

Golly Gee! The Construction of Middle Class White Characters in the Monologues of African American Comedians

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This research examines the work of comedians such as Richard Pryor, Adele Givens, and Eddie Murphy to uncover the ways in which African-American comedians manipulate features to construct middle-class establishment white [MEW] characters in their monologues. In constructing white characters, comedians exaggerate features, largely phonological, that index (Ochs, 1992: 335-346) qualities African-Americans associate with MEWs. The features receive emphasis through over-articulation of salient characteristics or through heavy repetition. The paper contrasts the construction of MEWs with the features that the same comedians use to construct African-American voices.

Data come from eleven comedic monologues in television and video concerts. The monologues are rich in phonological content and address significant social and ideological issues. The project uses qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the features comedians use in constructing white characters and contrasting them with African-American characters. It also compares the use of features across comedians, showing that some of the features occur consistently across comedians, while others are specific to particular comedians or characters. The features that comedians universally and consistently highlight are particularly salient as representations of perceived MEW characteristics. Other features may delineate specific characters or express mood or attitude.

Across comedians, MEW characters produce /ay/ in contrast with the monophthongal /a/ variant comedians use in their African-American voices. To emphasize perceived qualities of MEWs, in certain contexts the comedians employ strategies to produce an exaggerated /ay/. An extended post-vocalic /r/ is also in the core set of MEW features. This contrasts with an absence of post-vocalic /r/ in African-American speech. Word-initial /dh/ in MEW speech typically contrasts with the /d/ variant in AAVE.

The comedians place white characters into situations where their behavior reveals the political and ideological meanings that African-Americans associate with use of the phonological features the comedians emphasize. Monologues cast MEW characters as humorously naïve, corny, and slavishly conservative. By contrast, comedians typically portray African-American characters, who feel marginalized in MEW environments, as humanly and culturally rich.

According to (Preston, 1992: 351), attempting to elicit socially meaningful representations of whiteness through spontaneous imitations by African Americans is unreliable since, for a number of reasons, consultants may be unprepared to perform the task. This research reveals how comedians use salient features to create convincing personae in short chunks of temporal space. Though social meanings of features vary with social groups, responses from African-American audiences corroborate the validity for African-Americans of the features comedians use. Linguists have discussed the importance of AAVE to the social identity of African-American adolescents (Ogbu 1999; Baugh 2000: 6; Rickford and Rickford 2000: 223-229). Understanding the ideological meanings African-Americans attach to MEW speech adds another dimension in explaining the ambivalence of African-American students toward learning Standard English.

References

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