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Southern Speech and Self-Expression in an African-American Woman's Story

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In overviews of the current state of scholarship on Southern American English, both Guy Bailey and Michael Montgomery (this volume) encourage us to explore new modes of explanation for variability in the speech of particular southerners and among groups of southern speakers. Referring to work done by Bernstein (1993), Bailey points out that at most 27% of the phonological variability uncovered in his own large study of Texas speakers turned out to be accountable for with reference to the most commonly adduced social categories such as ethnicity, age, and gender. (Only 9% of the variability in one set of variables correlated with such social facts.) To understand the rest of the variability we must, Bailey urges, pay increased attention to new explanatory variables. Montgomery suggests what some of these variables might be, wondering about how southerners' uses of the markers of southern speech might be related to "the identity and purposes of Southerners and Northerners."

Several contributors to this volume explore, in one way or another, how the "identity and purposes" of southern speakers are connected with how they talk. Cukor-Avila shows how supplementing traditional sociolinguistic interviews with ethnographic techniques can lead to a deeper understanding of what it is about themselves and their relationships that people in a community use their linguistic resources to express. Davis uses ethnographic method, too, in exploring how adolescents understand what they do with language and how speech and setting are related. Johnson adduces cultural and psychological explanations for the persistence of lexical variation between town and country, when regional differences are disappearing. Preston examines the symbolic importance of southern speech, using various techniques to discover how people conceive of Southern ways of talking.

This essay is also about how "identity and purpose" help in understanding how southern linguistic resources are used in talk.[1] Part of my aim is also to illustrate how the particularistic focus of discourse analysis in the philological tradition helps clarify reasons for variation that can be blurred in work done from a more holistic, social-deterministic perspective. I suggest that some familiar ways of explaining why utterances and texts take the shapes they do result in incomplete explanations, because they take only the social into account and not the individual. My text is a bit of discourse I have been studying for some time: part of the life story of an African-American woman in her late 50s.

It should be clear from the fact that I am talking here about a single text that what I am reporting on is neither a quantitative study nor a study, except in its implications, of variation among different speakers or groups of speakers. My approach to linguistic variation is based in the close-reading techniques of discourse

analysis, or "the linguistics of the particular" (Becker 1984, 1988). Discourse analysts sometimes attempt to explain particular utterances and texts solely in terms of the social categories that have proven useful in understanding large-scale patterns of variation—class, gender, region, and so on. When we do this, we are failing to take advantage of what is precisely the main benefit of our research methodology and the main way our methodology can contribute to dialectology and quantitative sociolinguistics. This is the usefulness of discourse analysis for uncovering the mechanisms of variation among individual speakers and texts. In ways quantitative modes of analysis cannot, careful searches for patterns in particular texts and their correlations with purposes can help us understand the actual reasons why a particular person talks a particular way on a particular occasion.

THE STORY AND ITS AUTHOR

Mattie Blair[2] was born in Georgia; she spent her childhood there and her adulthood in Michigan, Indiana, and California. Blair told her story to me (a white woman then in my early 30s) several months before her death, from brain cancer, in 1985. She was then a patient in a church-sponsored convalescent home in Fort Wayne, Indiana. When the home's Activities Director asked what she would like to do with her time, Mrs. Blair said that she would like to tell her "story" and have someone write it down and publish it. She had led an interesting life, she said. Comparing her story to that of the author of the recently televised *Roots* series, she told me that what she had to tell was "as good as anything Alex Haley wrote about." I agreed to record Mrs. Blair's story. I listened to her talk about her life for ten or twelve hours during the summer of 1984, and I have been trying ever since to find ways to understand why she said what she did and why she said it the way she did.

It was clear to both Mrs. Blair and me that aspects of her history and her language had to do with her shaping by race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. She mentioned variations in skin color often in descriptions of people and made references to African-American ways of doing things. She was clearly aware of connections between language and ethnicity, too, stopping, for example, to explain African-American slang to me. She very often attributed troubles in her life to her being poor and female and, in her childhood, rural and southern. But it was also clear to both of us that Mrs. Blair's life, and her telling of it, were not generic. This was *her* story, not the story of a type, and she wanted it treated as a particular biography, not as a representative case study. In treating it that way—looking for Mattie Blair's particular reasons for saying what she did—I respect her wishes. I also become able to illuminate aspects of the language of the story that I would miss if I thought of the text simply as an example of African-American women's narrative, or of southern speech, or of the speech of the generation of the 1920s, or some other combination of demographic facts like these.

The moment I started the tape recorder on our first visit, Mrs. Blair began her story: "Well as you know, my name is Mattie Margaret Blair, born December the

20th, 1926, in Chester, Georgia." She insisted, especially during the first of our eight meetings, that her story not be interrupted except for relevant reasons. She sometimes referred to the story as a book and gave thought to possible titles. On the basis of the ten or twelve hours of tape I made, I could not provide a complete chronology of Mrs. Blair's life, but I could piece together most of it. "Sonny" is from the second of our sessions. The text is transcribed in lines corresponding to breath groups (Chafe 1980, 1987); line spaces separate episodes, which I discuss below. In addition to conventional punctuation, ellipses (of one or more periods) represent short silences; colons represent lengthened syllables. Parentheses enclose parts that I and many other listeners have been unable to figure out. My back-channeling and nonverbal noises are in angled brackets.

SONNY

Uh, he was an entertainer.
I met him at . . uh ( ) out there, at Fontana,
and uh, his name was Sonny.
And him and Doc became good friends.
5 And uh . . . Sonny was . . real nice.
He had a . . new car, first car I ever rode in had a record player in it, a tape
or whatever.
<Um-hm>
And him and Doc was very good friends.

So he has . . he eh, eh got, carried me someplace with him that day,
to the insurance company,
10 t– to to take out insurance on his car.
And while he was in there,
eh the man was out,
and he tore <(cough)> a bunch of checks out of the back of the checkbook,
insurance checks.
15 Well you know those type of checks,
it's checks like you can write 'em any amount, like you have an accident.
<uh-huh>

So uh, he goes around cashing checks, buying me, uh,
'cause I've always I'monna be truthful with you,
always been a clothes freak.
20 I l:ove pretty clothes, here I am blind.
And the first time he give me a piece of . a dress or something I bit it!
<Uh-huh>
You know, you know how you feel everything?, I don't know.
I said "Yeah, this is good material!"
And I used to be fond of Lili Ann suits.
25 But anyway, this Sonny cashed all of them checks,
and I found out about it,
that he had made about . . seven eight hundred dollars, they–

I don't never known that, I always been kind of a dummy, 'cause I was brought up that way, old *country* old dumb country girl.
If I hadda been brought up hip like the little city girls, I'd have some sense.
30 But I was raised down there in them cotton fields, you know I ain't had no sense, anybody could use me.
So he goes to work and uh cash them checks that day,
and he e– he showed me all this money.
And he carried me in the store,
and all I got out of it was he said . to cash another check,
35 (*I bought?*) all them groceries see.
And (*I just got?*) "Get anything you want. Get anything you want." [mimics whispered voice]
And I was putting that stuff in the, in the uh . . buggy,
and he just wrote this check and give it to the woman and she'd give him back the change.

And then uh, . . so he, I said "What are you . . ooo?"
40 And he had wa– a:ll that money.
And so he told me "Honey, you be doing that all today with me?"
And he said oh we'd buy, oh we would need to buy something, a little something, not too much,
and people'd give him back money, and he'd give them a piece of paper.
<Uh-huh>
And so I said "Ohh my God." [disbelieving semiwhisper]
45 And he said "Yeah, you didn't know I was a paper-hanger, baby?"
I said "What– who you hang paper for?"
I thought he meant hang paper on the walls!
<(laughter)>
I told you I wasn't nothing but a dumb– old *country*– ignorant Georgia girl.
<(cough)>
50 And he meant hang paper write checks.
And he said "Hey."
Said he was gonna go with me,
to this place, where he was gonna take me,
he– he'd give me some money.
55 I said "Uuu uh-hn, no:, uh-hn,"
I said "I ain't going no place with you."
And uh, he just caught me by the arm and pushed me and shoved me in the car,
said "Oh yeah, you're going."
And they told me . he was smoking marijuana, he was you know he was a dope addict.
60 And I said "No: uh-un."
So he taken me to this here here here motel,
and I crawled through the window and got out the window and run and went to the motel office.
And that's what saved me from him.

So, soon as I got back and could find Doc, I told Doc.

65 So Doc got his gun,
and went looking for his rump.
And when Doc– uh uh everybody told Doc,
say eh "I seen him. Oh he– I seen him over there."
He went to every big tavern in in in in in– San Bernardino.
70 Finally, we didn't find him so we went on home.

So he was so ignorant,
he (*goes to work?*) and gets in his pretty car,
and come over there and knock on my door,
on 30th Street, and say "Hey, I know that that old– that man of yours was looking for me."
75 And here Doc say "Yeah man, I sure was."
I didn't know he was look– listening, I thought he was in there watching television.
But he gon always peek to see who at the door, don't want nobody come in, think it's some man come looking for me.
And so Doc say "Yeah, man" say "I sure was looking for you." [mimics high whiny voice]
And he said "Well here I am, big man, what you want?"
80 And so Doc say he's "Aww, man."
And next thing I know *pumm*.
Shot him right through the head,
right there in my doorway.
And I said "Oh my God" my kids went to running went to hollering went to screaming,
85 I run and went to hollering, run across,
uh them old little stickers that (*put?*) in your feet,
and went to running went to run–
I told you about he hid in the church.
You know he hid in the church when he killed that boy.

90 So he went on to the penitentiary, and uh . . .
They had me accessory to the fact, but he pleaded guilty,
you know 'cause I didn't pull no trigger,
but you know they had to go through the whole procedure.

In what follows, I examine three aspects of the language of the "Sonny" story. For each of the three, I ask "Why did Mattie Blair do this rather than doing something else?" And each time I ask that question I provide two explanations, one having to do with the general social determinants of variation and one having to do with more individual, particular determinants. The three things I look at are

1) one element of the story's syntax: Mrs. Blair's use of negative concord and the negative auxiliary *ain't*,
2) one fact about the vocabulary in the story: her use of the verbs *take* and *carry*, and
3) the overall structure of the story: how it is divided into parts and how the parts fit together and flow into each other.

USES OF SOUTHERN SPEECH IN "SONNY"

Negative Concord and *Ain't*

Mattie Blair's speech is nonstandard in a number of ways. She uses verb forms such as *he taken*, *he cash*, and *he give* in the preterit; *them* as a demonstrative pronoun; the expression "him and Doc" instead of "Doc and he." She also employs negative concord, the repeated expression of negation throughout a negative clause. And she uses *ain't* to mean several things, among them the equivalent of *did not*, as, for example, in line 30: "But I was raised down there in them cotton fields, you know I ain't had no sense, anybody could use me."

Thinking about this fact from the *social* perspective, one explanation is clear: Blair uses double negation and *ain't* this way because she is relatively untrained in standard English; this has to do with social oppression related to being poor and African-American. This feature of Blair's speech could be used as an example of socially constrained variation.

But the social mode of explanation does not provide the whole picture. Thinking about Blair's nonstandard speech from the perspective of the *individual* provides an additional layer of understanding of her uses of *ain't*. The negation patterns which mark Mattie Blair's as nonstandard were part of her repertoire of linguistic resources, and she used socially marked, nonstandard forms variably as symbolic tools in the depiction of herself as a character in the story. Though negative concord is consistent throughout the story, and thus cannot be said to reflect the result of choice, Blair's use of *ain't* as an equivalent for *did not* in the first person singular is not consistent. Describing herself as an incompetent country girl, she used the lower-status form, "I ain't had no sense," in line 30. But describing herself as being in the right after the murder, she used a more standard form: in line 92, she said "you know 'cause I didn't pull no trigger" (instead of "I ain't pulled no trigger"). Blair's use of nonstandardness in the depiction of versions of herself results on one occasion in overreaching the mark, in the ungrammatical (that is, inconsistent with her own grammar), hyper-nonstandard form in line 28: "I don't never known that, I always been kind of a dummy."

Focusing on the individual speaker and the particular utterance here encourages us to think about creative use of resources rather than socially determined behavior and provides, in this case, a way of understanding inconsistency that makes more sense than most ways of understanding inconsistency (as performance error or free variation) in more holistically oriented sociolinguistics.

Take and *Carry*

Mattie Blair chose among two verbs, *take* and *carry*, where some speakers of English would have only one choice, *take*. In the Sonny story, *carry* seems to signify willing accompaniment: Sonny "carries" her to places she wants to go, as in line 8, "So he has . . he eh, eh got, *carried* me someplace with him that day," and in line 33, "And he *carried* me in the store" to pick out clothes and groceries. *Take*, on the other hand, appears when Mattie does not want to accompany Sonny. Sonny "takes" her to the motel, as in line 52,

51 Said he was gonna go with me,
52 to this place, where he was gonna *take* me,
53 he- he'd give me some money.

or in line 61, "So he *taken* me to this here here here motel."

Why did Mattie Blair use *take* and *carry* in these ways, and what did she mean by doing so? The obvious social explanation has to do with regional variation. *Carry* can mean, for speakers of southern varieties, something close to what *take* means: "to escort, accompany; to take, bring," according to the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cassidy 1985:550). Her knowledge of southern possibilities provided Blair with a way of creating meaning that someone who was not a southerner would have to create another way.

But the contrast Blair set up with her uses of *carry* and *take* between willing accompaniment and forced accompaniment is not one suggested by the *DARE* entry on *carry*. Blair had two choices available because she spoke a Southern variety, but what the two verbs mean in this story is a result of their juxtaposition in this story, which is tinged with but not solely a result of their meaning in the abstract. This is one approach to thinking about Blair's choices of *take* and *carry* from the perspective of the individual, and it results in our being reminded that the meanings of words a person chooses are not dictated by the variety he or she is speaking when choosing them. The variety provides resources, but the use of those resources is an individual matter.

We might also think about the meanings of *take* and *carry* in this story from the perspective of another individual, the original audience to the story. Except in listening to children and to people whose ways of speaking are very different from ours, we do not often hear true linguistic novelty: familiar forms being used for the very first time to express unfamiliar meanings, or brand-new forms or meanings. This is because most of the things we hear are not new and because our theories of language, both folk and scholarly, do not provide us with ways of incorporating newness. But I did notice something new when I listened to this story for the first time, in May 1984: it was the first time I had ever heard anybody use *carry* to mean anything like *take*. (At that time I was completely unfamiliar with Southern and African-American ways of talking, having lived only in nonindustrial university towns in the Northeast and Midwest.) So my decisions about the meanings of *take* and *carry* in the story and the contrast between them was the result of regional variation only in a negative way. To me, what Blair was doing sounded idiosyncratic, a creative choice made by her, entirely individual.[3]

Discourse Structure

The plot of Mattie Blair's story is the plot of tragedy. The story involves slowly but inexorably rising tension leading to a climax made inevitable by a tragic flaw in the protagonist's character: "ignorance," as Mrs. Blair would have called it, by which she meant not just lack of knowledge of certain facts, but an almost willful naiveté, an inability to deal quickly or smartly with the world.[4] The structure of the story reflects its plot. The outcome of Mrs. Blair's story seems inevitable. There are no clues about the ending before it happens and thus no reason to think about alternatives to it, so there seem at first to have been no options. Blair's long,