

*"I'd better schedule an MRI": The linguistic construction of 'white' ethnicity*

A recent trend in the study of ethnicity has been the emergence of 'whiteness studies' within fields such as sociology and anthropology (e.g., Brander Rasmussen et al. 2001). Though there are decades of sociolinguistic research on language and minority ethnic groups, linguists and linguistic anthropologists are just beginning to explore the linguistic correlates of whiteness and the construction of ethnicity for members of a socially-dominant group. Trechter and Bucholtz note that "[i]deologically, whiteness is usually absence, not presence: the absence of culture and color" (2001:5). From the perspective of language variation, this raises the question of whether there is such a thing as a "white" way of speaking, or whether the linguistic construction of white ethnicity simply involves the absence of socially-marked features associated with other ethnicities.

This paper addresses that question by looking at the portrayals of white characters by comedians of color in the U.S. Precisely because the dominant group is often treated as "invisibly normal" (Hill 1998), stereotypes of white ethnicity may be more difficult to locate within the culture than those of minority ethnic groups. Since whiteness is much less likely to be invisible to members of other groups, comedians of color provide a convenient way of accessing these stereotypes. The stand-up routines of comedians from different ethnic backgrounds, mainly African-American or Latino, were examined to determine whether whiteness was presented as 'unmarked' (consisting of the absence of other variables) or as having certain linguistic correlates.

The preliminary results of the study showed that whiteness was not 'unmarked' for comedians of color. Rather, a consistent set of features recurred across the various routines, including the following:

- nasalized voice
- corny expressions/interjections: *oh goodness!*, *for Pete's sake!*
- frequent use of names by characters in addressing each other
- formal or technical language: *electrolytes*, *MRI*, *service*, *incline*
- higher pitch
- expressions of animated, happy affect: *third time's the charm!* *this is great!*
- hedges/intensifiers: *kinda*, *well*, *totally*

In addition, the portrayals of white characters fell into various subgroups. Some of these revolved around regional stereotypes (e.g. Valley Girls, Southern rednecks, etc.) while others focused on class stereotypes (e.g. doctors and other 'highly educated' professions).

The second part of the study adds a quantitative analysis of two specific features: 1) *r*-lessness and 2) the use of hedges and intensifiers in the portrayal of European-American characters versus characters of other ethnicities. If time permits, a brief study of the construction of white ethnicity by European-American comedians (such as Jeff Foxworthy) will also be included.

References:

- Brander Rasmussen, Birgit, et al. 2001. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*.  
Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Hill, Jane H. 1998 Language, race, and White public space. *American Anthropologist*  
100:680-689.
- Trechter, Sara & Mary Bucholtz. 2001. White noise: Bringing language into whiteness  
studies. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11:1.3-21.