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Race and the re-embodied voice in Hollywood film

Mary Bucholtz *

Department of Linguistics, 3432 South Hall, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-3100, USA

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ABSTRACT

As linguistic anthropologists and others have argued, the development of modern sound technologies led to the disembodiment of the voice; the resulting ideologies of voice, however, concerned embodiment rather than disembodiment. By contrast, in late-modern media regimes, essentialized voices have been recontextualized and linguistically re-embodied via crossing and stylization. This article demonstrates that the re-embodiment of voice reasserted naturalized boundaries of gender and race in Hollywood 'wigger' films from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. The ideological effects of such representations both locally and more widely point to the importance of examining mediatized practices and products through a linguistic-anthropological lens.

1. Introduction

As part of a broader inquiry into the cultural and historical formation of language ideologies (e.g., Bauman and Briggs, 2003; Kroskrity, 2000; Schieffelin et al., 1998), linguistic anthropologists have been increasingly concerned with the question of how ideologies and technologies of the voice emerged as defining tools of modernity. This process depended heavily on the affordances of mediatization, as shown by scholars examining how the late-19th-century development of phonographic recordings (Bauman and Feaster, 2005; Weidman, 2006), and the transition from silent to sound film (Taylor, 2009), among other innovations, enabled the consolidation of new social subjectivities via new ideologies linking voices to bodies. The ability of sound technology to capture and circulate the voice made it possible for a wide audience to scrutinize the details of embodied vocal activity in performance, including such elements as accent, intonation, and voice quality. At the same time, the technological separation of voice and body in these new, mediatized forms spurred anxieties regarding the embodied authenticity of the projected voice and its propriety with respect to gender, class, race, ethnicity, and other parameters of social difference. Many of the representations produced under this technological regime both foregrounded and alleviated such anxieties by unsettling, then restoring, an essentialist connection between the 'right' body and the 'right' voice.

As several studies have shown, the mapping of specific voices onto specific bodies became the naturalized evidence of authentic modern—and, often, gendered—identities, as for example when mediatized voices brought about new configurations of femininity. Weidman (2003, 2007) demonstrates that in South India in the early twentieth century, upper-caste women assumed nontraditional roles as classical singers in which an idealized femininity was tied to a vocal style that was physically enabled by the gramophone and the microphone, yet was viewed as transcendent of the body. Similarly, in her study of the highly ideologized 'Japanese women's language' as a translation device for rendering English in novels of the same period, Inoue (2003) finds that these dislocated uses of the register by non-Japanese characters were naturalized through realist representations typical of the modern novel. Thus, although technologies of mediatized reproduction allowed

* Tel.: +1 805 893 3776; fax: +1 805 893 7492.
E-mail address: bucholtz@linguistics.ucsb.edu

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for the disembodiment of the voice, in the modern period producers, performers, and consumers jointly engaged in an ideological project of vocal reattachment, anchoring the voice to socially definable embodied subjects.[1]

The voice has likewise attracted increasing attention in film theory and criticism (e.g., Beach, 2002; Kozloff, 2000). Film theorist Michel Chion argues that the development of modern sound technologies both entailed the disembodiment of the voice and enabled the exploitation of this disembodiment for cinematic effect. Indeed, he maintains that technologies severing the physical link between the body and the voice are the foundation on which modern—and, increasingly, contemporary—film rests:

> The voice is ceasing to be identified with a specific face. It appears much less stable, identified, hence fetishizable. This general realization that the voice is radically other than the body that adopts it (or that it adopts) for the duration of a film seems to me to be one of the most significant phenomena in the recent development of the cinema, television, and audiovisual media in general. (Chion, 1999, p. 174)

For Chion, then, the disembodiment of the voice, its status as 'radically other', is not always as easily resolved as it was in earlier historical periods documented by linguistic anthropologists.[2] The governing ideologies of voice under earlier stages of modernity were rooted in essentialization and authentication, which comfortably imposed and reasserted hegemonic ideologies of social subjectivity. By contrast, in the media regimes of the late-modern period, already-essentialized voices have become further recontextualized through a process of linguistic re-embodiment, whereby such voices are detached from expectably raced, gendered, and classed bodies and jarringly reassigned to 'inappropriate' bodies via language crossing and stylization. Indeed, such practices have been said to be the quintessential linguistic reflex of late modernity (Coupland, 2007; Rampton, 2006).

Yet despite the linguistic remapping of gender, race, and other social categories via crossing and stylization, these practices may reinscribe rather than subvert essentialized mappings of body and voice, particularly when a conservative cultural force such as the Hollywood film industry undertakes to represent them in mediatized form. In late 19th- and early 20th-century popular entertainment, racialized voices were frequently disarticulated from racialized bodies as European Americans engaged in performances of blackness through minstrelsy, an anomaly that was symbolically reconciled through the visual device of blackface (Lott, 1993; Rogin, 1996). Originating alongside blackface, its vocal counterpart, 'blackvoice'—that is, nonblack speakers' use of linguistic features indexical of blackness—proved to be a potent vehicle for the circulation of a specifically linguistic form of minstrelsy (Bucholtz and Lopez, forthcoming). As in blackface, blackvoice often highlighted rather than erased dissonant indexicalities of race (e.g., Stras, 2007).

In this article, I document the indexical recontextualization of blackvoice at a pivotal moment in late-modern US popular culture: the emergence of a white, suburban audience for hip hop. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1995 to 1996 as well as Hollywood teen comedy films produced soon after this period, I trace the trajectory of blackvoice from an as-yet unmediatized yet ideologically saturated index within the European American youth culture of a California high school to a highly mediatized and reified vocal object. This transformation allowed local styles of white hip hop and similar styles around the country to circulate much more widely, but only within strictly defined ideological limits. I focus in particular on how the re-embodiment of voice reasserted the naturalized boundaries of gender, race, and age in the local ethnographic context as well as in Hollywood blackvoice films from the mid-1990s to the 2000s featuring comical white hip hop characters. In both contexts, blackvoice is ideologically represented as an inauthentic racial transgression used by emasculated European American teenage boys to authorize their illegitimate claim to a physically powerful African American hypermasculinity. The mediatized amplification of a previously unmediatized racial and gendered ideology of white hip hop style served as a strategy of containment of this contested youth identity at a moment when it was just emerging on the national stage.

2. White hip hop and the wigger figure

When white American teenagers and young adults began to embrace hip hop culture in the 1990s, they were taking the most recent step in a series of cross-racial appropriations of black musical and cultural forms spanning from jazz and blues in the 1920s and 1930s to rock and roll in the 1950s to soul in the 1960s to disco and reggae in the 1970s (e.g., Daley, 2003; Hall, 1997; Jones, 1988; McMichael, 1998). Thanks to the ever-expanding reach of the popular media, to an even greater extent than with these previous black sources of white youth cultural styles, hip hop has shaped not only the musical tastes and leisure practices of young European Americans but also the embodied semiotics of their hairstyles, their dress, their gestures, postures, and movements, and their speech. White youth who embrace this style typically view themselves as members of the multiracial Hip Hop Nation, but they are often labeled by others, more ambivalently, as *wiggers* or *wiggas*, a neologism created as a blend of the strongly negative term *white nigger*.

[1] Agha (2003) describes a similar process whereby 18th- and 19th-century British print media discourses resulted in the ideological hardening of a collection of specific phonological variants into a rigid class marker, Received Pronunciation.

[2] In the same vein, Dolar (2006) draws on Chion's work in outlining a Lacanian philosophy of the voice as an analytic object that is neither fully linguistic nor fully material.