

White performances of the “Hip Hop accent”

Sociolinguistic research has increasingly turned to examining the use of both the grammar and speech events of black speech by non-Blacks. This phenomenon called language crossing is defined as “the use of language varieties associated with social or ethnic groups that the speaker does not normally ‘belong’ to” (Rampton 1995:14). Although the literature has focused on phonological features, there has been very little research on the prosodic features used by language crossers. This paper seeks to partially fill this gap by examining the intonational patterns of white actors who voice film characters who at some point in the film can be characterized as “acting and/or sounding black”.

Most research has looked at language crossing in everyday interactional contexts (e.g. Bucholtz 1999, Chun 2001, Cutler 2003); however crossing is also common in popular film contexts when white actors use features associated with African American English (AAE). Many white actors use only the most saliently stereotypical elements of AAE and by doing so reinforce ideologies about AAE (Bucholtz 2007; Lopez 2008, 2009). Specifically, these examples of language crossing are often rooted in racial as well as gendered stereotypes since the linguistic elements used are characterized as black male speech. One such feature some white actors employ when using speech associated with Blacks is a falsetto register. This study looks at the intraspeaker variation in the speech of white comedians by examining films in which they play characters who at some point in the movie switch from the modal register of a white character to a falsetto voice for stylistic purposes. Although there are exceptions (Podesva 2007), most studies have investigated how voice quality patterns are distributed across speakers instead of intraspeaker variation patterns. Following Eckert (2008), this paper focuses on the social meaning of variation and examines this variable as a resource for constructing social meaning for the film characters that the actors are playing.

Previous research has shown that falsetto phonation is utilized in order to construct a diva persona and possibly a gay identity (Podesva 2007). By examining six films where the “Hip Hop” accent is used by six different white characters, I illustrate that this variable is used to construct a Hip Hop persona that is utilized in order to authenticate the characters as cool, masculine, physically capable, good dancers and authentic rappers. For example, Jamie Kennedy’s character B-rad uses the Hip Hop accent in the following exchange in order to authenticate his claim that he is truly a rapper and emphasize that the Hip Hop persona and linguistic features that come with it is his real identity.

(1) Malibu’s Most Wanted (Wigger please! scene)

B-rad:	[Hip Hop accent] I ain’t lying, I ain’t lying. I’m sorry ya’ll but this is who I am. I’m just a rapper, straight up.
Black males:	Wigger please!

As can be seen from the pitch drawings in the Appendix, the voice used during the Hip Hop accent is much higher and exaggerated than the one during the modal voice of the character. Analyzed in these pitch drawings is one of B-rad’s utterances taken from example 1 (*I’m just a rapper, straight up*, in Figure 1) and an utterance taken from a scene that occurred two scenes before the one in example 1 (*I don’t mean to offend you*, Figure 2). In the scene from Figure 2, B-rad uses his modal register when he is being threatened by two black males who are trying to “scare the black” out of him. The fact that the two are used in different contexts in order to create different personas indicates that this variable is being used stylistically and for this character has a social meaning related to hip hop. This use of the falsetto in order to create a Hip Hop persona contrasts with that of the diva persona found in Podesva’s (2007) study. This finding supports Eckert’s (2008) argument that “the meanings of variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings” (454).

Appendix

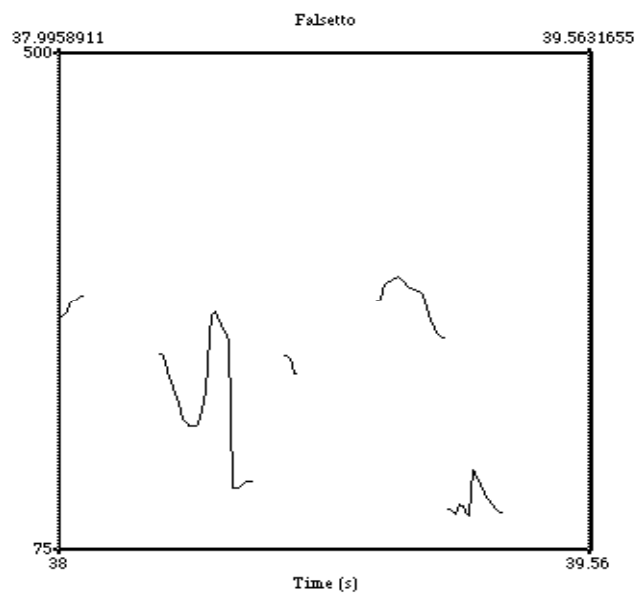


Figure 1. B-rad's utterance in Hip Hop accent. *I'm just a rapper, straight up.*

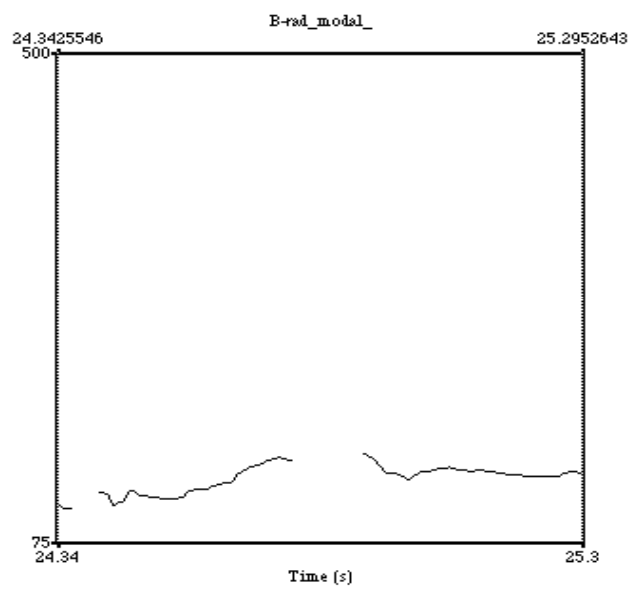


Figure 2. B-rad's utterance in modal voice. *I don't mean to offend you.*