MAINTAINING CLASS AND ETHNIC BORDERS IN A NORTH AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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1. Introduction[2]

Until recently, the anthropological "gaze of surveillance" within the racialized white/black binary fell almost exclusively upon African Americans (Fine, 1997: 64). Even if this gaze was motivated by liberal goodwill or radical praxis, its effects contributed rather disturbingly to the larger historical discursive process of making whites and whiteness natural, normal, central and unmarked[3]. Nowhere has this tendency been stronger than among linguists who continue to highlight the systematicity and richness of African American Vernacular English grammar in countering those who seek to legitimate the oppression of diasporic Africans based on linguistic differences. This same enlightening and liberating effort, however, has had the effect of fetishizing African-American interactional products (Smitherman-Donaldson, 1988; Morgan, 1994; Walters, 1995), as well as promoting the ideology that Englishes thought to be opposite of African American and vernacular (white and elite) are somehow more standard, normal, and central.

Recently the anthropological gaze has been redirected toward investigating whiteness, and how its unmarked status is re/produced and masked so as to attribute to it a timeless and natural centered status (Frankenberg, 1993; Fine *et al*., 1997). With some exceptions, however, these studies have tended to describe the discursive production of whiteness through large-scale social practices over longer stretches of time and place.

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Few of them focus on how whiteness is re/produced in face-to-face interaction through the most fleeting and easily overlooked linguistic details. Accordingly, this paper will show how several high school students identify a kind of rhetorical style, which I call "abstract/speculative inquiry", as white and elite through the parody of their teacher's speech. They do so by performing parodies of this inquiry with stylized pronunciations that in turn index white linguistic stereotypes among their interlocutors.

The primary data are transcripts based on audio- and videotaped classroom interaction during a year of fieldwork in a Washington, D.C. high school class (entitled "Street Law") intended to educate the (predominantly African American) students about citizen rights, law and legal procedure. The original study focused on African American teenagers' accommodation and resistance to "Standard English". The most interesting aspects of accomodation and resistance that I found in Street Law took place *not* among the well-described and understood morphosyntactic variables that linguists have used to differentiate "Standard" and "Vernacular" Englishes, but rather among discourse-level features. Indeed the teacher, himself an African American student fulfilling a community service requirement at his law school, was promoting a kind of style "regarded as more persuasive and worthy of being taken seriously (...) in [the] boardrooms of major corporations, or in the seminar rooms of major universities" (Erickson 1984: 83). This inquiry style privileges the exchange of abstract, speculative, and vicarious information in which speakers assume an "objective" stance in discussing situations where concrete people are either absent or abstracted. The teacher's efforts to promote abstract/speculative inquiry were often challenged by Street Law students who sought to conduct inquiry based on "real-world", concrete, empirically demonstrated, and personally experienced instances of human behavior related, preferably, in anecdotal form or what i call the "concrete/empirical style" (Erickson, 1969; Clark, 1995, 1998). Here I investigate some of these student challenges to the Street Law teacher's language promotion project. I argue that when the Street Law students invoke white, elite, and *un*black linguistic stereotypes at the same moment that they are resisting

[3] Although this situation holds in the national discursive domain, local domains within the United States where white hegemony cannot be taken for granted highlight the shifting, unstable meaning of the "marked/unmarked" distinction. See Hardigan (1999).

abstract/speculative inquiry, they, as a result, identify abstract/speculative inquiry as a white (and elite, and unblack) way of talking.

2. Abstract speculative and concrete/empirical inquiry

Users of abstract/speculative inquiry appear to pass themselves off as spokespersons for the "objective truth". They present themselves as reliable, honest brokers for their ideas by presenting a proposition as if it were independent of them, and therefore not polluted by their subjectivity. They achieve this godlike objectivity by typically leaving their personal selves out of the arguments they are presenting. In addition to removing themselves from their inquiry, abstract/speculative users extract other humans from their argumentation through such well-known linguistic processes as passivization and nominalization (Schatzman & Strauss, 1966; Fowler & Kress, 1979). Together these linguistic processes work to give interlocutors the impression that the ideas have "an objective life, existing independent of any person expressing them" (Kochman, 1981: 21).

The Street Law teacher, Len, models such objectivity for the students during a class discussion of obscenity in raunchy music videos and the United States constitution's protection of the freedom of speech (Example 1).

Example 1

39. Len: So Juan is they- are they obscene, should they be taken off, or are they not obscene and they should stay on, or--
40. Juan: Well, they doin' their *thing*. (*laughter*) They alright.
41. Aisha: They, they do anything they gotta do to sell their lives.

In initiating inquiry on whether raunchy rap videos should be considered protected speech under the U.S. Constitution, Len does not elicit the students' opinions on this or on the dancers' motives. Rather, he asks the class whether the videos partake of abstract, nominalized "obscenity". The processes of passivization (*be taken off*) and the lack of a human semantic experiencer for the predicate *obscene* (obscene to *whom*?) further drain Len's inquiry of human reference. Len's depopulated rhetoric contrasts with the students' response in lines 40 and 41, which rejects abstraction and focuses on relatively concrete human actors and their motivations.

My description of these two inquiry styles recalls, but is distinct from, Bernstein's (1971) distinction between (middle-class) elaborated code and (working-class) restricted code, which, read in the most infelicitous and overdeterministically Whorfian way, attributes elaborated and restricted *cognitive* capacities to the speakers of each code, respectively. It is important to note that the Street Law students are able to "do" both inquiry styles. Indeed, I will show that the students' ability to parody the abstract/speculative style entails a sufficient degree of competence to know which features to parody. Nevertheless, the Street Law students cannot "do" abstract/speculative inquiry as well as their law student teacher can. There is, in other words, a learning gap. The students, in turn, politicize this learning gap as a site of class and ethnic struggle.

3. Marking white

Mitchell-Kernan uses the term *marking* to describe the African-American speech event of a speaker's parodistic representation of another person's speech. Marking functions to attribute outgroup status to the person whose speech is so marked and, by extension, to the speech itself. Following Mitchell-Kernan (1974) and Morgan (1998), I define *marking white* as the verbal performance of linguistic and paralinguistic features (e.g., gestures) commonly recognized to be stereotypically white. The details of this representation are often as fleeting and subtle as a single, parodied sound, which nonetheless utters volumes of social meaning. In the examples below, I consider how the students exaggerate three such sounds to parody the white/elite style: the diphthong [ai], the vowel [i]**,** postvocalic [r], and prevocalic [l].

3.1. Exaggerated offglide diphthong [ai]

Example 2 shows how one Street Law student, Chanika, marks the author/ethnographer (me) as white in something as brief as a greeting. I had set up the camera and turned it on, pointing it in Chanika's direction. Then I left the room. During my absence, Chanika scowled at the camera and rudely saluted it with an extended middle finger. Moments later, I reentered the room and greeted her.

Example 2
John: How are you doin'?
Chanika: H[**ai**]. (1 sec) F[**ai**]n

Chanika pronounces these vowels quite differently than she usually does. She exaggerates the low back to high front diphthong [ai] so that the final [i] of the diphthong is higher and tenser than the way she would usually pronounce it (laxer, as [aɪ]). Chanika and I both have access to a linguistic stereotype (i.e., the destination of white /ai/ is higher, fronter and tenser than black /ai/) in order to index the social meaning. This stereotype has a normative basis: glide reduction of /ai/ ([ai-->a]) before voiced obstruents and finally is a well-attested phonological feature of Southern English and African American Vernacular English. Erickson (1987) and Giroux (1992) have described such moves as "border constructions", that is, the making salient of racial, ethnic, class and gender differences. Thus, Chanika marks me as white through this linguistic performance and through my understanding of its social meaning.

3.2. Exaggerated high, front, tense [i]

The following example shows an instance of students explicitly attributing white identity to Len, the African American teacher, in their reaction to a phrase he utters. During a discussion of defamation in class, I bring up an example of how a tabloid magazine claimed that a 97-year-old Arkansas woman was pregnant and ask how that might or might not constitute defamation. The teacher, Len, responds:

Example 3

484. Len:...but then she's also gonna have to prove, uh reputation damage too. If everybody thinks it's a joke hee hee ho ho funny, (*Chanika breaks into laughter*)
485. Len: (*chuckling*) [You know nobody could--
486. Lakesha: Oh he [said "h**ee** h**ee** ho ho funn**y**". A little white kid!
487. Chanika: [H**ee** h**ee** ho ho funn**y**
488. Len: [Nobody could really, you know get--(??)

Upon hearing the phrase *hee hee ho ho funny*, Chanika bursts into laughter. Lakesha then repeats this expression using a exaggeratedly high and tense pronunciation of the [i] sound in *hee* and *funny*. To top it off, Lakesha utters *a little white kid* immediately following her linguistic performance, explicitly steering the performance's interpretation among her interlocutors. Like Chanika in the previous example, Lakesha is marking Len as white. Unlike the previous example, the source of this outburst of linguistic lampoonery seems to have come from Len's use of the phrase *hee hee ho ho*

funny. What triggered Chanika's laughter? Was it solely Len's pronunciation of the /i/ tokens in the phrase? Perhaps the students find something humorously incongruous about an adult black man uttering a phrase they deem to be more becoming –as Lakesha points out– to a "little white kid". Attributing childishness and whiteness to Len's utterance may also indicate a kind of gender censure. What is significant is that Lakesha and Chanika grab onto the scant linguistic resource available (that is, the sound [i]) and mark whiteness in it.

3.3. Exaggerated [r]

The two previous examples have shown Street Law students marking the talk of the ethnographer and the teacher as white. I now turn to instances of students marking abstract/speculative inquiry itself as white. Examples 4a and 4b examples come from the same class as the previous example, in which the topic was "limitations of free speech". Len asks the class whether raunchy music videos are obscene, and therefore not protected speech. Akeem suggests that they have artistic value.

Example 4a

1. Len: Do they abide, to li[terary, a[r]tistic political or scientific value
2. Akeem: [No they dancin' they showin' a[r]t. It's a[r]t
3. Len: You know, so music video-dancin' is an a[rr]t.
4. Akeem: It's a a[r]t. They showin'
5. Chanika: (???) [at]
6. Aisha: I, I, I didn't know a[r]t supposed to be those--(005)

As in Example 1, Len uses the word *art*(*istic*) in a packed, abstract context, complete with the formal lexical item *abide* (turn 1). Various pronunciations of the /r/ phoneme emerge in this passage –from vocalized or zero to strongly pronounced [r]. This range of pronunciation is represented here by a three-way distinction:

vocalized (zero) [r]------->[at]
mildly pronounced [r]---->a[r]t
strongly pronounced [r] -->a[rr]t

Chanika's pronunciation of *art* (turn 5) is a vocalized or zero "r" in contrast to Len's moderate or heavy pronunciation of the "r". This is typical of both speakers' pronunciations of the sound in that environment. Later, the word comes up again.

Example 4b.

128. Len: So we got a, what uh, what do those videos express? Do you think they're expressing a valuable information or idea that need to get out there?
129. Manuel: It's music. It's just music, and it should be allowed to be expressed in any way. It's a[r]t.
130. Len: Okay. So you see it as a[r]t.
131. Chanika: **A[rrt^{h}]**
132. Len: What about Juan, he said it was fine what do you see it as?
133. Juan: I see it as [at].
134. Len: What kind of a[rr]t?
135. Juan: Nasty! (dancin'(?))
136. Lakesha: I see it as a crazy performance.
137. Len: Akeem
138. Akeem: Same thing, it's a[r]t.
139. Chanika: I don't, I don't know what kind of **[at]** it is, it's just something on television.
140. Lakesha: =Crazy, crazy.
141. Aisha: It shouldn't even be, considered, a[rr]t

Again, Len echoes an institutional and abstractly worded legal definition of "obscenity" in line 128. In fact, the phrase *valuable information or idea* comes directly from a written definition of obscenity that Len had distributed that day. Presumably, this wording is based on "official" legal texts as well. Manuel, in 129, continues the same stylistic key. Len then positively evaluates Manuel's contribution and his justification. At this point, Chanika, who is not a ratified interlocutor, at least in classic classroom discourse, utters the word *art* with a heavy, "hyper-rhotic" [r], and a clearly aspirated final [t].

However, Chanika's typical pronunciation of the "r" in *art* (and in medial and final positions) is zero, and final voiceless English stops in general are not released, let alone aspirated. Chanika's one-word utterance is potentially more than a light-hearted commentary on outgroup pronunciations of a sound. It is also a commentary on the raced and classed abstract/speculative talk that is going on. Regarding the former, Chanika highlights the [r] and [t] among her fellow interlocutors who have access to linguistic stereotypes that contrast white rhoticity with vernacular black r-lessness (see also Kiesling, 2001). Regarding the latter, Chanika's pronunciation of the final /t/ in *art* is highly exaggerated for *any* variety of English. She not only releases the air from an alveolar point of articulation instead of the more common unreleased glottal/alveolar co-articulation, but she powerfully aspirates the final consonant as well. This overly fussy

pronunciation indexes another linguistic stereotype among her interlocutors, which she described for me in a personal interview: that of the "uppity", upwardly striving, speaker who goes to great lengths to "speak correctly". Chanika's marking the word *art* serves to show that the talk that is now going on around her is foreign, alien.

3.4. Exaggerated [l]

Another example showing the Street Law students marking the abstract/speculative rhetorical style as white and outgroup comes after Len asks the students whether a sportscaster's description of an African American athlete as a "great, fast, wild jungle cat" should be considered an ethnic slur, and therefore an example of speech not protected by the U.S. Constitution.

Example 5

638. Len: So, so we're sayin'. So, does, does does it depend on your interpretation of what "great, fast wild jungle cats" mean?
639. Aisha: Yeah.
640. Len: You know, does it, is-are are, is he, is he com--is he comparing the
641. Len: [players to animals?=
642. Aisha: [=He could.]
643. Chanika: [If the man white, it's an ethnic]
644. Len: Or is[he sayin', or is he sayin' that you know, what if he's a cat
645. Chanika: [slur. If he black, it's fighting words]
646. Len: lover? What if he likes lions and tigers? He thinks they're very powerful, very quick.
647. Aisha: Oh, come on!
648. Len: What the [thing is what the thing is, we do, we do we do have a tendency]
649. Akeem: [Here goes the hypothetical questions.]
650. Chanika: [I don't think so **John** I]
651. Len: [to relate people to uh=]
652. Chanika: [mean uh= =Len. I don't think so **Len** .]
653. Lakesha: [=Len.]
654. Juan: [=Let's go with the black fan on the field.]

At 650, Chanika mistakenly calls Len "John", the name of the white ethnographer, (me). Chanika catches her slip, and as she begins to repair it, Lakesha conveniently reminds Chanika of the teacher's correct name. At 652, she performs the [l] in the word *Len* with a lengthened low, back and velar pronunciation, understood by her interlocutors (and many other North Americans) as part of a stereotypical white southern accent. In both instances, fleeting as they are, Chanika white-identifies the teacher in addressing him with the name of the white ethnographer as well as pronouncing his name

in a stereotypical (southern) white manner. Crucially, this happens in response to Len's posing of speculative inquiry in turn 646, which Akeem, remarkably, names explicitly in 649. Chanika's slip of the tongue and pronunciation in this context mark Len's abstract/speculative 'what if' inquiry as white.

4. Marking white, marking elite

In Street Law, as elsewhere, issues of race and class (as well as gender) are not easily separated. In fact, several instances of the students' lampooning of abstract/speculative inquiry cannot be called "marking white" without rendering the students' class border constructions invisible and/or reducible to their racial border constructions. Example 6 shows an instance of the Street Law students rather explicitly ridiculing the teacher's highly abstract framing of a discussion of Affirmative Action.

Example 6

614. Len: So so Jennifer, I'll ask you again, based on that example, you know, do you think that, do you think that Affirmative Action is working?
615. Jennifer: [Yes.]
616. Juan: [(??) (??) (??) question.
617. Len: Do you think it's a good thing to have?=
618. Lakesha: =I know! You should be, a a a a law professor.
619. Len: Who?
620. Lakesha: [You!]
621. Juan: [uh, heh, heh, heh]
622. Len: Why?
623. Lakesha: [Cause you ask so much, so much questions (*creaky voice*).]
624. Juan: [heh heh heh heh heh]
625. Juan: Uh heh heh heh]
626. Lakesha: And every time!
627. Chanika: ["Do you think that should wo**[rrk^{h}]**?"]
628. Len: Well how else are you [gonna work? how else are you gonna learn?]
629. Chanika: "Do you think this is wo**[rrkIN]** now
630. Lakesha: Every minute!
631. Chanika: "Do you think this is where it's gonna be?" (*laughs*)
632. Juan: ["How can it be--What can you do to make this possible"]
633. Lakesha: [Creating stories and everything.]
634. Akeem: [(??) backfire]
635. Chanika: ["How can it be—"]
636. Len: But but I'm but I'm sayin' let's say this is this this is this is a serious question. We, you know you live in America, you live in this society, you know. Do we, do we think that this is working? Is this, this is, for many of us this is a serious question. Do you think that it's working?

This example quite clearly shows the Street Law students commenting on abstract/speculative inquiry, both through marking, as well as in more explicit linguistic metacommentary. At 618 and 623 Lakesha expresses frustration with Len's inquiry style as well as explicitly describing and critiquing what he sounds like –"a law professor," "creating stories and everything". While Lakesha herself does not mock Len's inquiry in the imitative fashion that I call marking, Chanika (turns 629, 631, 635) does so with parodies of speculative questions. In addition to mocking Len's rhetorical inquiry, she accents these parodies with exaggerated postvocalic r's, a distinctly velarized {ING} suffix [ŋ], and an aspirated final stop (wor[kʰ]). The marking/mocking continues as Juan joins Chanika with questions that not only imitate Len's inquiry style, but also exaggerate it.

Elements of this commentary such as Chanika's exaggerated [r] mark white as I have described in previous examples. However**,** other elements of this group mockery such as aspirated [k], velar {ING}, and the parodistic recasts do not index shared cultural knowledge of white stereotypes as much as they mark Len's talk as outgroup along class lines. Most of the above linguistic elements used to display a mocking stance are *formal* and *hyperformal* rather than stereotypically white linguistic variants. Crucially, however, these less racially tinged variants appear alongside Chanika's hyper-rhotic white-marking, so as to implicate whiteness not only with abstract/speculative inquiry but also with formal and hyperformal language.

5. Conclusion

I have shown how a class of African American high school students mark the abstract, speculative rhetorical inquiry promoted by their teacher as white and elite. In doing so, I have shown how a prestigious, economically valuable way of talk "loses its color" and becomes white and elite in real-time, face-to-face interaction. With these parodies the students are drawing a cultural and political border, in effect saying, "This is not our kind of talk". The consequences of such border construction have been documented elsewhere (Delpit, 1995; Fordham, 1996; Urciuoli, 1996). Namely, the Street Law student who wishes to practice and become fluent in the kind of inquiry that

Len is promoting –and thereby gain a piece of economically valuable cultural capital– does so only at the risk of peer ostracization and censure, by talking like one of *Them* instead of one of *Us*.

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