Features and Uses of Southern Style

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English in the Southern United States

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BARBARA JOHNSTONE

1 Introduction

In a local newspaper article covering his retirement as a longstanding member of the school board of Bryan, Texas, Travis Bryan, Jr., a banker and a descendent of the European Americans who founded the city, is described as “defy[ing] stereotypes, vacillating between being a hard-nosed businessman and a God-fearing southern gentleman who is prone to tears when he talks about ‘those little faces looking out of the school bus windows’” (Levey 1991: A1). To the writer of the article, a man like Bryan has to “vacillate” between acting like a businessman and being “God-fearing” and “prone to tears.” Acting like a “southern gentleman” is inconsistent with being “hard-nosed,” and the coexistence of the two ways of acting in one person’s repertoire is evidence that he is special.

Bryan “defies stereotypes,” however, only in a fairly stereotypical way. The article’s characterization exemplifies an image of what it takes to be a successful Southerner that is frequently adduced in popular discourse about southernness. According to this familiar trope, a person cannot be simultaneously “hard” in the way required for practical efficacy and “soft” in the southern way, so one has to alternate between the two styles. The ideal Southerner is someone who can make effective use of both, someone who can be “hard” (like a Northerner) for strategic reasons but whose more natural style is the “soft” southern one. To give just one familiar example from popular fiction, Scarlett O’Hara, protagonist of Gone With the Wind, is a successful Southerner of this kind (Mitchell 1936).

The example of Travis Bryan highlights the fact that not all Southerners talk alike and that most Southerners (probably all) have more than one way of talking. Sounding like a Southerner is not, in other words, an automatic and inevitable result of being from the South. Like people everywhere, each Southerner has a repertoire of available ways of being, acting, and sounding, styles which he or she can adapt (more or less consciously and more or less freely) to the situation and the communicative purpose at hand. For some Southerners as well as for some people from elsewhere, sounding southern is a set of sociolinguistic resources (including, though by no means limited to, the kinds of phonological resources...
outlined by George Dorrill in chapter 7 of this volume) which may be employed sometimes not at all and sometimes heavily. This chapter is about some of the linguistic aspects of styles of speaking and interacting that are alluded to in descriptions of white Southerners such as Travis Bryan, Jr., and Scarlett O'Hara. First I describe a few of the specific linguistic features which have been observed in the speech of some Southerners (and in literary and other representations of southern speech). Then I talk about some of the things people may accomplish by adopting features of southern style.

Southern white men and women have long been characterized as using language differently from others, interacting differently, and having different attitudes toward language. The characterizations have varied somewhat over time. Thomas Jefferson described Southerners (by “Southerners” he meant white southern men) as “hot-headed, indolent, unstable, and unjust” (McWhiney 1988: xiii). By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the idea that Southerners were more polite, more easygoing, less direct in speech than Yankees, and more verbose and more eloquent seems to have become a regular feature of discourse about them, by outsiders and insiders. This idea structures much discourse about Southerners, whether the Southerners in question are from the coastal or the mountain South and whether they are men or women. Travelers from the North in the mid-nineteenth century noted that Southerners had “softer” manners and that they were franker and more cheerful than Northerners, more courteous and courtly (McWhiney 1988: 109). In the early 1930s, Florida novelist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings described the speech of “crackers” as “soft as velvet, low as the rush of running branch water” (Burkett 1978: 60). In the fictionalized voice of Bill Clinton, contemporary Arkansas novelist Bobbie Ann Mason comments on the northern tendency to “call a bull a bull.” She has “Clinton” claim that “in the South, we have an expression for people who do that. We say, ‘He’s a person who says what he thinks.’ And it’s not necessarily a compliment. What you call ‘waffling’ is just good manners back home” (Mason 1993: 90). Southerners’ love of talk, both informal small talk and formal oratory, is also often mentioned. In a letter to Malcolm Cowley, William Faulkner claimed that the “gentle folk” of the antebellum South “really did nothing: they slept or talked. They talked too much, I think. Oratory was the first art” (Ross 1989: 188). Reminiscing about her southern childhood, Shirley Abbott (Abbott 1983: 164–5) remembers “the goodbye ritual” which could take up to three hours.

Linguistic research about regional variation in discourse structure and style is still fairly sparse. By “discourse structure” I mean the grammar of units larger than sentences and the closely related issue of cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976), as well as discourse-marking strategies (Schiffrin 1987) by which speakers show, as they produce talk or writing, how it is to be interpreted. “Discourse style” consists of typical choices for expressing linguistic politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) in general and for performing specific speech acts: requesting, persuading, narrating, and so on. Tannen (1981, 1984) shows how the interactional style of New York Jews is characterized by such features as the tendency to tolerate only very brief pauses in conversation and to ask rapid-fire personal questions to demonstrate friendly solidarity. Reissman (1988) talks about Puerto Rican women’s narratives, and Johnstone (1990a, b) describes how white midwesterners construct and use stories, contrasting this population with the urban northeasterners studied by Polanyi (1985) and others.

More directly relevant to the topic of southern style is the fairly extensive body of scholarship about the discourse style of African Americans, beginning with work by Abrahams (1962, 1976), Kochman (1972), and Mitchell-Kernan (1972) on such speech events as signifying, hooah Alexandria, and styling out. Kochman (1981) describes African Americans’ speech styles in aggressive talk, boasting, flirting, and handling accusations and personal information. Labov (1972a) compares lower- and middle-class African Americans’ expository style and discusses teenage boys’ personal narratives. Eeter-Lewis (1993) discusses life stories of professional women. Erikson (1984) describes the structure of boys’ conversations, and Gumperz (1982: 187–203) analyzes African-American political oratory. Heath (1983) contrasts language socialization practices in a working-class African-American neighborhood with those in a similar white neighborhood, describing differences in such things as how caregivers use questions and how children are encouraged to construct and perform narratives. It should be noted that all these studies except those of Abrahams and Heath are about northern, urban African Americans.

Whatever the particulars of the history of African-American varieties of American English and the details of the interactions between African Americans and European Americans in the South, it is clear that there has always been mutual influence. Certain aspects of southern whites’ styles are similar to aspects of African-American styles. For example, Feagin (1997) suggests that the use of certain intonation patterns and of the falsetto register by southern whites can be traced to African-American influence. In this chapter, however, I focus on white Southerners, primarily because relatively little has been written about discourse-level features of southern white Americans’ speech despite decades of descriptions of southern phonology, vocabulary, and grammar (cf. McMillan and Montgomery 1989). In what follows, I sketch the work that has been done on discourse styles and strategies of European-American Southerners and suggest some of the many directions in which future research could go. First I describe studies of particular features of southern discourse. These include features that can be associated with what may be characterized as southern interactional requirements, such as forms of address, greetings, indirectness, and other politeness phenomena; features associated with the southern folk poetic tradition such as oratorical style and parable-like narrative; and patterns of language socialization that may be connected to characteristically southern beliefs about language. Then I turn to a discussion of some of the uses to which southern style can be put, summarizing some recent work on how Texas women make strategic use of ways of sounding and interacting associated with southernness.
2 Interactional style: deferential politeness

2.1 Greetings and forms of address

Many of the features of southern style which have been remarked on have to do with how interpersonal relations are indexed and negotiated in conversation. Southerners' elaborate civility has been noted over and over, in popular and scholarly representations. Among the earliest studies of southern style is that of Spears (1974) on southern folk greetings and responses, which, as other observers have also more informally noted, are more elaborate and obligatory than greetings elsewhere. In a study of expressions of local solidarity in New Orleans, Coles (1997) found that the use of local-sounding greetings was the strategy adopted most often by telephone callers who wanted to display their identification with radio talk-show hosts and a veterinary-clinic receptionist.

Coles also describes the use of particularly New Orleans-sounding forms of address as a solidarity-building move: darling, doll, and babe are examples. While these particular items are characteristic of New Orleans rather than the South as a whole, forms of address in general are described over and over as being different and more significant in the South than elsewhere. Sir and ma'am are among the most frequently mentioned of the forms of address with particularly southern uses. The use of sir and ma'am to one's parents, for example, as a required element of the answer to a yes/no question, is widespread in the South and not elsewhere, as is the use of sir or ma'am to peers or younger people. On the basis of observation, interviews, and questionnaires, Ching (1988) concluded that the central function of the southern sir and ma'am was to express deference, but that there were other uses too: emphasis, and, among younger peers and when used to someone younger than the speaker, to express friendly solidarity. Simpkins (1969) notes that the same speaker may be addressed in different ways depending on which aspects of his or her social identity are relevant at the moment. In a study of the uses of ma'am and sir in the screenplay (by Horton Foote) and film (directed by Sterling Van Wagenen) The Trip to Bountiful, Davies (1997) combined discourse analysis and a "playback" phase in which she asked Southerners to comment on the meanings of these address terms while watching clips of the film. Like Ching, she found that the core meaning was the expression of deferential politeness, or "negative" politeness in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms: the creation and maintenance of culturally appropriate social distance between speakers, so that potential impositions on others' autonomy are avoided. In addition, Davies shows that shifts in the intonation accompanying the use of sir or ma'am can serve to foreground other aspects of the social relationship between speaker and hearer, so that, for example, a shift to a flatter intonation contour can index a shift to a less formal relationship. Ma'am and sir can also be used for emphasis, when the answer to a question is, for example, surprising or particularly significant. The conventional deferential meaning of sir or ma'am can, in some uses, be completely overridden, as when one of these forms is used sarcastically or in the course of a conversational negotiation for power.

Sir and ma'am are just two of a wide variety of address forms used by Southerners to index and manipulate social relations. In his childhood autobiography (Crews 1978), Georgia novelist Harry Crews describes a powerful feeling of connection with other generations of his family when he noticed that he was saying yes, sir to his uncle and being addressed by his uncle as son, just as his uncle addressed his own mother as ma'am and was addressed as son (1978: 164–5). Here is part of the conversation Crews re-creates, as the narrator, his grandmother, and his Uncle Alton operate on a rooster's claw:

"Cut a little deeper in there, son," said grandma.
"Yes, ma'am," said Uncle Alton. "Son, git that turpentine swab right here."
"Yes, sir."
"Clean it down in the corner, Alton."
"Yes, ma'am," said Uncle Alton. "Son, I got the needle started, but I can't git the end of it. See if you can."
"Yes, sir," I said. (Crews 1978: 165)

In Crews' novel Body (1990), characters use a wide variety of address forms (Johnstone 1992, 1994). To older people and to strangers to whom they want to display respect, Crews' characters use ma'am or sir and Mr., Miss, or Missus first name, as in "Mr. Alphonse, sir, I have come to ask for you daughter's hand in marriage" (Crews 1990: 200). As did Crews' uncle, older men use son to younger men or boys, as well as old son, boy, and bud; men address women they know as girl and as child. Women call men honey, old honey, and old thing. Many uses of these address forms, particularly to elders, display a sort of ritual deference, but other uses can help to diffuse tension by putting the speaker's deferential attitude on display at a key moment. Among peers, terms like old son and girl can signal closeness and solidarity, but other uses, particularly of terms such as bud and son, appear in bids for dominance or threats of belligerence, as in this response to a challenge to "talk right": "I come from the same part of the country you do, old son," said Billy Bat, shifting on his heels. 'I'll talk any damn way I please!' " (Crews 1990: 209–10).

2.2 Conditional syntax and indirectness

Crews' characters in Body also express negative politeness via a range of strategies for linguistic indirectness, rarely expressing a proposition in such a way as to take full responsibility for it or impose their view of the world on others. One of the most frequent strategies for indirectness involves the use of conditional syntax. Full if-then constructions, as well as conditional clauses alone, can be used to hedge assertions, as in examples (1) and (2):
I ain’t got a thing if I ain’t got time.
(2) Damned if yellah [yellow] weren’t always my favorite thing in the world.

Conditional syntax also appears in requests, as in (3) and (4):
(3) I guess you could step out and git some toothpicks and a carton of camel cigarettes, if you a mind to.
(4) If you be good enough to take the newness off it, I believe I could stand me a taste.

In (5) and (6), conditional syntax mitigates a suggestion:
(5) I wouldn’t look for’m to show up if I was you.
(6) I’d think that whiskey’d be a trifle hot.

In (7) conditional syntax is part of a more forceful suggestion, and in (8) and (9) conditional syntax appears in threats:
(7) You gone [gonna] marry into the Turnipseed family, you gone have to learn not to be a asshole.
(8) You do and you can make you a pallet on the floor.
(9) There’ll be trouble if you can’t learn to keep a civil tongue about my family.

Conditional syntax creates distance between the hearer and the claim or action which is conventionally performed by what he or she is saying. It can thus serve to mitigate impositions, serving, like forms of address, to express negative, deferential politeness. By the same token, however, the use of conditional syntax reflects characters’ heightened awareness of the social distinctions that make politeness necessary, so it often occurs at socially tense moments in the story.

2.3 Evidentiality

Crews’ characters’ utterances often include predicates such as believe, reckon, think, guess, have the feeling, and so on: superordinate “evidential” predicates which indicate how the knowledge asserted or interrogated in the embedded clause was acquired or how certain it is (Chafe and Nichols 1986). For example, in (10), the evidential clause I believe embeds the assertion “you already said that once.” Other examples are in (11)–(13).

(10) You already said that once: I believe.
(11) I wouldn’t want to guess, but I have the feeling we’ll know soon enough.
(12) You reckon we ought to get help?
(13) I don’t believe I’ve ever known one.

Reckon is the most common evidential predicate in the novel in questions, believe or don’t believe in assertions.

Evidentials are required in many genres of discourse, and they are not, of course, exclusively southern (although the verb reckon and the expression I don’t believe with a sentential complement may be more common in traditional southern speech than elsewhere). But their frequency and their specific function in these southern characters’ speech is distinctive (Johnstone 1992; Johnstone 1994). This is in part because only two of the hundreds of evidentials in the novel express the speaker’s complete security in his knowledge: “One thing’s for sure, he can’t last much longer like he is,” and “Now I know that is right for a dead solid fact.” Evidentials are overwhelmingly in the negative (I don’t believe, I don’t misdoubt, I don’t guess, I can’t say as, I don’t know as), and/or conditional (I wouldn’t know about, I’d say), and when they are not, the semantics of the predicates expresses insecurity (think, believe, have the feeling, strike someone as, expect, seem, make x to be, look to be). In other words, the evidential predicates almost always have the effect of hedging assertions and allowing respondents to hedge theirs. Characters say what they believe to be true and describe how things seem to be rather than telling what they know and how things are. Like conditionals, evidentials can leave space between speakers and the meaning of their utterances. By hedging assertions, evidentials protect speakers from the social embarrassment that would result if the assertion turned out to be false. They are also deferential. Speakers who hedge assertions avoid imposing their version of the world on others. Hedged assertions are not, literally, claims about how the world is, but only claims about how the speaker sees it.

2.4 Reasons for southern civility

Other strategies for the expression of deferential politeness in Crews’ Body include speaking at a higher level of generality than might be expected if the Gricean cooperative maxims were all that mattered, as well as the frequent use of conventional formulas such as “I don’t mean to pry” before requests for information and “I wish” to introduce requests for action, and the phrasing of some requests as questions. These strategies also help to mitigate possible threats to a person’s need to be treated as autonomous and not imposed on. The use of question intonation in assertions, which McLemore (1991) calls “uptalk,” has also been identified as southern, and particularly characteristic of the discourse style of young women (Ching 1982; McLemore 1991), although it appears to have spread rapidly in the US since these studies in Tennessee and Texas were done. Mitigating the directness of an assertion is among the functions of this feature, too.

Deferential negative politeness (as opposed to friendly expressions of “positive” solidarity) is especially important when there are potential threats to negative face—when it is especially likely that people might offend or bother one another. This means that negative politeness can be used either to avoid offense or to display the fact that offense is likely—in other words, to threaten. This is why it is possible for “If I was you, I don’t know as I’d. . . .” to serve, depending on the context of its utterance, either as a deferential suggestion or as a warning of potential violence. Southern politeness has in fact often been linked, in popular accounts, with the threat of violence. In a popular-press book, for example,
McKern (1979) describes southern culture as “a tradition that routinely pairs civility and violence.” A nineteenth-century English woman, writing about a trip through Texas and the Gulf States, describes the use of polite address forms in confrontational discourse (McWhiney 1988: 163):

[Ex]pected in a dispute, however violent may be the discussion, the courtesy of the “sir” is never omitted. On the contrary it is repeated at every third word, and mixed up as it is with oaths and denunciations, with which they always interlard their discourse, the effect is curious enough.

McWhiney (1988) attributes the tendency toward violence among southern male “crackers” or “rednecks” to their Celtic heritage. People often attribute a tendency to violence to people whom they perceive as different and less “civilized,” however. Thus explanations such as these cannot be taken at face value. The only thing we can be sure of is that the presence of the kinds of elaborate deferential politeness we have seen indicates the need for them. The kind of Southerner whose style is characterized in the studies summarized in this section is one for whom social boundaries are significant and personal autonomy must be maintained. Deferential negative politeness provides ways of renegotiating boundaries and reclaiming autonomy in every interaction.

3 Southern verbal artistry

Southerners have often been characterized as particularly artistic with language, skilled in speechmaking, preaching, storytelling, and writing. Many of the most canonical figures in American literature are or were from the South. It would be impossible in the space of this chapter to review all the research there is about the literary style of southern authors, and studies of southern verbal artistry in non-literary contexts are sparse and do not by any means cover the territory. I will touch in this section on just two areas: oratory and storytelling.

3.1 Oratory

Ross (1989: 185–233) talks about southern oratory in the context of an exploration of the sources of William Faulkner’s style. (Another study of southern oratory is Braden 1983.) According to Ross, “oratory was deeply embedded in the South’s ideology, as a ‘style’, yes, but also as a way of establishing and enforcing relationships among people, as a way of critiquing and commemorating assumed values, as a way of gaining and maintaining power” (1989: 188).

The memorization of passages from famous classical orations and the study of elocution and declamation were key elements in the education of young white southern gentlemen. Before the Civil War, oratory was the principal vehicle of political discourse (often at large picnics and “oratorical feasts”), journalism and other printed material playing a much smaller role than they did in the northern states. After the war, when the South’s political power was at an ebb, public oratory became less deliberative and more ceremonial, functioning to buttress cultural values and for entertainment, as orators were more likely than before to be speaking to people who already agreed with them. Post-Civil War southern oratory was “a ritualistic, discursive performance, a celebration not only of the participants’ values, but also...a celebration of the language in which those values were couched” (Ross 1989: 192). Interestingly, Ross points to a connection between oratory and violence, pointing out that southern demagogues sometimes expressed domination not only through vocal eloquence but also through gesture and were sometimes “known to carry their messages physically into the audience” (1989: 195).

Ross contrasts the “colloquial” oratorical style of the South with classical Ciceroian speech-making, which was more pre-planned and hence structurally more balanced and rounded, both on the sentence level and on the level of the speech as a whole. Southern orators needing to hold an audience’s attention, sometimes for hours, had to cultivate ways of adding and improvising as they spoke. One of these, according to Ross (1989: 198–202), was amplification, a set of techniques for adding to phrases or sentences at points where they might otherwise end. This could be done by appending appositive phrases, relative clauses, and other elements, or via anaphora, the repetition of the beginning of the previous phrase as a way of starting a new, parallel one. We see a variety of amplification techniques in use in this excerpt from a speech by a Senator Morgan (1900: 5) in support of the coinage of silver. Ross discusses this passage on page 199; I have expanded the analysis somewhat, lining up examples of anaphora and underlining successive examples of appended material.

Another leading reason why I have so earnestly favored the full and free coinage of silver is that it is gathered by the toil of man in the deep and dangerous mines;

it is converted into coin by the highest art of the chemist;

it is the gift of God, who made silver and gold alone for use as money in their functions of real value, and

it is the reward in money, not in promises to pay, of the laborer; the reward of each day's work when the night shuts in.

It is the fruit of the pick and the shovel, and it is not the product of some artful brain in a bank parlor that is busy with contrivances to deceive the world into the belief

that his credit is better for the people than this gift from heaven, and

that his wisdom has made a back number of the omniscience of God.

Another rhetorical trope used in the service of amplification is expeditio, or the rejection of all but the last of a set of alternatives, as in this excerpt from a speech by Benjamin H. Hill (1909–13: 176), which I have again reformatted somewhat:

Immediately after the close of the late war a gentleman of northern birth, raising, and education, one who had been a brave and faithful soldier with
the northern army throughout the war, came to make his home in the South. 
He did not come to rob us in our helpless condition.
He did not come to boast over the humiliation of our defeat.
He did not come to breed strife between the races for the purpose of office and power.
He came as a citizen, as a gentleman, as a patriot, to identify himself with us and with ours.

Amplification can also be achieved via the use of balanced compounds, pairs of synonyms or words of closely related meaning connected with and such as energy and animation, idleness and wantonness, or evil and remorse. (This figure of speech is sometimes called “hendiads.”) Ross points out (1989: 202) that Faulkner sometimes made creative use of this technique, using pairs of words that contrast in a surprising way, such as “tranquil and astonished” or “wild and reposed.”

The style of southern oratory was sometimes not unlike that of a family of related speech genres employed in church settings. Orator Gene Talmdge of Georgia, for example (Ross 1989: 194), was described as using the “call and response” technique of revivalist preaching to draw his audience in. In the contemporary South, highly developed interactive oratorical style is associated both with the African-American church and with some fundamentalist white denominations. Titon (1988), for example, describes how the pastor and the members of a Baptist church in the Virginia Appalachians compose prayers and sermons on the spot, using various kinds of pre-formed phrases and structures, and Clements (1974) describes the rhetoric of Pentecostal radio sermons in northeast Arkansas.

4 Narrative
One of the religious speech genres Titon describes is the offering of personal “testimony” (1988: 359–407). This occurred in the church Titon studied at a set time during worship services, when the pastor invited members of the congregation to testify or “witness” about “what the Lord’s done for you” (1988: 360). Such testimonials sometimes included personal reminiscences, as congregation members recounted youthful or recent events and told how they were “saved” from error through God’s intervention. In her work comparing the roles of language and literacy in two working-class communities in the Piedmont Carolinas, Heath (1983) suggests that children in the white community were trained to tell personal narratives in somewhat the same way in secular contexts, too. In “Roadville,” as Heath calls the white neighborhood, narratives of personal experience were meant to be “a piece of truth” with a moral. “Stories” were not to be fanciful and were to make some point about error on the part of the teller and a lesson learned. For example, a story taken up as appropriate in a conversation among a group of women is one about how a recipe failed because the cook had interrupted herself to gossip on the telephone. Its moral, expressed as the story-ending “coda” (Labov and Waletzky 1977), is “Guess I’ll learn to keep my mind on my own business and off other folks’” (Heath 1983: 152). The story is told without exaggeration, highlights a personal weakness on the part of the narrator, and ends with an implicit warning, in this case about gossip, an activity which in this community is publicly disapproved (though nonetheless sometimes practiced). It is, Heath points out, like a parable, depending on analogy for its interpretation (1983: 154–5). Children’s narratives are guided by adults into this mold; making up fictional tales about personal experience is not accepted and is referred to as lying.

In all these respects, Roadville storytelling contrasts with narrative practices in “Tracton,” the African-American community Heath studied, where highly fanciful, entertaining stories are explicitly encouraged. “Expressive lying” is, of course, part of the repertoire of some white Southerners as well. Bauman (1986: 11–32), for example, describes the uses of exaggeration and untruth in stories told by white Texas dog traders at a county fair. Bauman does not focus on what, if anything, is particularly southern about this practice, claiming instead that this sort of storytelling is widespread in the American folk tradition. The difference between the moralizing storytellers of Roadville and the comic liars of Canton, Texas, has to do, at root, with differences in language ideology (Schiefelin, Woolard and Krostitky 1998), or people’s beliefs about what language is, what it is for, and what its roles in their lives should be. People in Roadville, according to Heath, are literalists, believing that there is a single correct word for each object and a single correct way of recounting each event. For them, language is not a resource for play or humor.

The contrast between the Southerners Heath studied and those Bauman studied underlines, once again, the fact that there is not just one southern style of discourse, because there is not just one style of Southerner or set of southern beliefs, attitudes, and purposes. Although the South’s historical reliance on the spoken word rather than print in political and social life may have encouraged verbal artistry in some situations, the reliance on written text (scripture) in fundamentalist religious belief may encourage literalness in other situations. The underlying explanations for southern style have to do not with region per se (Southerners do not use language as they do because they are Southerners), but with particular facts about history, belief, social structure, and communicative purpose which may vary from group to group, person to person, and situation to situation.

5 Uses of southern style
To illustrate the variety of things “sounding southern” can consist of and accomplish, let us now turn to a set of brief case studies that illustrate some of the variety of ways in which women from Texas orient to and use southern-sounding speech. Historically, economically, and culturally, Texas is both a southern state and a western one. Many Anglo-Texan settlers came from the coastal or mountain South, bringing their plantation or small-farming economy and their southern or
south midland ways of talking with them. White Texans owned slaves and fought
on the side of the pro-slavery southern confederacy in the Civil War of the 1860s,
and the post-Civil War history of Texas was like that of other southern states.

Anglo-Texans tend to think of themselves primarily as Texans and Americans,
and as Southerners only incidentally. Southern speech is part of white Texans' sociolinguistic world, however, whether or not they identify themselves in the first instance as Southerners. People talk, sometimes out of a vaguely nostalgic wishfulness and sometimes for very specific strategic purposes, about "Texas speech," but it is obvious to most Texans that Anglo-Texans who sound stereotypically like Texans also sound like Southerners. While there are phonological features that are notably rarer (postvocalic \-ness, for example) or more common (monophthongal /a/ before voiceless obstruents) than in southern speech elsewhere (cf. Bailey 1991), the features Texans tend to think of as particularly Texan (such as the use of y'all) are actually pan-southern, and people who feel that they have "an accent" are aware that it sounds southern in some ways. Anglo-Texans, particularly those from the eastern part of the state, can say they are not Southerners, but many of their forebears were from the South, and sometimes, some of them sound like Southerners. Anglo-Texans thus have to deal with southernness in a way others do not, and, for some, southernness can function as a strategic resource.

The idealized Southerner who was the focus of traditional regional dialectology - rural, non-mobile, older, with limited contact with information or people from elsewhere - is a person for whom sounding southern could not serve any strategic function, because she would have no other way of sounding. For such speakers, sounding southern would be invariable and automatic. Because sounding and acting southern would not contrast with any other way of sounding and acting, it could not be a rhetorical (or, in Gumperz’s (1982) terms “metaphorical”) resource. Such speakers probably do not really exist, since none is completely monostylistic, but there are certainly Texas women for whom southern style in discourse is relatively invariable and automatic.

One such speaker is Sophie Austin. She was born in the early 1920s and was seventy when she was interviewed as part of a study of Texas women’s speech (Bean 1993; Johnstone 1995, 1998, 1999; Johnstone and Bean 1997). She is a retired journalist, now active in historic preservation in the small east Texas town where she lives. Miss Sophie (as she would be addressed there) thinks of herself as combining western directness with southern indirectness: "We can be direct, but [we] know how to couch [what we say] with courtesy and consideration. We took that [southern] gentility and we blended it" with ways of acting encouraged by "the expanse of Texas," “freedom,” and “the outdoors.” Texans are “windchesty” (they have opinions about things and “have a way of getting to the point”), she says, but, raised as a “lady,” she has always felt it important to be, or to orient to expectation that she be, “retiring.” McLeod-Porter (1992) describes some of the ways Miss Sophie's interactive style illustrates this blend of regionally marked ways of talking, with particular reference to her uses of indirectness, euphemism, and literary-sounding metaphor in samples of her speech and writing.

Miss Sophie's southern-sounding speech features were acquired during a childhood in a relatively homogeneous, isolated setting. It makes sense to attribute the fact that Miss Sophie sounds southern at least in part to the fact that she is from east Texas, where most people she was exposed to was a child sounded and acted southern. This is to say that there were, in her youth, relatively few other models for how to sound and act, or at least relatively few models she would have been able to adopt. Furthermore, Miss Sophie’s education encouraged her to adopt a style that was both expressive of gentility in a traditionally white southern way and relatively invariant. Being “ladylike,” stressed especially at home, required the former. As Miss Sophie put it, “I knew that when I was with Mother, I was to be like Mother, which was quiet and dignified.” She learned in school that there was one “correct” way to be, act, and speak, and that eloquence and expressiveness required consistency, encouraged invariance. Miss Sophie's education took place well before teachers and curricula began to suggest the possible acceptability of strategic adoption of various ways of talking, and Miss Sophie is very explicit about her belief that "Standard English" is the way to talk and that “slang,” which is her term for any nonstandard way of speaking, is an indication of “vulgarity.”

Although Miss Sophie probably sometimes sounds southern simply because it is her default way of sounding, her professional life has included situations in which she is aware that sounding like a southern lady has been strategically useful. For example, as they discussed a recent TV interview, McLeod-Porter (1992) asked her to comment on her “very quiet, low-keyed style.” Miss Sophie commented, “You choose your strategies for what’s ahead of you, right?” and claimed she could “act as well as anyone.” A more direct, less “retiring” and less southern-sounding way of talking would be more appropriate if she were asking for money for a project, for example: “I would be very direct. I’m here to do so and so, matter of fact, business-like, right?”

The kind of speaker who is best captured in variationist sociolinguistic research is one like Tracy Rudder, a college student who was twenty years old when she was interviewed, born in the early 1970s (about fifty years after Miss Sophie). Her use of southern-sounding speech is more variable and is related to her private, “vernacular” identity rather than her public identity. She switches toward southern-sounding forms relatively unconsciously when the situation is right. Accommodation theory (Giles and Powsland 1975) probably accounts for her behavior well. Here she talks about sounding southern with her friends, but less in more academic contexts:

I probably feel most natural when I’m with my friends. I mean, the ugly truth is that I’m becoming more and more educated. How is it possible to read Hemingway and turn around and talk like an inbred backwoods redneck? My friends know I’m southern – so are they, though. That’s okay. I just wouldn’t want them to think I was some backwoods redneck or that I’m just some big funnel that my culture and education are running through. . . . We kind of keep a check on each other.
Unlike Miss Sophie, Tracy is oriented here to what is stigmatized about southern-sounding speech as well as to what may be rhetorically effective about it. "Sounding country" is clearly desirable in some contexts, for some purposes (Johnstone 1998). Some students in Texas high schools and universities adopt southern-sounding ways of talking (together with other markers of ruralness such as stylized cowboy dress, country music and dancing, and pick-up trucks) to express their allegiance to traditional "small-town" values, whether or not they actually come from small towns. But Tracy's set of attitudes about her variety (it is not an educated way of sounding, but it is appropriate with friends, who understand its uses) is also very common, and probably more typical of people of her generation than of people of Miss Sophie's. Southern speech was less known and recognized outside the South in Miss Sophie's day than it is now, due in part to large-scale migrations of Southerners to the West during the 1930s and to the North after World War II, and to the increasing visibility of Southerners in national politics and the media. Southern-sounding speech is thus probably more stigmatized now, by outsiders and Southerners alike, than it was earlier. Migration of people from elsewhere into Texas during several oil booms has created an enhanced need for an "in-group" way of talking by which people who consider themselves "real" Texans can identify themselves to and with each other. Bailey (1991) shows, for example, that certain phonological and lexical features associated with sounding like a Texan are increasing in use with the need for Texans to distinguish themselves from northern in-migrants.

Orienting to southernness somewhat differently, Janet Wilson claims not to use southern-sounding speech ("I think I've probably tried to minimize it"), not so much because she thinks it sounds uneducated as because she thinks it sounds rural. Having spent most of her life in Houston, she thinks of herself as urban and identifies southern style with the country. ("You have to be urban, you know, and not get the accent going"). But in the course of a summer workshop in a northern state, Wilson (a middle-aged teacher and truant officer, born in the early 1950s) realizes that her southern sound is "there, no matter what." One form she uses, 'y' all, comes to index her as a Southerner, which becomes obvious to her when the Northerners hail her as "y'all." "Y'all is "just a very southern thing," Wilson says, thinking back about the experience, "that I wasn't aware of." So while her initial answer to our question "Is there some value... in sounding like you're from Texas?" is "No," talking through the Rhode Island experience makes her realize that she likes the "familiarity" associated with that way of being seen.

Janet Wilson: When I was in Rhode Island I realized you cyou know, it's it's there
Delma McLeod-Porter: Umm
JW: no matter what.
DP: Is there some value (when you're somewhere else) of sounding like you're from Texas?

In Janet Wilson's case, a nearly invariant southern feature becomes an index in a new way, coming to identify her as a Southerner and with a relaxed, practical way of using language. Wilson's use of y'all before her encounter with the Northerners was fairly automatic, but afterwards she could (and may) have used y'all as a strategic way of displaying her southernness for rhetorical and self-expressive ends, to accomplish interactional goals that sounding southern might help with and to show who she is and how she wants to be seen.

Terri King is a telephone salesperson in her twenties whose "southern drawl makes [her] $70,000 a year," in her words. In selling mailing lists over the telephone, she finds the strategy of switching into a southern-sounding way of talking and interacting to be particularly useful with men. As she puts it, "It's hilarious how these businessmen turn to gravy when they hear it. I get some of the rudest, most callous men on the phone, and I start talkin' to them in a mellow southern drawl, I slow their heart rate down and I can sell them a list in a heart-beat" (Stevens 1996: E1). King's use of southern discourse features represents a more fully stylized (Rampton 1999) use of southern-sounding speech. She draws
on one specific model for southern femininity, the model of the “southern belle.” The southern belle as a literary type is of course most famously represented in Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel—and the subsequent movie—Gone with the Wind; a description of this female type that gets used over and over is “an iron fist in a velvet glove.” As Shirley Abbott (1983) explains it, this image of the wealthy white southern lady—the plantation mistress, physically delicate but mentally tough, tenderly concerned with the well-being of the slaves and fiercely devoted to her family—served in part to make slavery appear palatable or even desirable. It is part of what Tindall (1980: 162) refers to as “the romantic plantation myth of gentility.” Abbott suggests that one reason for the image’s survival after the Civil War is that it involves a set of “managerial techniques” that can be effective (1983: 106). The belle acts helpless, dependent, dumb, and passive to get a man, over whom she exerts control through his weakness, by virtue of the fact that she can forgive him. Abbott herself, who is from the South, “grew up believing . . . that a woman might pose as garrulous and talky and silly and dotty, but at heart she was a steely, silent creature, with secrets no man could ever know, and she was always—always—stronger than any man” (1983: 3). Texas women talk about sounding like a southern belle in similar ways, claiming that it is particularly useful as part of a sexually charged manipulative strategy.

When asked to show how southern belles talk, people often adopt higher-than-usual pitch, a wider-than-usual intonation range, and exaggerated facial and hand gestures, in addition to trying to sound polite, tentative, loquacious, and cute. Monophthongal /ai/, at least in all the pronouns / and my, is almost invariably part of the performance, even for speakers who find the variant difficult to produce. King claims that her “southern drawl” can be turned on and off as needed. “Turning on the southern charm” in this way is something many southern women, not just Texans, talk about doing, claim they do, and can be heard to do. It should be noted, of course, that the same speakers can make various uses of southern-sounding speech. King may well sound southern in other contexts too, for other reasons, including ones such as those discussed above.

These examples illustrate just four points on a continuum of ways in which southern discourse style can function for women in Texas, from the relatively automatic to the quite consciously strategic. Each of these women draws on somewhat different aspects of southern style in her bid “to sound southern.” The resources of southerness are available to these women because of where they are from: they have heard people sounding like Southerners all their lives and can do so themselves in native-sounding ways, and, because they are in some ways members of the core group to whom southern speech “belongs” (namely, people who were born and/or grew up in the south), they are capable of adopting southern style without its seeming parodic or “inauthentic” for them to do so. Yet their uses of southern discourse features are in some ways performances, just as are anyone else’s uses of southern discourse features. Being southern and sounding southern are, for those who have access to them, resources for the “performance of self” (cf. Goffman 1959; Johnstone 1996), sometimes in general (Miss Sophie’s sense of self requires her to be “ladylike,” for example) and sometimes for very specific, fleeting purposes (such as selling a business service to a man who wants you to flirt, or getting a particular loan from Daddy).

6 Needed research

As the preceding overview makes clear, there is still a great deal of room for research about southern discourse styles and strategies. And it continues to be important that this work be done, because some Southerners continue to orient to language and use language differently from people elsewhere, and some people from elsewhere continue to draw on stereotyped notions of what southern speech means as they evaluate and interact with Southerners and the South. There are many aspects of discourse which have been studied in other contexts but never explicitly in connection with southern speech. For example, there are features connected with how sentences combine into paragraphs and paragraph-like spoken units, such as patterns of cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976). There are features connected with how people coordinate the activity of talk, such as topic introduction and topic shift (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), conversational repair (Jefferson 1974), or discourse marking (Schiffrin 1987). There are features connected with verbal artistry, such as the use of the formulaic comparisons that are so often caricatured in popular representations of southern speech (“lower than a snake’s belly,” “slower than a crippled turtle,” “rich as cream gravy on Sunday”), as well as other kinds of figurative language. There are features connected with interactional style: when and how, for example, is the dominant mode of interaction solidarity-building “positive” politeness rather than the deferential negative politeness described above? What are southern greetings like, and how do they differ from greetings elsewhere? There are other speech events as well which may be characteristically southern and would repay study in the framework of the ethnography of communication.

Most of the studies I have drawn on in this chapter have been based on literary texts, and although these have all been chosen, in part, because they were thought to represent southern discourse well and interestingly, the sample of discourse with which discourse analysts have worked is not representative of the range of ways in which Southerners use language. It would be interesting to focus, in future research, on other sorts of examples: transcripts of conversation, for example, or non-literary prose. Doing this would be likely to draw out the range of variation in talk and writing in the South, both within and among speakers, and to highlight the contexts in which sounding southern is neutral or detrimental to the task at hand and those in which sounding southern is a useful resource. In the latter kind of situation, it would be interesting to see how people style southern speech: which features get highlighted as indices that a person means to sound southern, and what sounding southern can conventionally mean. I have explored some of the things it can mean to women to sound southern; what, for example, can it mean for men? When Southerners “cross” (Rampton 1995)
into other ways of sounding, what can be thereby accomplished? What can it accomplish for non-Southerners to sound southern? Choices about sounding and acting southern have, for example, played a key strategic role in several recent US presidential campaigns, and country western music relies heavily on southern imagery and on representations of southern ways of talking.

As the South becomes less and less isolated from other parts of the US and more and more similar in economy and mass culture, the topic of language change becomes interesting in new ways. Just as one can ask what happens to regional phonology in the face of dialect contact, one can wonder what happens to regional styles of interacting and speech events thought of as regional. Leveling of differences and the eventual obsolescence of non-dominant varieties is of course one possibility. But social theory suggests that one reaction to globalization may be to attempt to reorient to local identity. Cultural geographers recognize the continued persistence and importance of traditional sources of meaning such as localness (Entrickin 1991: 41). Evidence of the continued value of localism can be seen in activities that are aimed at perpetuating it, or even creating it. Localness can, for one thing, become a commodity, which gives rise to competitions over the control of what localness means or over its uses. What it means to be “here” or “from here” can, for example, be the site of arguments about how local economic development should proceed (e.g. Cox and Mair 1988), and we are all familiar with advertising that makes strategic use of nostalgia for neighborhood, local community, or region (cf. Sack 1988). Local contexts of life may still be tied to human identity in more immediate ways, too. As Stuart Hall points out (1991: 33–6), globalization is not, after all, a new phenomenon, and “the return to the local is often a response to globalization...It is a respect for local roots which is brought to bear against the anonymous, impersonal world of the globalized forces which we do not understand.” In the South, renewed orientation to regional identity in the face of homogenizing pressures may play out linguistically in various ways. Guy Bailey (1991), in Texas and Oklahoma, and Michael Montgomery (1993b) in the Southeast, have shown, for example, that certain features can become symbols of local identity and then be preserved and even spread in the face of in-migration from elsewhere. It will be interesting to see whether, and if so how, the more global features of southern discourse which have been considered in this chapter are preserved in the face of pressures on Southerners to act more like people from elsewhere.

Notes

1. This section is adapted from Johnstone (1999), which examines strategic uses of southern discourse style in the context of theories of “language crossing” (Rampton 1995) and “styling” (Rampton 1999; Hill 1999).

2. Even a hypothetical monostylistic speaker of a southern-sounding variety could be taken by others to be using it strategically – to be acting southern rather than just being southern. Someone who unintentionally puts on a show simply by acting the only way they know how to act is a potential source of humor, and southern characters often have this role in fiction and film and on television. (Forrest Gump, in the film of the same name, is one example.)

3. Miss Sophie would certainly have interacted throughout her life with many African Americans as well as with Anglo-Americans like herself. As far as pronunciation goes, southern blacks and whites of Miss Sophie’s generation are difficult to distinguish (Haley 1990). But there are differences in interactional style. Due to the racism and social hierarchy of the day (and to a considerable extent of this day, too), Miss Sophie would, however, have found it inconceivable to adopt features of African-American interactional style in public contexts. Thus, while African-American speech ways were arguably more available to Miss Sophie than they are to contemporary Anglo-American teenagers like the ones studied by Cutler (1996, 1999) and Bucholtz (1997), they were less likely to become useful expressive resources for her, thus less likely to be adopted. “Contact” in the sense of mere contiguity does not necessarily imply influence, unless people have a use for the other variety they are exposed to.