

Cross-Racial African American Vernacular English and White Masculinity in Hollywood Films

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Two recent strands of sociolinguistic research focus on how the linguistic representation of a particular language or dialect is also a social representation of its speakers: (1) the growing body of research on language crossing (Rampton 1995), which has identified the ways in which outgroup uses of an ingroup language variety may, among other functions, serve both to construct social difference and to impose negative evaluations on the group whose language has been appropriated (e.g., Hill 1993, 2001; Ronkin & Karn 1999); and (2) sociolinguistic studies of the use of minority languages and dialects in the entertainment media, and especially film, in which representations tend to be simultaneously linguistically inaccurate and socially stereotypical (e.g., Harper 2006; Lee 2006; Meek 2006). Yet thus far little research has considered how language crossing might itself be represented in media portrayals of minority varieties. The present paper examines a growing media phenomenon that combines language crossing and linguistic representation: the use of African American Vernacular English by European American characters in Hollywood films. Complementing previous research on the use of AAVE by European American speakers (e.g., Bucholtz; Cutler 1999; Sweetland 2002), the paper argues that white uses of AAVE in film perpetuate both language ideologies associated with AAVE and essentialist racialized and gendered stereotypes of blackness and whiteness.

The data are taken from 15 films mainly aimed at the youth market that were released between the mid-1990s and the present day, including comedies, dramas, and horror films, in which European American characters use elements of AAVE at least some of the time. The analysis examines the linguistic features of AAVE employed by European American speakers in these films as well as the semiotic functions to which the variety is put in creating characterization and plot. The paper demonstrates that the use of AAVE by white characters is nonfluent, stylized, and highly stereotypical, and generally involves the emblematic use of a few widely recognized phonological, prosodic, and grammatical features, as well as lexical items taken from African American youth culture, along with high levels of profanity.

The analysis further shows that this stylized representation of AAVE in such films is overwhelmingly associated with European American male characters and serves one of two main functions. Among white teenage and young adult male characters, stylized AAVE is used by “wiggers” (a derogatory term for white hip hop fans) and semiotically portrays this controversial youth identity as linguistically and culturally inauthentic. Somewhat paradoxically, when stylized AAVE is used by European American adult males, it serves as a tool whereby uptight European American adult males learn to forge emotional connections with others.

The paper argues that Hollywood’s representations of AAVE do not only reduce the linguistic complexity of the variety, as other researchers have shown, but, through nonfluent cross-racial use of stereotypical features of AAVE, perpetuate language ideologies of AAVE as symbolic of coolness, physicality, and authenticity. Such white uses of AAVE in Hollywood films reproduce racial and gender stereotypes and reinforce essentialized boundaries between linguistic and cultural groups.