

“I ain’t Never Been Charged with Nothing!”: The Use of Falsetto Speech as a Linguistic Strategy of Indignation

Rasmus Nielsen*

1 Introduction

While several studies have addressed intonation differences between African Americans and European Americans (Loman 1967, 1975, Tarone 1973, Wolfram and Thomas 2002) including differences in fundamental frequency (Walton and Orlikoff 1994), very little work has been conducted on falsetto, the rapid vibration of the vocal folds in which the fundamental frequency, or F0, ranges from 240 Hz to 634 Hz for men compared to a modal F0 of around 100 Hz (Podesva 2007). In particular, intraspeaker variation in falsetto remains underexamined but promises to be a rich site for the further exploration of how speakers of African American English (AAE) use stylistic resources to shape meanings and identities.

In the present study, I address the aforementioned gap by investigating falsetto speech used by “Michael,” a fourteen-year-old African American male from Washington, D.C., in an hour long interview conducted as part of a sociological study of participants in a summer day camp for at-risk youth (Froyum Roise 2004). I focus on the quantitative patterning of falsetto, while inferring the social meaning of falsetto from the interview discourse, using positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999a) to analyze each instance of falsetto. In the interview, Michael’s falsetto speech occurs in 45 intonational phrases out of a total 1680 intonational phrases. Maximum F0, F0 range, and duration of falsetto measured in milliseconds are coded for each instance of falsetto.

The analysis reveals that falsetto seems to have several related pragmatic functions, including stances of frustration, anger and indignation, as well as general expressiveness. The analysis also shows that the falsetto speech used to convey indignation clusters with other morphosyntactic and phonological AAE features, such as double negatives, *r*-lessness, stopping of inter-dental fricatives, and monophthongization of diphthongs (Labov 1972, Green 2002), in the expression of outrage against the hardships and social injustices that are pervasive in many U.S. inner city minority communities. Intonation in general and falsetto in particular are still challenging lines of inquiry in the study of AAE. This study focuses on intraspeaker variation but aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of AAE falsetto and intonation more generally.

2 Intonation and Falsetto in African American English

Tarone (1973) noted in the early 1970s that suprasegmental features, including intonation and prosody, of AAE are just as characteristic of the dialect as phonological and morphosyntactic features. However, several decades later, AAE intonation and prosody are still poorly understood (e.g., Wolfram and Thomas 2002). Research on intonation in AAE has shown major differences between AAE and European American varieties such as the following: different stress patterns (e.g., *Pólíce* vs. *políce*; Baugh 1983, Wolfram and Fasold 1974, Smitherman 1977, Green 1990), greater pitch range (Tarone 1973, Loman 1975, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006), lower F0 for males in modal voice (Wheat and Hudson 1988, Walton and Orlikoff 1994), different intonational contours on questions (e.g., level tones at the end of yes/no questions, falling tones at the end of wh-questions (Green 1990, Foreman 1999, Loman 1967, 1975).

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Falsetto is often described as a salient part of AAE intonation (especially for men) in the academic literature (see, e.g., Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006, Thomas and Reaser 2004, Wolfram and Thomas 2002), but they all keep referring to the same landmark studies conducted by Tarone (1973) and Loman (1967, 1975). Tarone argues that she heard falsetto frequently during observations of seven adolescents aged sixteen to twenty-four, and that speakers shifted into “a falsetto register when the speaker created a dramatic effect in his argument by building up suspense or by establishing the strength of his own feelings about the issue at hand.” For example, one speaker uses falsetto to protest the idea of supporting a woman financially. Tarone states further, following Johnson (1971), that falsetto is found in “game” frames to create group solidarity in the black street community.

The other landmark study of AAE intonation and falsetto is that of Loman 1975, based on Loman 1967. Loman focused primarily on the intonation patterns produced by ten-year-olds in a low-income area of the central part of Northwest (NW) Washington, D.C. While most of the data comes from children, Loman also included data from adult-adult conversations and parent-child conversations. Among his other findings, Loman found that the highest pitch level he coded for (/4/, extra high) was often produced in falsetto register by African American men to convey excitement. He noted (1975:233):

It is an interesting feature in the speech behavior of the Negro men, that pitch level /4/ is typically pronounced in the falsetto register. This is how pitch level /4/ is expressed in AJ's utterances, and more examples can be found in the utterances of his brother, HJ, in conversation 9. This phenomenon can also be heard whenever there is a group of Negro men talking spiritedly at the street corner.

The spirited talk at the street corner could be similar to Tarone's (1973) and Johnson's (1971) observations concerning the “game” frame and the social construction of group solidarity, even though the phrase “talking spiritedly” is somewhat ambiguous. However, it seems to indicate solidarity and unselfconscious speech, in light of Loman's (1975:232) observation that a low frequency of pitch level /4/ (in falsetto) indicates a “somewhat stiff and formal atmosphere.” On the other hand, Loman also notes that an utterance with pitch level /4/ is used as a “(slightly indignant) correction” (his parentheses) of a previous comment, which expresses a “sudden commitment in the conversation” (1975:232). Accordingly, it appears that falsetto is used for multiple interactional purposes, even though Loman's overarching conclusion is that falsetto is used to show excitement rather than indignation, in-group solidarity instead of out-group discordance.

In a more recent study, Alim (2004:70–71) notes what he calls *Black American falsetto* in two phrases. In the first phrase, falsetto is used as an *interrogative challenger* in “Why don't you wanna go?” as a response to Bilal saying “FUCK THAT!” about going to Africa. In the second case, falsetto is used as a *declarative emphaser* in “It's AIDS here, too!” as a response to Bilal saying that he does not want to have sex in Africa because of AIDS. The falsetto response emphasizes the opposition to Bilal's ridiculous argument, since there are high AIDS rates in the U.S. as well. The falsetto is used in a discursive *battlin* mode, in which Bilal's point of view is being contested, and he “has to defend or substantiate his anti-Africa position” (Alim 2004:70).

While the insights from previous studies into the nature of AAE intonation in general and falsetto in particular are invaluable to the understanding of suprasegmental linguistic features, it is equally evident that the generalized findings on AAE falsetto are based on very slim evidence. In all of the studies, there are only reports on very few instances of falsetto in addition to Loman's informal observations made when passing ‘spirited’ groups on Washington, D.C. street corners in the mid 1960s.

It is probable that falsetto speech has been observed more than it has been reported in academic studies, but the existing research leaves several gaps. First, the generalized and unquestioned contention that African American men use more falsetto than women is based on a

strikingly small subject pool. Second, conclusions regarding the form and function of falsetto tend to be overgeneralized and unidimensional: falsetto is used as a verbal game or to show excitement, despite ambiguous evidence in the Loman study. Third, most studies of AAE intonation focus only on how intonation patterns co-occur with structural aspects of language, such as declarative sentences and *wh*-questions, without paying any attention to *what* is being accomplished in the discourse, and *how* it is being accomplished. Based on previous studies, falsetto seems to be distributed according to conversational domain and discourse function, which is in line with Tarone's (1973:35) observation that intonation is "extremely sensitive" to "social situation," and Alim's observation about falsetto in a discursive *battlin* mode.

AAE intonation and voice quality is indeed poorly understood. It is my goal to address the existing gap, by focusing on falsetto in an in-depth linguistic case study of fourteen-year-old Michael from Washington, D.C. I use a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, examining frequency and distribution of the occurrence of falsetto as well as how it is used in unfolding discourse. As such, I am not only investigating whether or not falsetto is sensitive to social situation, following Tarone, but also whether or not it is sensitive to speaker alignment and the local interactional goals that are constantly negotiated in unfolding social interactions.

In sum, how often falsetto occurs and what it means in its conversational setting remains to be addressed, which is the goal of this case study. The study will be guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How often does falsetto occur and how is it distributed in the interview?
- (2) What is the social meaning of falsetto based on how it is used in the discourse context?

3 Style and the Sociolinguistic Case Study

The motivation for choosing the sociolinguistic case study is to investigate falsetto speech as a naturalistic linguistic phenomenon that is sensitive to style shifting in social interaction. Early variation studies focused on community-wide patterns of stylistic variation, with an eye toward locating 'vernacular', 'un-self-conscious' speech (e.g., Labov 1966). Increasingly, researchers have turned to examining not only how variation patterns according to speech style but also how and why speakers use stylistic resources in unfolding discourse (e.g., Podesva 2007). In addition, researchers increasingly have turned away from 'responsive' views in which style shifts are seen as reactions to shifts in situations to examining more closely the many cases in which speakers 'initiate' situational, relational and identificational changes through stylistic variation (Bell 1984). Traditional approaches to style, such as attention to speech, have been successful in investigating variation at the community level, but once the linguistic tokens are tabulated and abstracted away from their natural conversational settings, they tend to lose the contextual meaning and pragmatic function that is used to maintain, shape, and reshape social identities at the local level of social practice. Therefore, major insights can be gained by focusing specifically on localized linguistic practices and how they become meaningful in social interaction. For such a purpose, the linguistic case study is more appropriate than the large-scale survey studies.

Recent advances in social constructionist perspectives, such as Schilling-Estes' (2004) successful integration of variation methods and discourse analysis, have shown sociolinguistic variables to be sensitive to such matters as audience (Bell 1984), topic of conversation (Bell 1984, Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994), stance toward topics and interlocutors, and how interlocutors conceive of or frame the discursive interaction. For example, Podesva (2007) showed in a case study of a single speaker how the stylistic use of falsetto phonation varied greatly according to interactional situation and conceived frame of interaction. Podesva analyzed falsetto speech in terms of maximum F0, F0 range, and falsetto duration, a method I have replicated partly in this study. Hence, my quantitative analysis of Michael's falsetto involves a distributional analysis of falsetto according to discourse topic, while the qualitative analysis focuses on Michael's use of falsetto in unfolding discourse at the sentence level. Finally, I infer the meaning of falsetto based

on socio-pragmatic form and function, but before presenting the method and results, I turn to a short description of Michael.

4 “Michael”

The interview with Michael was conducted as part of a sociological study of African American participants in a summer day camp for at-risk youth in Washington, D.C. (Froyum Roise 2004). Michael lives with his mother and grandmother, and his father is in jail. Despite the seemingly relatively controlled sociological interview, Michael is one of the most eager storytellers from the study, as he often goes on tangents to tell narratives about fighting, run-ins with law enforcement, going to prison, and dating (Schilling-Estes 2006). As such, the data for this study deviates slightly from canonical sociolinguistic studies. The interviews in the sociological study of which Michaels’ interview is part of is much more structured and interviewer-controlled than a typical sociolinguistic interview, since the interviewer is interested in information more so than eliciting narratives and the so-called vernacular. However, Michael often takes topic control and holds the floor to tell stories, and such agentive behavior is an ideal site for investigating the construction of identity (Eckert 2000). As we will see, Michael’s use of falsetto phonation is a powerful stylistic tool that allows him to express feelings of anger and frustration toward how he is being questioned and positioned in the interview. In addition, the observer’s paradox does not seem to have a major effect on Michael, since he is highly vernacular throughout the interview, exemplified by his high rates of *r*-lessness, monophthongization, deletion of BE, and habitual BE. In this study, however, I report only on his falsetto phonation.

5 Methods

As mentioned above, my purpose is twofold here: 1). To investigate the frequency of falsetto and how it is distributed in the interview; 2). To infer the social meaning of falsetto from the discourse context. In order to determine the frequency and distribution of Michael’s falsetto speech, I divided the hour long interview into intonational phrases, based on Ladefoged 2001, and then coded each instance of falsetto impressionistically.¹ Each intonational phrase had to have a tonic syllable, a syllable with increased pitch and stress, in order to be classified as an intonational phrase.² Dividing the text into intonational phrases allowed for methodological consistency, and it appears to be a much more reliable way to segment an interview than, say, syntactic units or phrases due to the high number of fragments in face-to-face conversation. Then, the entire interview was divided into topics of conversation, to see if the falsetto speech would appear more in certain topics, following Rickford and McNair-Knox’s (1994) and Schilling-Estes’s (2004) findings that shifts in topic often corresponds with style shifts.

For the second part, inferring the meaning of falsetto, each instance of falsetto was analyzed in terms of max F0 (Hz), range of F0 (Hz), and duration (ms) of the falsetto, following Podesva 2007. Figure 1 below illustrates an example of Michael’s use of falsetto, exemplified by the phrase *I ain’t never been charged with nothing*. The *x*-axis shows time in seconds, and the *y*-axis shows pitch range measured in Hz. I established Michael’s modal voice to be between 130 Hz and 150 Hz, which is expected for his age. Table 1 below illustrates the acoustic measure and the method of calculation for each instance of falsetto speech. Figure 1 illustrates the points of interest in

¹Most utterances can be articulated with a high F0 without containing falsetto phonation. Obviously, extremely high F0 levels can only be articulated with falsetto, but in this particular study, there are several instances of high F0 phrases that do not contain falsetto. Therefore, the coding must be done impressionistically, since autocorrelation methods are not reliable. First of all, those methods cannot spot falsetto, and there are many problems related to pitch halving and pitch doubling in pitch tracking.

²The tonic syllable is usually the last stressed syllable in a phrase, and intonational phrases often follow syntactic units. However, this is obviously not always the case in face-to-face interaction. For example, a discourse marker such as *yeah* can carry tonic stress and thus form an intonational phrase on its own.

Michael’s pitch track, and it is also a graphic representation of the degree to which falsetto sticks out perceptually when used in discourse. In this specific example, the maximum F0 on the falsetto *ain’t never* is 373 Hz.

Acoustic Measure	Method of Calculation
Maximum F0 (Hz)	
F0 range (Hz)	F0 max – F0 min
Duration of falsetto (ms)	t (falsetto end) – t (falsetto begin)

Table 1: Acoustic measure and method of calculation.

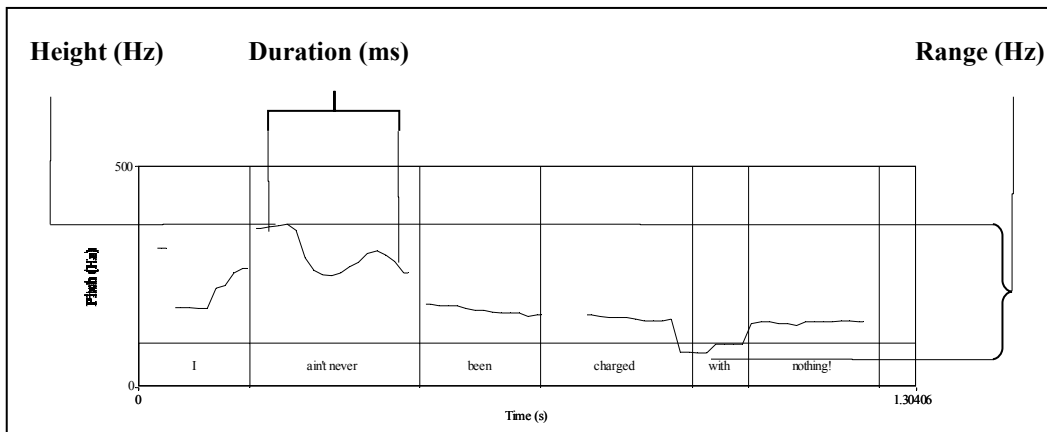


Figure 1: Michael’s use of falsetto.

In order to examine the meaning of the falsetto speech, I used a discourse analytical framework called positioning theory, “the study of local moral orders as ever-shifting patterns of contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting,” (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999b:1) to isolate the discursive acts in which the falsetto speech would appear. Positions are relational (e.g. a person in power can discursively position someone else as powerless), and one of the main components of positioning theory is to identify who has the initiative in a conversation, either through *performative positioning* or *accountive positioning* (see Harré and Langenhove 1999a:24). The performative positioning can be subdivided into *deliberate self-positioning* (e.g. when projecting personal identity and point of view) and *deliberate positioning of others* (e.g. when positioning others, either present or absent in the conversation). Accountive positioning can be subdivided into *forced self-positioning* (e.g. when responding to a positioning of the self carried out by another person) and *forced positioning of others* (when responding to a positioning of others either absent or present). All instances of Michael’s falsetto speech occurred in one of the four different types of positionings. Table 2 below illustrates each type of positioning in the interview in addition to the distribution of the four positioning types. The bold dialogue marks the discursive act, or positioning, in which the falsetto speech occurred.

	Performative Positioning (deliberate)	Accountive Positioning (forced)
Self-positioning	<p>Deliberate self-positioning (N=11):</p> <p>Example 1: Michael accused of getting a girl pregnant</p> <p>(1) <i>Michael</i>: "I'm pregnant with Michael's baby. And then I called her this morning and I was like, "Why did you say that?" And she was like, "I didn't say that." And then my grandma was on the phone and she was like, "You called this house last night and said you pregnant." She was like, "Oh, I was just playing." And I- I was</p> <p>(2) <i>Interviewer</i>: So she's not pregnant?</p> <p>(3) <i>Michael</i>: <i>And I was- I wasn't scared cause I was like, "I ain't had sex with that girl."</i></p>	<p>Forced self-positioning (N=15):</p> <p>Example 2: Talking about prison (juvenile)</p> <p>(1) <i>Interviewer</i>: What's that? I'm not familiar with OCC.</p> <p>(2) <i>Michael</i>: I don't know. I just found out about it.</p> <p>(3) <i>Interviewer</i>: What is it?</p> <p>(4) <i>Michael</i>: It's this program. I gotta go for six months.</p> <p>(5) <i>Interviewer</i>: Like a residential program?</p> <p>(6) <i>Michael</i>: <i>I don't know what it is!</i></p>
Other positioning	<p>Deliberate positioning of others (N=5):</p> <p>Example 3: Michael getting into fight (positioning antagonist)</p> <p>(1) <i>Michael</i>: And that's when, he went home and got a knife. And I was like, if they try to jump him, I was gonna help him. I'm not gonna let him go out like that, cause they said they was gonna jump him so. The boy that shot me, he heard me say, he was like, "You gonna help him? I thought you was with us." I was like, "No, I ain't gonna let him go out like that." <i>That's when he uh shot me</i>, so we started fighting.</p>	<p>Forced positioning of others (N=14):</p> <p>Example 4: Michael positioning family members</p> <p>(1) <i>Interviewer</i>: Okay, and what- what would you say is- you like the least about your family?</p> <p>(2) <i>Michael</i>: <i>The nagging</i>. Like e- every time I do something little. Like this weekend, I had to go to Oak Hill. But they dropped my charges because they knew, they could find out it wasn't me and my friend. They- they wanted us to yeah, like, yeah. If we ever think about doing something like that, they said, "Don't do it!" They gonna put us in this program, and this OCC program.</p>

Table 2: Examples of positioning types

6 The Quantitative Distribution of Falsetto

Turning to the first research question concerning the frequency and distribution of falsetto speech, falsetto occurred in 45 out of 1680 intonational phrases. This number is fairly high considering the perceptual nature of the falsetto variable. Eckert (1987) argues that some variables contribute more to the construction of a social identity than others, and Podesva (2007) argues that falsetto is such a variable due to its perceptual salience. Table 3 below shows how Michael's falsetto was distributed based on topic. While the falsetto speech occurred frequently, topic did not turn out to be a significant factor on the distribution ($\chi^2=10.208$, $df=7$, $p=.177$).

	Family	Prison	Fighting	Police	Marriage	Gender	Sex	Dating
Falsetto IP (N)	7	5	3	4	4	7	8	7
Total IP (N)	277	274	253	78	67	144	306	281
Falsetto (%)	2.53	1.82	1.19	5.13	5.97	4.86	2.61	2.49

Table 3: Frequency of Intonational Phrases (IP) with falsetto according to topic

7 Falsetto Speech as a Linguistic Strategy of Indignation

Turning to the second research question regarding why Michael uses falsetto speech, the co-occurrence of positioning type and falsetto maximum F0, F0 range, and falsetto duration presents a striking pattern, since forced self-positioning overall is the most significant positioning type in which falsetto speech occurs. Figure 2 illustrates that Michael’s maximum falsetto was significantly higher,³ had a significantly greater range,⁴ and was longer⁵ (though non-significant when comparing forced self-positioning with forced positioning of others and deliberate positioning of others) when he was forced to self-position by the interviewer.

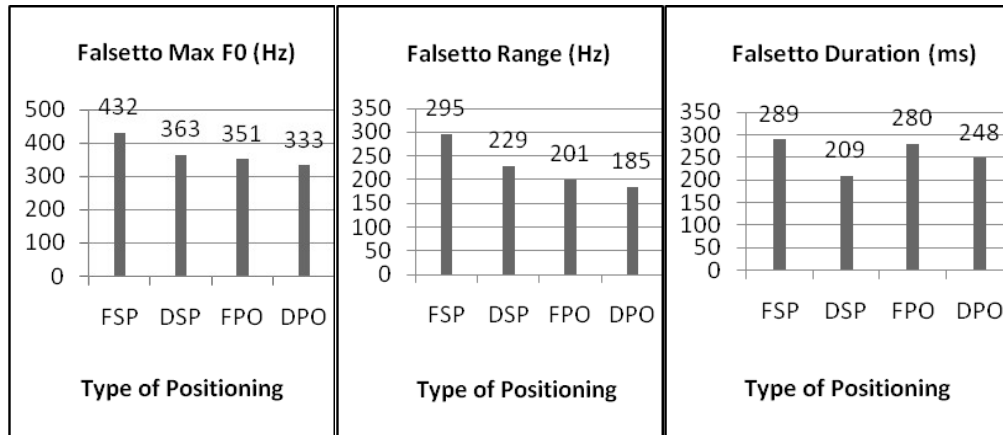


Figure 2: Falsetto max F0 (Hz), range (Hz), and duration (ms) across positioning types.

It is clear that the most extreme falsetto appears in the act of forced self-positioning. In these cases, the interviewer has the initiative, and Michael is forced to respond to her questions and positionings of him. While a speaker is often forced to present and defend a certain point of view when being forced to self-position, the same speaker has the ability to engage in an act of repositioning the self. Interestingly, in 10 of the 15 cases of forced self-positioning, Michael immediately rejects how he is being positioned and repositions himself in the interview. Table 4 (inspired by Du Bois 2007) below illustrates how Michael uses falsetto and other linguistic features to reposition himself in the interview, and in this case with a rather indignant tone:

Speakers	Subject	Evaluation	Object	Repositioning
Interviewer:	Has that ever that you	happened before ‘ve been charged	with something?	
Michael:	I <i>ain't never</i>	been charged	with nothing.	(Oppositional)
	I ain't never	been	in jail.	

Table 4: Forced self-positioning followed by repositioning

³Forced self-positioning vs. Deliberate self-positioning ($t=1.71$; $df=24$; $p=.008$); Forced self-positioning vs. Forced positioning of others ($t=1.70$; $df=27$; $p=.001$); Forced self-positioning vs. Deliberate positioning of others ($t=1.73$; $df=18$; $p=.008$).

⁴Forced self-positioning vs. Deliberate self-positioning ($t=1.71$; $df=24$; $p=.02$); Forced self-positioning vs. Forced positioning of others ($t=1.70$; $df=27$; $p\leq.001$); Forced self-positioning vs. Deliberate positioning of others ($t=1.73$; $df=18$; $p=.016$).

⁵Forced self-positioning vs. Deliberate self-positioning ($t=1.71$; $df=24$; $p=.03$); Forced self-positioning vs. Forced positioning of others ($t=1.70$; $df=27$; $p=.43$); Forced self-positioning vs. Deliberate positioning of others ($t=1.73$; $df=18$; $p=.26$).

The example in Table 4 shows how the interviewer positions Michael as someone who may have been charged with something, and Michael immediately resonates her request through a structural parallelism in which words are repeated. However, instead of acknowledging her evaluation “been charged,” he negates it with a double negative “ain’t never” containing falsetto, while repositioning the object “something” with “nothing.” Thus, the alignment between the interviewer and Michael is oppositional, and his repositioning is doubly emphasized by the follow up statement “I ain’t never been in jail.”

Based on the rather dramatic repositionings in the interview, I divided the most extreme positioning type, forced self-positioning, into two different categories *forced self-positioning* (FSP) and *forced self-positioning + repositioning* (FSPR). Figure 3 illustrates that the falsetto Michael uses is even more extreme when his forced self-positioning is followed by, or completed with, a repositioning of the interviewers’ persistence for information or inappropriate line of questioning. While the example in Table 4 shows a co-occurrence of falsetto speech with Michael’s indignant stance towards the interviewer’s question, it is difficult to assign a specific meaning to falsetto speech. Some of the main challenges include the fact that falsetto is a continuous variable, and in this case the meaning also appears to be continuous. In addition, there is no direct link between linguistic variables and social meaning. On the other hand, it would not be very satisfying to say that Michael’s falsetto speech is meaningless, when considering how perceptually salient his falsetto is throughout the interview.

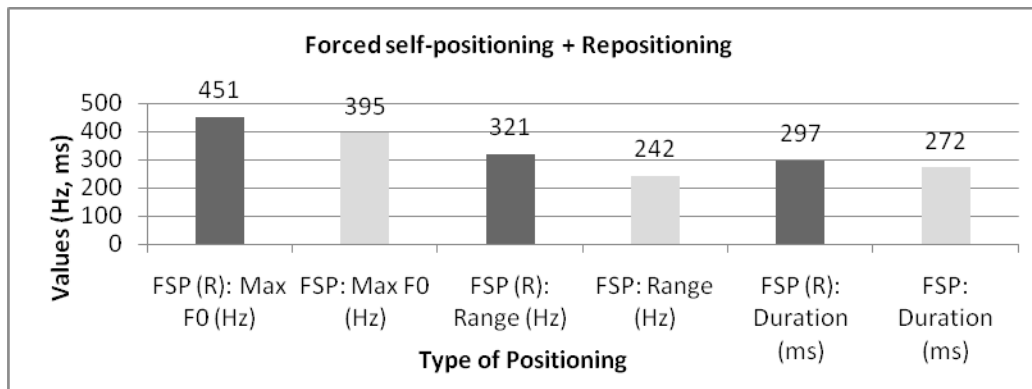


Figure 3: Falsetto duration across positioning types

I will argue that Michael’s 45 cases of falsetto speech are used to convey expressiveness in general, which is in line with most research on falsetto (see Podesva 2007), and indignation in the most extreme cases in terms of max F0, F0 range, and duration. These extreme cases are found when Michael repositions personal attributes assigned to him by the interviewer. Strikingly, most of the times Michael uses falsetto happens in oppositional alignment between him and the interviewer. In some cases the opposition is mild, and in the most extreme cases, the opposition is more severe.

Finally, I will turn to the 10 cases of forced self-positioning + repositioning to propose the social meaning of Michael’s falsetto. Table 5 presents the 10 cases of falsetto, which I argue are used to express indignation. The bold words represent the falsetto:

Discourse context	Michael's Falsetto
(1) Asked persistently about what kind of job he has.	<i>I make money!</i>
(2) Asked if he used a condom.	<i>I don't know. She gave it to me, I don't know.</i>
(3) Asked repeatedly about the prison he was sent to.	<i>I don't know what it is!</i>
(4) Asked if he has ever been charged.	<i>I ain't never been charged with nothing!</i>
(5) Asked about impressions of prison.	<i>I was mad! Cause I didn't do nothing.</i>
(6) Asked if he wants revenge if treated poorly by his girlfriend.	<i>No, not revenge! It's like, I'm just saying...</i>
(7) Asked why he says he takes care of himself financially.	<i>Who knows?!</i>
(8) Asked how he would feel if we woke up one day as a girl.	<i>Like, uhm, I don't know.</i>
(9) Asked persistently to label people who cheat or date more than one person.	<i>I don't know. That's it.</i>
(10) Asked about when kissing develops into having sex in a relationship.	<i>I don't know. I'm just saying...</i>

Table 5: Falsetto as indignation

When looking closer at the falsetto phrases and the discourse contexts presented in Table 5, a pattern of the falsetto starts to emerge due to the overall cohesion presented in the discursive acts, forced self-positioning + repositioning. All of these examples clearly demonstrate that Michael is not willing to cooperate with the interviewer when he is being forced to tell how he earns his money,⁶ about being charged with a crime, his experience in prison, whether or not he used a condom when he had sex with a girl, and so on. Further support for the argument that high F0, wide F0 range, and long falsetto duration could index indignation may be found in the sentence structure that forced self-positioning + repositioning favors. In most of the 10 examples above, the first person, singular pronoun ‘I’ is used, and I would argue that it is more likely that one would express anger, frustration, and outrage in the first person rather than in the second or third person.

The analysis in the current study is supported by previous findings on falsetto. While falsetto is reported as taking place in speech events that simultaneously challenge speaker positioning and co-construct group solidarity (Tarone 1975, Alim 2004),⁷ it is evident from the specific examples provided that falsetto occurs in oppositional alignment as in this study. As mentioned earlier, Tarone (1973) describes that falsetto is being used by a man to protest the idea of supporting a woman financially. Loman (1975) reports that falsetto is used as an indignant correction, and Alim (2004) uses falsetto to contest a speaker’s unwarranted anti-Africa attitudes. The current study shows that Michael uses falsetto to be expressive in oppositional alignment, and in the most extreme cases to convey indignation. It is unlikely that Michael is using falsetto to co-construct opposition and solidarity, especially considering the direct and confronting nature of the sociological interview.

8 Conclusions

The instances of falsetto speech in this study were found to have related expressive meanings, which is in line with previous studies (e.g., Tarone 1973, Loman 1967, 1975). However, the present study also departs from previous studies in several ways: Michael’s falsetto speech indexes various degrees of expressiveness depending on face-to-face interaction and the positions taken up

⁶He eventually reports that he cuts grass for elderly people in the neighborhood.

⁷Alim (2004:73) argues that *battlin* is both *competitive* and *communal*.

between Michael and the interviewer. Falsetto speech as a linguistic variable of AAE has proven to be a phonation type and stylistic resource that depends greatly on the interlocutor's fluid and rapid changing stances in the interview discourse. The integration of discourse analysis with more traditional variationist methods allowed me to infer the meaning of the falsetto from the interview discourse, a social meaning that would have been lost had I not analyzed Michael's falsetto in its conversational context.

The most extreme instances of falsetto in terms of max F0, F0 range, and duration index indignation towards the interview questions that cause oppositional alignment. By using falsetto as an agentive, stylistic resource, Michael is able to resist and reposition the interviewer's implications (linguistically) in addition to resisting a life of sociocultural constraints and oppression. Finally, this study also questions a commonly held belief in sociolinguistics: that the sociolinguistic interview is the best way to elicit the so-called vernacular. When reading through the repositioning examples above, the trained linguists would hardly classify this data as a successful sociolinguistic interview, since Michael is far from comfortable in many cases. However, it was never the interviewer's intention to make Michael comfortable per se, since the main focus was on gathering responses to a set list of questions for a sociological study. I am not sure, I want to encourage data gathering of this nature for sociolinguistic studies, but considering the fact that the falsetto only showed up in oppositional alignment, and the most extreme cases in indignant repositionings, perhaps the traditional sociolinguistic interview would not be that effective as a means for gathering falsetto speech, at least not in the speech community to which Michael belongs. I hope this linguistic case study and focus on intra-speaker variation has contributed to a greater understanding of AAE intonation in general and falsetto speech in particular, and how falsetto can be studied in larger African American speech communities.

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Georgetown University
Department of Linguistics
Box 571051
Washington, D.C. 20057-1051
rn62@georgetown.edu