'Sounding country' in urbanizing Texas: Private speech in public discourse

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'Sounding Country' in Urbanizing Texas: Private Speech in Public Discourse

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1. INTRODUCTION

The connection between rural life and rural-sounding speech in Texas was once fairly simple: people "sounded country," to use the local expression, because they were from the country. Communicative isolation caused by relatively low mobility and limited education meant that linguistic innovations were slow to diffuse outward from urban centers. While it is still the case that phonological innovations begin in Texas' cities (Bailey 1991), the situation is now more complex in other ways. Being and sounding "country" is less and less a matter of demography and more and more a matter of identity. It has become a resource that can be used in the process of self-creation through talk. This paper explores one way this can work.

Increasingly, Texas’ boots-and-hat-wearing, truck-driving cowboys and cowgirls are suburbanites who learned to dance the two-step in a high school gym class, and more and more of the state's small, once-isolated towns and rural ranches are populated by

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1 This is a paper I presented at the Southeastern Conference on Linguistics in March, 1996. I am very grateful to Judith Mattson Bean for her many contributions to the project this paper is part of, including the Linda Davis interview. Bean and I intend eventually to make a revised version of this essay into part of a chapter in a book about how Texas women draw on the sociolinguistic resources available to them to fashion ways of acting, talking, and being. When we do this, we will combine this with work about how and why Davis "sounds country" on the level of phonology, and we will add depth to it: more facts, for example, about Texas' demography, a more detailed discussion of the uses of "public" and "private" in social and linguistic research, perhaps a more ethnographic look at Grapeland. There is a lot of research about country music that bears, directly or tangentially, on this topic as well. Though this will not be part of the book, it would also be interesting at some point to apply the set of analytical tools I develop in this paper to the rhetoric of conservative political groups like the religious right or the family values movement.
Michigan Discussions in Anthropology

weekenders from Houston and Dallas. In fact, according to 1990 census figures, more than 80 percent of Texas' population lives in metropolitan areas and only 1.1 percent on farms or ranches. This situation has not, however, led to linguistic homogenization. Guy Bailey (1991) has shown for several phonetic and phonological facts that older, Southern forms have survived and are in fact expanding in use in Texas. Bailey attributes this in part to the post-World War II influx of outsiders into the state, which led native Texans to seek out ways to express their Texanness. Texas' shift in the 1970s and '80s from an agriculture and oil-based economy to a service-industry economy and from a predominantly rural population to a predominantly urban one has had an analogous linguistic effect. Rural speech forms have become resources to exploit in rejecting the cultural homogeneity of the white middle-class suburbs and proclaiming one's sympathy with traditional rural attributes such as political conservatism, religiousness, and "family values."

One of the resources Texas speakers and writers draw on to express ruralness is the interanimation of public forms of talk with private ones. An example of this can be seen in a front-page news story from a small-town newspaper (Grapeland Messenger, October 31, 1991, P. 1).

Rash of Burglaries Plagues Community

Three local businesses were burglarized during the past week and reports of some home burglaries have city and county law officials looking for clues and culprits.

Nelda Johnson's Grapeland Flower & Gift Shop and Fashions was entered sometime during the night Thursday. The illegal entry was made through the back door and Mrs. Johnson said she missed some clothing and jewelry.

Early Sunday morning, the office of Grapeland Propane and Fuel Company was broken into through the back entryway. A small amount of petty cash was stolen in that incident and the store's safe sustained major damage. The safe's handle was broken off and it took a locksmith some 4 hours to get it open.

Then early Tuesday morning, Grapeland Fuel's service station on Market Street was burglarized. This time, the thief or thieves broke through the front glass to make their entry. A framed dollar bill, some cigarettes, drinks and canned goods were taken.

Whether the theft is large or small, the trouble and expense of these break-ins is mounting for victim merchants. For Grapeland Fuel's Barbara Ferles, this is the third break-in since the opening of her new station. Glass replacement alone costs several hundred dollars.

The local burglary problem is expected to be a major item on the business agenda during the November 12th meeting of the Grapeland City Council.

For the most part, the article presents news in a conventionally report-like, topically-cohesive format (van Dijk 1986). But bits of language associated with other modes of discourse crop up here and there, too. Note, for example, the playful expression "clues and culprits" at the end of the first paragraph, reminiscent of the name of a TV show or a game. In the next line, note the redundant identification of the location of the first burglary: Grapeland Flower & Gift Shop and Fashions is fully specified by its name,
since there is only one such establishment, but its owner's name appears too. This gives the paragraph a slightly gossipy tone. The fourth paragraph of the article begins with then, a marker of episodic breaks that is more often heard in spontaneous narrative than in expository writing, and the fifth paragraph departs from the journalistic norm of neutral objectivity, sounding more like the moral of a story than a summary of the news: "Whether the theft is large or small, the trouble and expense of these break-ins is mounting for victim merchants." In the next section, I lay the theoretical foundations for the analysis of this and other instances of interanimated public and private discourse.

2. PUBLIC TALK AND PRIVATE TALK

The term "public" has been used in connection with discourse in various ways. It would be well to review them here, so as to settle what I mean by "public" and "private" forms of talk.

1) Publicness can be defined by setting. This is the closest to the everyday understanding of the adjectival meaning of "public" as in "public speaking"; speaking that is done in a public setting, in an auditorium, for example, as opposed to a front porch, a classroom as opposed to a living room. This use of the term calls attention to aspects of delivery that enhance the probability of communication in large settings: careful diction; pacing; dramatic uses of intonation; gesture; references to large audiences like "ladies and gentlemen."

2) Publicness can be defined by audience. Public speech in this sense is speech to non-familiars, people with whom the speaker does not share knowledge in the domain in question. This is something like what Wallace Chafe (1982) means by "detached," and Basil Bernstein (1970) by "elaborated." Speech to non-intimates is characterized, it is often observed, by linguistic features associated with the written word in its prototypical Western sense; it is like what Walter Ong (1982) and many others mean by "literate" or "written-like." Public discourse in this sense, precisely because of the audience, is relatively formal, relatively impersonal, relatively neutral in affect, relatively serious and referential in focus. Linguistically speaking, it is syntactically complex. Relationships among propositions are explicit, and thematic relations within propositions fully marked. Private discourse, on the other hand, is "involved"; "restricted"; "oral." It is more informal, more personal, more evaluative, more playful, more likely to be narrative. Its syntax is more spoken-like, relying on simpler, earlier-learned morphosyntax to mark relations among and within propositions (Ochs 1979).

3) Publicness can be examined as a cultural construct, via the Goffmanesque complex of possible speaking/writing voices of author, animator, and principal, or, in the Foucaultian sense, as a complex of unexamined "naturalized" ideas about who has these roles in particular contexts. This approach is particularly useful in elucidating the meaning of "public" as in "public opinion" or the noun "the public." Public discourse in this sense is, for Westerners, discourse often authored and animated by journalists, but
reflecting the sentiments of "the public" as principal. Thus public discourse is understood as being anonymous, disengaged, not the expression of any particular individual’s opinion, but rather of the opinion of the people. This conceptualization of "the public" is associated with Jürgen Habermas [1989(1962)]; see also Warner 1990. Public discourse in this sense contrasts with the discourse of the state and with the discourse of individuals. The emergence of this sort of public discourse has been encouraged by certain intellectual and political developments, such as the Enlitement and the development of republican politics. In a collection of essays on various ways languages and groups of language-users ("publics") are constructed and legitimated in discourse, Gal and Woolard (1995:135) point out that "the notion of public" in this sense "need not even rely on the idea of a concrete readership or spectatorship, but rather on the projection or imagination of groups or subjectivities in print or other mass media."

The terms "public" and "private" are also used in this sense in everyday talk. My mother, for example, once wrote me two letters which she mailed together; one was labelled "private as opposed to accompanying business letter." "This is private" means "this is just between us"; "not for public consumption" labels not only certain kinds of information but certain ways of using and evaluating information. "Private" talk can index powerlessness, but, as Deborah Tannen points out (1986a), what indexes powerlessness often also indexes solidarity: it can be a sign of trust and liking to be in someone’s private confidence.

I use "public" and "private" in this paper in a way that reflects the fact that these three ways of defining the term are interrelated. "Public" discourse is the way one talks to people who one assumes share relatively little knowledge. Because little is shared, more has to be made explicit linguistically. Originally functional in this public context, linguistic explicitness can come to index a way of talking that positions the speaker and his or her interlocutors as non-familiars. "Private" discourse, on the other hand, begins as talk that is functionally adapted to situations in which much is shared, and so this discourse can come to index intimacy even in other contexts.

There are several reasons to be interested in connections between public and private discourse. As has been clear at least since Labov began discussing the "observer’s paradox" (Labov, 1972, pp. 61-62, 209ff.), we can never observe or describe talk that isn’t somewhat between the two. All talk is to some extent private and to some extent public, anyway: even talk to oneself (with whom one presumably shares most context), is often conceived as having an external audience of one sort or another. Talk meant for large audiences is usually talk that is relatively "performed" (Bauman 1977), calling particular attention to itself and its animator. The standard sociolinguistic theory of the "vernacular" reaches us that people’s real speech is best captured when they are least likely to be performing, but a sociolinguistics interested in the full range of speakers’ competences might focus precisely on performance (Johnstone and Bean 1997).

In an article on "folk formality," Tannen describes a variety of discourse types that mix typically private with typically public features:

"Folk formality" and its converse, "formal folksiness," are not just a result of relative incompetence. As Jane Hill points out, new ways of meaning are created in these "leakages" between public and private. Hill shows, for example, how uses of Spanish expressions like "numero uno" in public discourse in English can serve as cryptic claims to dominance. This paper explores Hill’s suggestion that:

what is most important about the public/private distinction in the United States today is not the zones of life clearly included within each category, but the play of meaning along the ambiguous boundary between them, especially between kinds of talk defined as 'public' and those defined as 'private'" (1995:197).

3. MORE EXAMPLES FROM THE GRAPELAND MESSENGER

We look now at a few more examples of how private forms can crop up in public speech. We begin with some more discourse that really is rural: articles from the small-town newspaper quoted from earlier. We then examine public relations material produced by and for Linda Davis, a country-western singer and lyricist. Davis lives in Nashville and sends her newsletter to widely scattered strangers, but she uses the language of intimates to suggest her identification with rural life and values.

Grapeland is in Houston County, in rural East Texas. It is a farming community with a population of about 1,800. The main crop nowadays is peanuts, though grapes were once important. East Texas was settled by Southern planters, who brought slaves and the plantation system of farming with them, and this part of the state continues even now to be Southern in ways other parts are not.

The newspaper serving Grapeland and smaller towns in Houston County is the weekly Grapeland Messenger, published in Grapeland. We have already examined a report that appeared in the Messenger on October 31, 1991 about a "rash of burglaries" in the community. The next issue of the paper contained the only other story about the burglaries (Grapeland Messenger, November 9, 1991, p. 1).
Arrests made in recent burglaries
Citizens Begin Plans For Crime Stoppers

Grapeland citizens are uniting in an effort to stop the increasing incidents of local crime...and to discourage anyone with criminal intent from stopping here.

Arrests were made last week which are expected to clear up a number of burglaries and a recent robbery here, but the frequent and aggravating incidents prompted a community meeting Tuesday night to look into initiating a local crime prevention or crime watch program. An excellent representation of interested community citizens attended the meeting held at the local First United Methodist Church. Members of the business community, city council, Concerned Citizens group, and community council gathered for the problem-solving session.

Problems were aired and discussed and possible solutions explored in the session. A volunteer study committee was formed to look further into the matter and report back with recommendations as to how the community can best unite to fight crime.

Last week's Messenger reported several burglaries and among them illegal entries at both Grapeland Propane and Fuel's office on Main Street and the station on South Market...About the same time that the story was being written, the station was being robbed again.

Susan McQueen was working at the station when the robbery occurred. A juvenile and a young adult entered the business and as one stood watch, the other grabbed her around the neck and instructed her to give them the money. They forced her into a broom closet and fled.

Their illegally gained wealth and freedom were short-lived fortunately as the Crockett Police arrested the suspects a short time later. The money was retrieved.

A suspect in several house and business burglaries was also arrested the latter part of the week. [Name] of Grapeland was jailed in connection with the local incidents. [He] turned himself in to the Houston County Sheriff's office Friday morning. Law officers had been hunting him for questioning and had a warrant for his arrest.

The language here is more ‘private’ than that of the first article. The news that arrests have been made appears in a small preliminary headline. The real story is reflected in the main headline about citizens who are uniting.” Official figures such as the police do things as unidentified agents in passive clauses; the active agents are the ordinary people of the town. The article’s tone is highly evaluative and moralistic—burglaries are “aggravating” and attendance at the Tuesday meeting “excellent.” In the fourth paragraph (“Last week’s Messenger”), the author adds a personal aside, juxtaposing an extraordinary event (another break-in) with an ordinary one (his writing the article). This strategy of evaluation, stepping out of one's story to comment on it and underline its tellability, comes directly from the language of spontaneous personal storytelling. Playful, storylike wording -- “their illegally gained wealth and freedom were short-lived” -- marks the final paragraph of the article, as does the informal lexical choice of “hunting him” over “searching for him” in the penultimate line.

Public discourse can sound even more private than does the second Messenger article about the burglaries. Here is one week's version of the weekly report in the Messenger from Latexo, an even smaller town in the area. This is almost entirely private discourse:

4. LINDA DAVIS: PUBLIC PERSONAL LETTERS

We turn now to some writing that is meant for a public audience. Linda Davis is a Country-Western singer and songwriter born in 1962. Originally from a small town in East Texas, she moved to Nashville at 19, after junior college, and has lived there since. One or two of her recordings have reached the C/W Top 40, as did a duet with country star Reba McEntire called "Does He Love You?" Davis has toured as McEntire's opening act, and she has done solo tours as well. One of the songs Davis wrote, "What a Woman Wants to Hear," has been recorded by Dawn Sears. My colleague Judith Mattson Bean interviewed Davis in March, 1992, as part of our larger
Michigan Discussions in Anthropology

project on Texas women’s discourse (described in Johnstone and Bean 1997); quotes from Davis in what follows are from the interview, unless otherwise indicated.

Like all popular musicians, Davis is dependent on the fans who come to her concerts and buy her recordings. She makes materials available to members of her fan club on a regular basis, including a newsletter that appears “every few months.” Her motive is professional: if she were a fan, she would like to know that “the person I was sending my money to and was interested in was definitely interested in me.” Davis’ fans are not intimates. They are people she does not know, for the most part, and who do not know her, and she makes sure they do not get the chance to: “when there’s somebody that writes a lot, and wants to meet you when they come to town and go to dinner and—you just got to keep a little distance because some, you just don’t know about some people.” In replying personally to such people’s letters, “I’d send a pretty general thank you note and such and not get too involved.”

Although Davis does not “get too involved” with her fans in private, her public communication makes it sound as if she is closely involved with them. Davis writes a note to her fans for each newsletter. Here are excerpts from the one in the January, 1992 newsletter:

Hello Everyone,

The holidays have come and gone and the new year is already speeding by. I hope you and your families survived and are healthy.

Hillary had a wonderful Christmas. She always gets so much. She still hasn’t played with 1/2 of her stuff but in time...

Our family has a lot to be grateful for. After Thanksgiving, the 3 of us were in a little fender bender. Hillary’s wrist was broken but only a simple fracture. Lang and I were just bruised and sore, but our car went to the junk yard in the sky. 

Be careful out there!! I’m so excited! The first single from my new album ships to radio Feb. 7th. After 5 working days, the mail should have gotten to the radio stations and you’ll be safe to call and request it. The title is “There’s Something ‘Bout Loving You.” I’d love to know what you think, write me with your opinions.

Tour and road dates are still being put together. I will be going to my hometown of Carthage, Texas February 29 to perform. Wish each of you could come.

Bundle up and stay warm the remaining days of winter. We’ll visit again soon.

God Bless you,

[signed] Linda loves ya!

This letter is reminiscent of personal letters among friends in a variety of ways. Its vocabulary is characterized by playful formulas like “[the year is] speeding by” and “the junk yard in the sky.” There are forms of reference that presuppose common knowledge, such as the first names of Davis’ daughter and husband, and implicit claims to common experience, as in the paragraph about Hillary’s Christmas presents with its “you know how kids are” tone. Punctuation is informal, with ellipses and commas used in ways that are conventionally understood to make writing sound like talk (“but in time...”). “I’d love to know what you think, write me” as well as exclamation points, once multiple, and underlining (“wish each of you could come”). Davis uses numerals rather than spelled-out numbers and she is inconsistent about abbreviation in “Feb. 7th” and “February 29” the way a personal letter-writer might be. The sentiments expressed in the letter also create the impression that she is writing to friends, either on a postcard (“Wish each of you could come”) or in a thank-you note (“We’ll visit again real soon”) or a request for advice (“I’d love to know what you think”). Her diction is casual throughout. Davis’ signature is girlish, in correct, loopy school cursive, the lo of “loves ya!” underlined three times with a scribble, the exclamation point drawn as a balloon.3

In short, Davis writes private-sounding and private-looking letters to her public.

Why are Davis’ letters like this? For one thing, Davis wants the fact that the notes are her work, not a ghost-writer’s, to be clear to readers, “letting them know that I really am involved in this newsletter.” So she chooses, she says, to use “a personal letter... a letter form just like I’m setting here talking to you”: informal, conversational in tone. For another thing, images of close, private relationships such as those in an idealized vision of family are pervasive throughout the Country music world, as the lyrics of many songs attest; I will return to this point later (see also Endres 1993). The biographical summary Davis’ fan club sends new members also includes a letter from Davis, and the letter begins by thanking them for joining “my fan club family.” In an article about a Nashville “Fan Fair” that Davis also attended, the manager of megastar Garth Brooks gives voice to the same conventional sentiment, in a way that echoes the Southern aphorism “Dance with the one that brought you”: “Garth feels like these are the people that brought him to the party” (Mitchell 1992, p. 10).

But Garth Brookes’ public didn’t “bring him to the party,” and Linda Davis’ fan club doesn’t consist of family or friends. In contrast with the readers of the Grapeland Messenger, the readers of Davis’ letters do not know her, and she does not know them; they share only an interest in Davis’ career and presumably some knowledge of her work. Davis’ use of private-sounding discourse is entirely symbolic, a shrewd marketing move. By sounding “folksy” in the ways she does, Davis identifies herself with the discourse of small towns like Grapeland, communities in which people know one

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3 This girlish image is reproduced elsewhere in the newsletter, too, in a picture of Davis in a ruffled white dress and flowered straw hat, sitting on a white wicker porch sofa. It is not her only image, though: a photo in the same newsletter of her on stage with McIntyre has her wearing tight black jeans and a black hat (the conventional country music symbol of toughness), and in the video of her duet with McIntyre, Davis plays the “other woman” in conversation with the
another. Davis’ origins are rural, but that is not why she sounds like a small-town girl in her letters. She is in fact quite self-conscious about when and why she injects rural-sounding speech into her public voice. For example, though she is aware that “there’s no way to lose my Southern accent,” she thinks carefully about how the wording of her songs affects their meaning: “And there’s sometimes we throw ain’t in there,” for example, “cause, ‘cause it works for country.”

5. DISCUSSION

Just as ain’t “works for country,” then, so do ways of speaking that sound private. This has something to do with what rural life is (or once was) like: in smaller communities, social networks are likely to be denser and more multiplex (Milroy 1987), and people accordingly share more information and are more concerned with mutual socialization than with detached reference. This explains the moralistic qualities of “country” talk, and the use of forms of reference presupposing mutual knowledge. The connection between private talk and “country” talk also has to do in part with the fact that as “elaborated” standardized variants develop, non-standard forms, be they pronunciations, words, habits of syntax, or discourse choices such as narrative, come to have their usage restricted to private contexts; one adopts the dominant language in public and relaxes into the stigmatized one at home.

Linguistic forms that are restricted in this way become available as symbolic resources. Rural features of speech are usable by people who do not normally use them, as markers of quaintness and backwardness. Humorists such as Mark Twain and Molly Ivins, for example, make literary uses of country-sounding talk to symbolize and satirize rural ways of thinking, at the same time underlining, through their switches in and out of “dialect,” their own linguistic virtuosity (Bean 1993).

Conversely, rural-sounding talk can symbolize resistance to the dominant variety. I would argue that this is how country talk functions in general in Country-Western music and the culture that surrounds it. Just as Linda Davis’ newsletter does, the lyrics and the presentation of Country-Western music create the image of an audience that is “like family,” an audience with rural roots and traditional values, a public set apart from city folks, politicians, nonbelievers in Christ, and other demons. Country music’s characterization of its audience is obviously a matter of ideology, not a matter of demography. If Country-Western music really appealed only to “country” people, it would not be the industry it is; the power of the industry’s uses of rural-sounding private talk is precisely in how they work in expanding the audience into cities and suburbs. In other words, private-sounding talk can create a public. The rhetorical power of “sounding country” may be used for other ends as well. It would, for example, be interesting to examine the “family values” movement in this light.

Once it would have been satisfactory for a dialectologist to say that Linda Davis uses language as she does because she is from rural East Texas. However, this explanation is not longer sufficient. A speaker like Davis has more linguistic resources at hand than her grandmother probably did, and an explanation of why she sounds the way she does has to incorporate these new facts. The observations I have made in this paper about “sounding country” point to the need for new ways of conceptualizing sociolinguistic variability. As cultural and demographic changes make the norm-based, relatively self-perpetuating speech community less universally useful as an explanatory device, linguistic resources once connected with social facts like place of origin come to have new meanings and new uses. Our attention is drawn more and more to the mechanisms by which particular people decide how to sound in particular situations, for particular purposes.

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Purity and Power: The Geography of Language Ideology in Ukraine

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language issues have been a central component of many social and political conflicts in the Former Soviet Union. During perestroika, between 1988 and 1991, one of the first actions of every republic was to enhance the legal status of its titular language (Arel 1993:iii, 4-8). This legislation, along with increased freedom of discussion in the media, has brought language to the fore as a locus for contesting social and political issues. In Ukraine, government officials supporting the country’s independence have made an effort to redefine the hegemonic language by instituting standard Ukrainian alongside, or instead of, standard Russian as the language of authority. Many support this linguistic and social transformation, but many oppose it. This has led to a destabilization of linguistic hegemony itself, intensified by disagreements within government organs as well as disorganization and material shortages in governmental and educational institutions. Conflicting attitudes about language statuses are further complicated by the existence of many varieties of Ukrainian, Russian, and syncretic Ukrainian-Russian languages. Correctness, appropriateness, prestige value, and even referential meanings of linguistic forms are openly contested. The heteroglossic nature of language (Bakhtin 1981) has thus been made more obvious, and people are more consciously involved in the negotiation of meanings. In this paper I focus on language ideologies that reveal the social tensions in defining “correct,” “true,” and “pure” Ukrainian. Through an analysis of attitudes about language I examine struggles for status and symbolic power, and their relationship to individual and national identity formation in the newly independent country of Ukraine.

Although there are disagreements over linguistic meanings and values, for the most part people do not accept the multiplicity of meanings as a suitable state of affairs. As Bourdieu (1991) has argued, the very notion that there need be one “correct” language,