Language & Communication 35 (2014) 43–54

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Linguistic repertoire and ethnic identity in New York City

Kara Becker

Reed College, 3203 SE Woodstock Blvd., Portland, OR 97202, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 28 January 2014

Keywords:
Ethnicity
Repertoire
African American English
New York City English

ABSTRACT

This paper expands on the ethnolinguistic repertoire approach to consider the use of a broad linguistic repertoire by a single speaker in the construction of a multivalent identity. African American speakers in North America are often analyzed from an ethnolectal perspective, and placed in contrast to (white) speakers of regional varieties of American English. A close analysis of three features – one that is traditionally ethnolectal (copula absence as a feature of African American English), one that is traditionally dialectal (BOUGHT-raising as a feature of New York City English), and one that is potentially either (non-rhoticity in the syllable coda) – reveals intersectional identification practices that go beyond ethnicity and regional identity. The results of a variationist analysis of a community sample of speakers from the Lower East Side of Manhattan is contrasted with a micro-analysis of the repertoire of a single speaker, with the repertoire analysis demonstrating the fluid nature of speaker identity and of the boundaries between ethnolect and dialect in New York City.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The notion of *ethnolinguistic repertoire* (Benor, 2010) has been used productively in recent sociolinguistic scholarship to promote a perspective on ethnic identity as socially constructed and fluid (Benor, 2010; Eckert, 2008b; Fought, 2006; Newman, 2010; Sharma, 2011, 2012). Defined as "a fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities," (Benor, 2010, 160) the ethnolinguistic repertoire provides an alternative to a static, 'ethnolectal' view of the linguistic productions of pre-defined ethnic group members. This paper supports an ethnolinguistic repertoire approach in place of an ethnolectal one for African American English (AAE) in New York City, and expands on this approach in analyzing one speaker's use of a broad linguistic repertoire (Gumperz, 1964) that utilizes both ethnolinguistic and regional dialect features in the construction of a multivalent identity (Mendoza-Denton, 2002; Schilling-Estes, 2004) of which ethnicity is just one part.

Traditionally, the term *ethnolect* has been used to describe the variety of a mainstream language spoken by an ethnic immigrant group and marked by substrate influence from the L1 during a period of transition from bilingualism to monolingualism in L2 (Clyne, 2000; Wolck, 2002). A broader application of the term opposes speakers of a marked ethnic group to the mainstream regardless of the status of community bilingualism and substrate transfer, reinforcing what Fishman calls the "rigid boundary distinctions between that which is ethnic and that which is not ethnic" (Fishman, 1997, 342). In earlier periods in the US, ethnolects were primarily the varieties spoken by 'white ethnic' groups, which at the time stood in contrast to mainstream American English (Fought, 2006). More recently, an ethnolect approach has been used to describe the linguistic practices of non-white ethnic groups, a practice that has received criticism in sociolinguistic scholarship (Benor, 2010; Eckert, 2008b; Fought, 2006; Jaspers, 2008; Newman, 2010) for its presentation of ethnic identity as fixed. Scholars observe that designating non-white speaker groups as ethnolects only serves to reinforce what has been called a white/non-white binary

E-mail address: kbecker@reed.edu

0271-5309/$ - see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2013.12.007

in North America, in which non-white speakers are marked and stand in contrast to a supra-ethnic category of whiteness that is privileged and unmarked (Bucholtz, 1999, 2011; Cutler, 2008; Fought, 2006).

Eckert (2008b) further notes that descriptions of ethnic minority varieties in North America cast the regional dialects spoken by the majority in some locale as ethnic varieties by virtue of contrast. However, because of the unmarked status of whiteness, only speakers of ethnolects are marked with respect to ethnicity:

> "The designation "ethnolect" can be part of a more insidious practice. In the dominant discourse of American dialectology, the white Anglo variety is considered a regional dialect, while African American and Latino varieties are considered ethnic dialects...the dichotomy between regional and ethnic varieties and the lack of attention to regional varieties of African American and Latino speech underscores a deterritorializing discourse of subordinated racial groups" (2008b: 27).

The result is an opposition between a marked and marginalized ethnolect of non-white speakers on the one hand and an unmarked, white regional dialect on the other. Variationist sociolinguistic scholarship has by and large verified a distinction between white and non-white varieties for the English spoken in North American cities, as noted here: "The speech communities in most northern cities are in fact two distinct communities: one white, one nonwhite" (Labov, 1994, 54).[1]

African American English (AAE) is the quintessential ethnolect in North American sociolinguistics. Despite the qualifications that not all speakers who are African American use AAE, and that non-African Americans use features from AAE, its very name captures a variety defined by ethnic identity. An early focus on identifying the unique structural features common to communities of AAE speakers across mainly northern US Cities (Fasold, 1972; Labov, 1968, 1972a; Wolfram, 1969) sparked a massive body of scholarship on the variety, much of which investigates AAE's relationship to coterritorial white varieties. This relationship is viewed largely as unidirectional, so that AAE is seen to converge with or assimilate to mainstream American English, or to diverge from it (Ash and Myhill, 1986; Bailey and Maynor, 1989; Childs and Mallinson, 2004; Fasold et al., 1987; Labov, 2010). Much scholarship has worked to combat the rigid boundary between ethnolect and regional dialect for AAE, in particular for what Wolfram (2007) calls the supra-regional myth – that AAE is uniform across regions. Recent work has demonstrated that African American speakers do participate in mainstream regional phonology in a wide range of North American locales, from the South to northern cities (Fought, 1999; Wolfram, 2007; Yaeger-Dror and Thomas, 2010), and that African Americans demonstrate regional variation separate from mainstream varieties as well (Blake and Shousterman, 2010a; Hinton and Pollack, 2000).

A further complication for the ethnolectal approach is the way that individual speakers are considered in relation to group concepts like ethnolect and dialect. Given that AAE has been depicted as a static ethnic variety spoken by African Americans, it follows that individual speakers will also remain fixed inside this static categorization; i.e. they will be viewed first and foremost as speakers of AAE. Indeed, the relationship between African American and white speakers is exemplified in the concept of 'crossing' (Rampton, 1995) which suggests that a speaker's movement between AAE and white varieties can and should be described. As Joseph notes,

> Descriptions of 'crossing' tend to reinforce conservative views of the power of the categories people are supposed to 'stick' to. My own working assumption ...is that 'crossing' is less remarkable a phenomenon than is the perception that there are categories rigid enough to be crossed. (Joseph, 2004, 171)

With respect to AAE and (white) American English, it is white speakers who are more commonly depicted as crossers (Bucholtz, 1999, 2011; Cutler, 2003), most likely due to the marked status of white use of AAE and its implications for issues of appropriation and racialization. African American speakers who 'cross' into white speech are more commonly described as practiced style-shifters or as bidialectal. However, both perspectives elevate ethnic identity to the forefront, suggesting it is the organizing principle for the analysis of individual speaker practice.

The ethnolinguistic repertoire solves many problems inherent to the ethnolect approach. It works against the notion that language used by members of some ethnic group need be analyzed as a distinct linguistic entity by accounting for instances of intra-group and intra-speaker variation in some ethnic group not as 'use' or 'non-use' of some ethnolect, but as the selective use of features from a repertoire of ethnic distinction. Sharma's work (2011, 2012) has applied the ethnolinguistic repertoire approach to style-shifting in British Asian English, highlighting the utility of the framework for perspectives on ethnic identity outside of North America as well.

Benor acknowledges a narrow scope for the ethnolinguistic repertoire framework (2010: 161), noting its focus on the group and on the construction of ethnic identity. The present study seeks to expand the scope of the ethnolinguistic repertoire by highlighting a single individual who uses more than ethnolinguistic features to construct more than an ethnic identity. Here, notions of intersectionality are helpful in highlighting the complex construction of ethnic identity in individual speaker practice, which has been shown to be informed by and constructed in combination with other aspects of identity including gender (Fought, 1999), socioeconomic status (Eckert, 2008b), and age (Wagner, 2014). Indeed, ethnicity is not always a central aspect of the identities of people who are categorized as ethnic, nor do these people orient to ethnicity in the same ways or in the same amounts (Hoffman and Walker, 2010; Nagy, Chociej, and Hoffman, 2014). Finally, speakers shift

[1] Of course, not all work adheres to this general trend, including Wong and Hall-Lew (this volume), which investigates the use of the regional feature raised BOUGHT by Chinese Americans in New York City and the Sunset District of San Francisco (and in the latter neighborhood, Chinese Americans are arguably the unmarked majority) as well as Wagner (this volume), which demonstrates ethnic variation within white speaker groups, in this case Irish- and Italian–Americans, in Philadelphia.

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/934885

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/934885

Daneshyari.com