RECONSIDERING AUTHENTICITY IN PARODIES OF U.S. POLITICIANS

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PANEL: THE PARODY OF POLITICS AND THE POLITICS OF PARODY

Introduction

- Work on parody typically emphasizes the social commentary conveyed through the parodist’s recontextualization of an original text, or the object of parody (Morson 1989, Coupland 2001, Hall 2005, Sclafani 2009).

- Linguistic Performances of Parody
  - Exaggerating Features
  - Approximating Features

Exaggerating Features

- Stylized variants of distinctive linguistic elements in the original speech of the parodied

Functions

- Key audience into the object of parody
- Enable parodists to ideologically distance themselves from the parodied (Bakhtin 1984, Morson 1989, Coupland 2001)
- Expose the object of parody as artificial or false (denaturalization in Bucholtz and Hall 2005)
  - Sclafani (2009): categorically released /t/s in parodies of Martha Stewart

Approximating Features

- Linguistic features that (do not embellish but) closely replicate the speech of the parodied

Function

- Renders the speech “authentic”
- Authenticity 1: attested and attestable language (Coupland 2003: 421)
- Enhancing the virtuosity (Mitchell-Kerman 1972, Chun 2007) of the parodist’s performance
Sarah Palin: The Katie Couric Interview

“…that Alaska has a very narrow maritime border between a foreign country, Russia, and on our other side, the land uh boundary that we have with uh Canada.”

Some Notable Features of Palin’s Speech

Purnell, Rainy, and Salmons (2009)

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Exaggerating Feature: (ow)

- Palin exhibits variation in the realization of (ow), producing both monophthongs and diphthongs.
- Her parodists nearly categorically produce monophthongs.

### Data

TINA FEY
SNL Parody of Couric Interview

NICOLE PARKER
MadTV Parody of a Palin Q&A Session

SARABENINCASA
YouTube Parody of a Fictional Palin Vlog

**Phonological**
- (ing) Alveolarization
  - lookin’ at poll numbers
  - takin’ shots from his own party
- (ow) Monophthongization
  - That has to be considered also.
  - …what John McCain will do on this proposal.
- (ae) Raising
  - He’s got the track record…
  - Who’s more apt to be just talkin’ about solutions

**Lexical/Discursive**
- Euphemisms
  - darn
  - heck
- Upper Midwestern Reductions
  - You Betcha
  - Gotcha
- Reference to “Common Man” Character Types
  - Hockey Mom
  - Joe Sixpack
- Maverick
  - He’s also known as the maverick, though…

### Exaggerating Feature: (ow)

- Palin exhibits variation in the realization of (ow), producing both monophthongs and diphthongs.
- Her parodists nearly categorically produce monophthongs.
Exaggerating Feature: (ae)

- Palin’s speech exhibits both raised and non-raised variants of (ae).
- Her parodists produce the stylized raised variant nearly categorically.

Tina Fey: SNL Parody

“…and putting Fannie and Freddie back on the right track. And so healthcare reform and reducing taxes and reining in spending because Barack Obama…”

Fey’s Exaggerating Feature? (ow)

- Fey uses slightly more monophthongal variants of (ow) than Palin.
- Fey produces more words that provide her with an opportunity for using monophthongal (ow) variants.
  - Palin: 3.7% [54 out of 1459 words have (ow)]
  - Fey: 6.4% [35 out of 545 words have (ow)]

Fey’s Approximating Feature: (ae)

- Fey’s production of raised variants of (ae) approximates Palin’s in different phonological environments (i.e. prenasal vs. nonprenasal).

Approximating?

- Slight difference between Palin and Fey not significant
- Unlike other two parodists, Fey exhibits variable patterns.
Fey’s Strategic Use of Raised (ae)

“And she started going like this, and she was just talking about ‘taxes’ and she just- she just got lost in that corn maze.”

Authenticity

- The resemblance between Palin’s speech and Fey’s rendition of Palin lends an “authenticity” to Fey’s performance, enhancing its entertainment value.
- Not “authentic” in any objective sense
  - Ideology of “the linguist as arbiter of authenticity” (Bucholtz 2003: 406-407)
  - Authenticity as the process of authentication (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 601)
  - Fey’s performance linguistically contrasts with Palin’s speech in other respects: monophthongal (ow) and alveolarization of (ing)

Unexploited Feature: (ing)

![Bar chart showing frequencies of -in and -ing in words like "Palin", "SNL", "MadTV", and "YouTube"]

Conclusion

- Fey uniquely packages a variety of types of features, marrying the absurd with the “authentic.”
  - Exaggerating: monophthongal (ow)
  - Does not exploit (ing)
  - Approximating: raised (ae)
- The notion of authenticity has been rightly problematized in sociolinguistics (Bucholtz 2003, Coupland 2003, Eckert 2003), but examining authentication as a process in parodic performances can be useful and necessary.
- The artfulness of parody arises from achieving a balance between the processes of authentication and denaturalization (Bucholtz and Hall 2005).
References