

## Martha Stewart's Style: Using Parody to Uncover Symbolic Meaning in Stylistic Language Use

Jennifer Sclafani  
Georgetown University

Models of stylistic (intraspeaker) language variation have evolved from early models of differential attention paid to speech (Labov 1966) to a focus on various interactional influences, including the speaker's audience (Bell 1984) and the speaker's own agentive construction of identity in interaction (Coupland 1980). In addition to utilizing casual speech from sociolinguistic interviews and other 'natural' speech data, sociolinguistics have investigated stylistic language use in overtly performative and self-conscious contexts (e.g., Schilling-Estes 1998).

Aside from considering *what* influences intraspeaker variation, another question that has received much attention lately in style research is how to attribute *meaning* to the use of specific linguistic features of style. The present study locates itself within this body of research as it attempts to investigate the symbolic meaning of linguistic style through the lens of parody, a particular type of linguistic performance in which speakers attempt to 'reveal the covert semiotic value of apparently unmotivated actions' (Morson 1989) through what Bakhtin (1981) has called 'varidirectional double-voicing'. As such, parody can be a useful tool in uncovering agentive and perceived symbolic meaning of linguistic features of style.

The analysis looks at two parodic sketches of lifestyle entrepreneur and talk show host Martha Stewart – one from the television show *Mad TV* and the other from *South Park* – and compares salient linguistic features used for comedic effect in relation to Stewart's actual observed linguistic behavior (Davies 2004) on her television show, *The Martha Stewart Show*. In particular, the analysis considers two phonological features (intervocalic and final /t/ fortition and British initial /h/ pronunciation), lexical features, politeness strategies, and voice quality. A comparative quantitative analysis of /t/ fortition as used by Stewart in her talk show and by her parodist on *Mad TV* demonstrates that a *variable* feature in Stewart's observed linguistic behavior is rendered as *categorical* in the parodic sketch. In addition, the analysis reveals that the parodies are seemingly scripted to showcase certain salient linguistic features, creating what Coupland (1996) has dubbed 'phono-opportunities' for exaggerating aspects of style to achieve specific communicative goals.

In response to the question of how analysts can properly attribute meaning to style, this study illustrates that parodic strategy is a means through which language users purposefully couple linguistic and extralinguistic devices which stand in ideological opposition to each other. In the case of Martha Stewart, stylistic elements associated with her 'Good Woman' image are exploited in order to expose the underlying 'Bad Woman' that Stewart actually is (especially in light of her 2003 insider trading conviction and imprisonment). Finally, the analysis presented confirms that linguistic features which linguists find salient and choose to analyze as stylistic devices are also salient to those who use, perceive, and manipulate them for authentic communicative purposes. It is suggested that the genre of parody can be of use to linguists who wish to uncover the complex associations between style, performance, and gendered language use.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by M. Holquist; translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bell, A. 1984. Language style as audience design. *Language in Society* 13: 145-204.
- Coupland, N. 1980. Style-shifting in a Cardiff work-setting. *Language in Society* 9: 1-12.
- Coupland, N. 1996. 'Hark, hark the lark': Multiple voicing in DJ talk. In D. Graddol, D. Leith and J. Swann (eds.) *English: History, Diversity and Change (The English Language, Past Present and Future, Book 3)*, p. 325-330. Milton Keynes and London: Open University and Routledge.
- Davies, C. 2004. 'Women's Language' and Martha Stewart: From a room of one's own to a house of one's own to a corporation of one's own. In M. Bucholtz (ed.), *Language and Woman's Place: Text and Commentaries*, p. 187-194. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Labov, W. 1966. *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Morson, G.S. 1989. Parody, history, and metaparody. In G.S. Morson and C. Emerson (eds.), *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*, p. 63-86. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Schilling-Estes, N. 1998. Investigating 'self-conscious' speech: The performance register in Ocracoke English. *Language in Society* 27: 53-83.