



Rhetorical argument, folk linguistics, and content-oriented discourse analysis: A follow-up study



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The current study is a replication of Preston (1994).
- Participants felt that AAE was neither proper nor appropriate.
- Participants believed that vernacular varieties will be acquired by those living in a certain context.
- Participants did not consider the reasons why non-standard varieties might persist.

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ABSTRACT

In 1994, Dennis Preston published “Content-Oriented Discourse Analysis and Folk Linguistics”, in which he applied Deborah Schiffrin’s argument structure analysis and Vantage Theory to folk-linguistic data. The present study applies Schiffrin’s analysis to similar folk-linguistic data, as both Preston’s and my subjects discussed African American English. Preston found that his subjects used Oppositional Argument while the subjects in the present study used Rhetorical Argument. According to Schiffrin’s analysis, arguments contain *positions*, *dispute*, and *support*. The resulting analysis compares the conclusions that can be drawn from each set of arguments, such as social and distributional facts about language variety, and facts about variety acquisition and use.

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1. Introduction

In 1994, Dennis Preston published “Content-Oriented Discourse Analysis and Folk Linguistics” in which he demonstrated how discourse analysis techniques can be used to determine folk beliefs about linguistic topics. Discourse analysis, he argued, has mostly concerned itself with the structure, rather than the content, of conversations. Through the use of analysis of argument moves, the underlying beliefs of the folk, these “patterns and consistencies of folk belief which are hidden from casual investigation” (286) can be brought into relief.

1.1. Folk linguistics

Discourse analysis is a well-established approach to analyzing data, and folk linguistics is becoming more so, with publications, conference presentations and even a special issue of the *AILA Review*. The now-thriving study of folk linguistics was first proposed by Hoenigswald (1971) and later taken up most prominently by Preston in various studies. Preston (1989) wrote that “impressions, classifications, and caricatures of language and language use” by nonlinguists “are part of the information needed to understand the status of and regard for language use in speech communities” (xi). Niedzielski and Preston (2003), in the only book-length study of American folk linguistics, note that “elicitation and the process of reasoning about language in discursive settings may be more valuable than the elicitation of static, prepackaged folk belief” (301). Other studies putting forth discourse-based attitude analyses are Liebscher and Dailey-O’Cain (2009), who argue it is important to keep in mind that in studying language attitudes, we are observing not a pure abstraction, but something that is regularly made relevant in everyday life—and in everyday life, expressions of attitudes are rarely (if ever) stated without any sort of

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back-and-forth with other people. An analysis that examines attitudes in interaction therefore looks at their most contextualized and least abstracted form (200).

Hall-Lew and Stephens (2012) investigated “Country Talk” in which they elicited linguistic attitudes and definitions through interviews rather than free conversation. Studies such as these show that we must consider folk beliefs about language as part of the total package of linguistic competence. This metadiscourse about language can help linguists develop relevant research and educational programs.

Dennis Preston has been the most prolific researcher in the field of folk linguistics, sometimes using maps (Preston, 1996), other times interviews (Preston, 1994; Niedzielski and Preston, 2003), to gather folk beliefs on language. Other researchers such as Martinez (2003) used written questionnaires to gather material on folk belief regarding language varieties: in this case, Spanish along the Texas/Mexico border. Recent research by Cukor-Avila et al. (2012) also used map data to investigate Texans’ perception of dialect variation within the state.

1.2. Argument

I will concentrate on Preston’s (1994) article here. In this case, Preston broke his article into two parts, demonstrating two analytical techniques that can be used for folk-linguistic study. The first analysis Preston used was a codification of argument structure proposed by Deborah Schiffrin (1985, 1987, 1990) and the second, Vantage Theory, as proposed by MacLaury (Preston cited unpublished papers by MacLaury and Trujillo). Rather than further attempt to replicate the Vantage Theory portion of the analysis here, I will concern myself in this article with Schiffrin’s analysis, applying it to my data, and comparing my findings to Preston’s.

Other schemes of analyzing arguments have been proposed. Toulmin (2003/1958) proposed a model of argument that involves *claims*, *warrants* and *data*. The *claims* are supported by a *datum* which is offered as support for the original assertion. The *warrant* is the step – usually based on some common sense rule – that links the *datum* to the *claim*. A *modal qualifier* (*probably*, *possibly*) may be used if there are any exceptional conditions bearing on the link between the warrant and the conclusion. In addition, *warrants* have *backing* which are the scientific principles, laws, or statistics that validate the truth of the warrant.

van Eemeren et al. (2002) considered argumentative discourse to involve a difference of opinion. In this framework, people express opinion as a *standpoint* which can be met with *doubt* or an *opposite standpoint* from the listener. The first is called a *nonmixed difference of opinion*, the second a *mixed difference of opinion*. *Critical discussion* ensues when the two parties aim to resolve their differences through the stages of *confrontation*, *opening*, *argumentation*, and *conclusion*. The standpoint can be *justified* or *refuted*. “The speaker must believe that the listener (a) does not already fully accept the standpoint, (b) will accept the statements used in the argumentation, and (c) will view the argumentation as an acceptable defense (or refutation) of the proposition to which the standpoint refers” (53). The standpoint can be defended through one or more single arguments that consist of two premises each. *Multiple argumentation* “consists of alternative defenses of the same standpoint, presented one after another” (64).

Jackson and Jacobs (1980) proposed a discourse analytic framework to everyday conversational argument. The opening turn of an argument is known as the *arguable*. The interlocutor may dispute the truth of the utterance, resulting in a *propositional* argument. An argument at the *performative* level has to do with the sincerity conditions or felicity conditions of the attempted speech act. Although Jackson & Jacobs call their method discourse analysis, the categories they use (adjacency pairs, presequences, insertion sequences, etc.) are from conversation analysis. An interesting section of the article treats enthymemes in conversational arguments. Enthymemes occur because all the premises of the argument are not explicitly stated nor are they explicitly linked to the conclusion. How detailed the speaker must be depends on the needs and demands of the listener. In other words, the unstated premises are those that the listener accepts without a need for further explanation.

Preston (1994) presented his own understanding of argument, citing earlier work by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), Jacobs and Jackson (1979) and Schiffrin (1985, 1987, 1990). Preston’s analysis focused on the categories presented in Schiffrin (1987): *position*, *dispute*, and *support*, which he claimed are similar to those found in van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), who proposed similar categories of *opinion*, which can be *attacked* (*disputed*) by the listener or *defended* (*justified*) by the speaker. Preston differed slightly from these categories in that he recognized, following Schiffrin, that there can be arguments without disputes (rhetorical arguments) but that the data in question (Preston, 1994) consisted of oppositional argument. He further explained that positions can be difficult to identify, yet a dispute will clearly point to the position that is being disputed. Preston also claimed that “positions which are only supported and not disputed will not produce oppositional argument” (296), which is the case with the data I present here.

In this paper, I follow Preston (1994) and analyze the transcript using Schiffrin’s (1985) model of argument. She describes two types of argument, *rhetorical* and *oppositional*. In rhetorical arguments “a speaker presents a monologue supporting a disputable position”, and in oppositional arguments “one or more speakers support openly disputed positions” (37). These categories roughly correspond with van Eemeren et al.’s (2002) *nonmixed* and *mixed differences of opinion*. The argument presented by Preston was oppositional; the one I present here is rhetorical. Certain foci, as described by Schiffrin (1987) are similar. Arguments contain *positions*, *dispute*, and *support*. *Positions* are assertions that reveal not only ideas but also moral claims to the way the world is or the way it should be. They are sometimes spoken “soapbox style” in which the speaker seems to address a larger audience than just who is in the room. Hedges and intensifiers are sometimes used. Positions can be *disputed* through opposition to an idea, the stance of the speaker, or moral implications; or *supported* through logic, evidence, or speech acts such as explanation or justification (18–19). In the following analysis I pattern the labels after those of Preston (1994): POS (position), DIS (dispute) and SUP (support). The moves are also numbered.

The reason for this article is not to focus on the topic that participants discussed (African American English) but rather to replicate Preston’s method. I had over 50 pages of transcript to work with, and the portion of the conversation I chose to analyze had a similar topic (AAE) but different rhetorical structure (rhetorical as opposed to oppositional argument). With a similar topic we can concentrate on the structure and meaning of the discourse, although a discussion of the topic itself is inevitable since this is content-oriented analysis. In a future article I will choose an excerpt with a different topic but a similar rhetorical structure to the conversation in Preston’s 1994 article. The sociolinguistic interview that produced the data I analyze here was open-ended and did not have a specific focus. AAE happened to be mentioned by the participants and also happened to be the focus of Preston’s article. The topic should not distract readers from the reason for the article, which is enacting Preston’s method: applying Schiffrin’s analysis to folk-linguistic data. In my data gathering I did not ask about AAE nor was that my focus. The participants mentioned it without any prompting on my part.

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