echoes Dan in terms of certain usages that are not associated with AAVE. For example, even though he shows his highest usage levels for third person singular –*s* absence in the section on friends, he still occasionally uses –*s* forms at certain strategic points. For example, in the excerpt in (5), he uses an –*s* form in completing Dan's thought; while in (6), he self-corrects to an –*s* form, indicating that he is working to overcome his propensity toward –*s* deletion in informal conversation in his efforts to converge with Dan.

(5) D: But you know, um, there's a old saying that goes.. Fondness—I mean, no, not fondness, no, separation? Being away from somebody?

R: **Makes** the heart [grow fonder.]

D: [grow fonder.]

R: Not for me.

(6) R: See, I don't know. That stuff (marijuana), it—it **mess** with you—it **messes** with your head so much.

Example (6) illustrates that when we're looking at so-called ethnic dialect features and what their usage levels might have to tell us about ethnic alignment, we have to keep in mind that linguistic convergence is not always easy—or possible. In other words, divergence or lack of convergence does not necessarily indicate that a speaker wishes to disassociate from an interlocutor but may simply indicate that the speaker lacks the linguistic ability to converge. For example, although Ronald is quite adept at manipulating his levels of *r*-lessness to converge with or diverge from Dan's, his ability to converge in terms of past *be* regularization is more limited. Overall, Dan shows limited regularization of past *be* in affirmative sentences (14%) but shows the classic Lumbee pattern in negative contexts—that is, regulariza-

tion to *weren't*, as in *He weren't home* or *It weren't me*. In fact, Dan never once uses *wasn't*, whether in regularized or non-regularized contexts (e.g., *They wasn't* vs. *he wasn't*). Ronald, on the other hand, mirrors the AAVE pattern in showing regularization to the *was-* form in both positive and negative contexts (*was* regularization = 30%; *wasn't* = 71.4%). There are only two cases in which Ronald uses *weren't* rather than *wasn't* for past *be*, and each of these occurs in a section in which considerations of friendship with Dan are uppermost. One case occurs in the middle of the discussion of friends, in a particularly animated section in which the two are talking about sex. This is illustrated in (7).

(7) R: Said Hunter was down there having sex with a girl on the couch in
          the study lounge. Anybody could walk in, [Dan!]
     D: [laughter]
     R: In the study lounge but that—but **you weren't**—**you wadn't** here
          when, uh, Jim and Jane—yeah **you was**.

Even though Ronald seems to be trying to converge with Dan, his self-"correction" from standard *you weren't* to nonstandard *you wasn't* indicates that he's having difficulty. And his switch back to his own system for past *be* regularization seems relatively permanent, since he uses *you was* right after he uses *you wasn't*.

The other case in which Ronald uses *weren't* is in the discussion of Dan's brother discussed above; a portion is transcribed in (8). This time, Ronald is a little more successful in converging with Dan, in that he uses *they weren't* without "correcting" to *they wasn't*; however, he returns to regularizing to *was* a few lines later.

(8) D   And then—**they weren't** never the same after that.
     R: **They weren't**?
     D: Not after you lose [a child.
     R: [They still—they've still changed? I mean, you
          can still, you still see they difference?
     D: Yeah.
     R: And that's been how many years now?
     D: That's been, uh, seven, three, six years.
     R: Dan, **that wadn't** too long ago. I thought **you was**—that was
          something happened when **you was** a little kid or something.
     D: No::.

In addition, a few minutes later he makes another unsuccessful attempt to converge with Dan. This time he regularizes to the *were-* form but does so in an affirmative context; and further, he fails to regularize to *weren't* in an immediately following negative tag. This is shown in (9).

(9) Oh, **he were** beating on her or something, **wadn't he**?

We see, then, that when considering what speakers' usage patterns for morphosyntactic features have to tell us about their ethnic self- and group identification, it is important to investigate not only aggregate usage levels but also particular occurrences of important features in the discourse contexts in which they are situated. Further, we also have to keep in mind that morphosyntactic features may not be as easy to adopt as phonological features, and speakers may exhibit confusion between two differing systems despite their best efforts to converge with their fellow interlocutors.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, I have attempted to demonstrate in this investigation the importance of recontextualizing the sociolinguistic interview data on which quantitative variationist studies are based. Through close examination of a range of ethnic language features in the discourse contexts in which they occur, we can arrive at a greater understanding of the full range of meanings associated with such features and of the range of meanings associated with the seemingly straightforward notion of ethnic group membership. We can also see that no matter how important ethnicity may be as a component of individual identity, particularly in interethnic encounters, it is only one of a myriad of such components, and speakers are far more adept at balancing innumerable considerations of individual identity and interpersonal relations than we often give them credit for. Speakers are not automatons whose use of variable features is nothing but a dull reflection of their demographic characteristics. Rather, they are active strategizers who use language to shape and re-shape themselves and the world around them. However, we can only get a full sense of speaker agency if we complement our large-scale quantitative studies with case studies that examine speech as it actually unfolds.

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