Silvan Wilsch

Intra-Speaker Variation and Sociophonetic Identity Construction in Political Rhetoric

A Study of Barack Obama and Ben Carson's Speaker Design Strategies in High Performance Events with regard to Style-Shifting between African American English and General American English

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Political speeches represent "public speaking events in which language form and usage are inherently foregrounded and highlighted" (Soukup 2012, p.84), events which Coupland refers to as "high performances" (2007, p.147). As such, it is all the more surprising that then-presidential candidate Barack Obama was accused of speaking in a "ghetto-style [and] feigned accent" (Sowell 2012, n.p.), during one these high performance political events, which are usually considered "highly constrained stylistic contexts" (Hernández-Campoy & Cutillas-Espinosa 2012, p.8). The event in question was a rally held at Hampton University in 2007 (while Obama was running for presidency for the first time) and caused controversy five years later. FOX News reporters and other commentators – such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity – accused Obama of "playing race" and employing a "fake accent" (Sowell 2012, n.p.) when speaking in front of the predominantly black audience. The idea for this study was initially sparked by this controversy surrounding Obama's linguistic choices during the 2007 Hampton University rally, and was furthered by other remarks made about his language use, such as a comment by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who stated that "[Obama] speaks with no Negro dialect, unless he wants to have one" (Alim & Smitherman 2012, p.1).

Similarly to the way in which bilingual speakers code-switch between different languages, speakers can style-shift if they control different varieties, registers or the like, of a single language (Ervin-Tripp 2001, p.44). Style-shifting is the selective production and exclusion of certain linguistic features from one's linguistic repertoire (Davies 2007, p.71) and individuals utilize these linguistic features as a way of negotiating and constructing meaning (Eckert 2001, p.119). Style-shifting can function to "indicate a change in the speech situation, such as topic, audience, or setting, or it may serve a speaker's 'metaphorical' or 'rhetorical' purposes" (Strand 2012, p.185). In the case at hand, style-shifting between the more vernacular variety African American English (AAE) and the 'standard' variety General American English (GAE) is under discussion.

Style-shifting within the political sphere is not uncommon. Many politicians have been observed to adjust their language on a regular basis, so as to make them appear more favorable in the eyes of their respective audiences; thus, the use of style-shifting to cultivate support among different speech communities is a known rhetorical tool for politicians. Bill Clinton, for instance, is known for successfully deploying a "folksy" (Alim & Smitherman 2012b, p.1) style when addressing predominantly black audiences and audiences in the South. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, has been mocked for "faking" (Bischoff et al. 2012, p.405) a Southern accent. This being said, the *way*

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in which a politician chose to say something had never caused more controversy than *what* they chose to say before the scandals surrounding Obama's conspicuous use of AAE at Hampton University; it can be argued that this happened because of the racial component that Obama's African descent added to the debate.

This study investigates the linguistic performances of two black politicians from the United States – namely, Barack Obama and Ben Carson – when addressing audiences of differing ethnic composition. Obama's use of vernacular speech at Hampton University was considered controversial due to the stigmatized nature of AAE use within formal contexts, which nevertheless enjoys covert prestige as a marker of solidarity and identity (Labov 2006, p.58). Ben Carson was chosen as a foil, due to crucial similarities between the two politicians. For each of them, speech samples from two speeches and two interviews were selected for analysis, whereby one speech/interview was given in front of a predominantly white audience and the other speech/interview was given in front of a predominantly black audience. In order to determine *if*, *when*, and *to what extent* Obama and Carson employ features of AAE in these 'high performance' political events, an acoustic analysis of three sociophonetic variables indexical of AAE is undertaken. Focusing on the patterns of these three phonological features of AAE versus their 'standard' GAE counterparts, the linguistic outputs of Obama and Carson are investigated individually and in comparison to each other. Additionally, research on style-shifting, contextualization of the speeches and interviews, insights about AAE and the biographical backgrounds of Obama and Carson are discussed to explain their respective stylistic choices. In summary, Obama and Carson's sociophonetic construction of identity and achieving of situational goals through style-shifting between AAE and GAE in 'high performance' political events is examined in this study.

The study at hand was initially designed to include interviews conducted by the author with the two ex-candidates, based on the model of a similar study conducted by Hernández-Campoy & Cutillas-Espinosa (2012). Unfortunately, it was not possible to conduct interviews with either Obama or Carson despite several inquiries. These interviews could have provided pivotal insights into the candidates' motivations to style-shift in political discourse, their general language ideologies, and their attitudes towards AAE and GAE. In addition – under the assumption that the answers would be given truthfully – the interviews could have revealed how consciously Obama and Carson style-shift during their 'high performances' and what they consider to be their personal 'vernacular/s' (in the sense of most natural speech). Methodologically, the information elicited in these interviews

could have provided confirmation (or not) of the author's interpretations of the results; these diagnostic remarks must therefore remain speculative to a certain degree.

Chapter 1 situates the study in the context of traditional and present-day research on style and style-shifting, where a paradigm shift is currently underway. Traditional responsive-based approaches – such as Labov's Attention To Speech Theory – are being increasingly criticized for not being holistic enough and for being insufficient to account for all intra-speaker variation. A shift towards initiative-based approaches to stylistic variation is taking place – summarized under the collective term Speaker Design – where style-shifting is no longer seen as a mere response to external factors. This orientation towards a social constructivist framework sees the individual voice "as a potential agent of choice rather than a passive, socially constructed vehicle for circulating discourse" (Johnstone 2000, p.417). With reference to the Speaker Design Model, the study at hand focuses on language use and style-shifting as essential tools to create/project identity and to achieve situational goals. Especially within the political realm, speakers make use of their linguistic repertoire in order to make certain facets of their identity more or less salient,with the aim of gaining support among their constituencies (Podesva et al. 2012, p.61). The information gathered in this chapter is used later on in an attempt to explain the stylistic choices of Barack Obama and Ben Carson.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth overview of the variety under investigation – namely, African American English. Its terminology, genesis and usage as well as its indexical phonological, grammatical, lexical and prosodic features are presented. This provides insights into the variety's history and the language attitudes connected to it, helping the reader to better understand AAE as a whole. The presented features provide the basis to recognize shifts between AAE and GAE in the acoustic analysis of the speech samples – the three phonological variables (ING), (AI) and (R) were selected for this purpose .

As Hernández-Campoy & Cutillas-Espinosa have shown, it is impossible to understand how and why individuals style-shift without understanding their "political, social and linguistic identity and ideology" (2012, p.41). Chapter 3 gives insight into the lives of Barack Obama and Ben Carson by providing biographical information with special attention to the linguistic influences they have been exposed to throughout their lives. The chapter demonstrates that crucial similarities make Carson the ideal foil candidate for Obama, while certain contrasts promise to generate interesting results in the study's comparison of their stylistic choices and sociophonetic construction of identity.

Chapter 4 presents the occasions and events of the four interviews and four speeches that are being analyzed. When it comes to public speech acts, context is vital (Batluk 2011, p.2). The contextualization of the speech samples provides necessary information on setting and purpose, as well as the affirmation of the appropriate audiences, while their content-related investigation ensures valid comparability among them. It was of crucial importance to find one speech and one interview in front of a predominantly black and predominantly white audience containing overlapping topics for each of the candidates – in order to find out what factors were key to Obama and Carson's style-shifting, and to allow for a comparison between the two.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed description of the methodology applied in this study and introduces the three sociophonetic variables chosen to distinguish between AAE and GAE passages within the speech samples. The three variables – (ING), (AI) and (R) – were selected because especially in high performance contexts have phonological variables "shown to play a key role in indexing a particular identity or persona" (Sclafani 2012, p.122). Furthermore, are their respective AAE and GAE variants easily distinguishable in an acoustic analysis.

The results of the acoustic analyses for both Obama and Carson's cases of speaker design practice in political discourse, whether or not they shifted between AAE and GAE, when these shifts occur, and to what extent they were present are presented in Chapter 6. This is based on whether features of AAE – strictly speaking, the variants indexical of AAE from the variables (ING), (AI), and (R) – are detected in the analyzed audio samples. A further, more in-depth analysis is undertaken of Obama's controversial speech at Hampton University in order to verify or debunk his use of highly vernacular – and therefore stigmatized – features of AAE (which are presumed to have caused the controversy and led commentators to use terms such as "ghetto-style" when describing Obama's language).

Chapter 7 discusses the presented findings in relation to the different approaches to style-shifting introduced in Chapter 1. The traditional responsive-based approaches and the more contemporary Speaker Design approach are applied to each candidate's results both individually and jointly, with the aid of the information gathered on the AAE variety, the politicians' biographical backgrounds, and the contextualization of the speech samples.

In closing, a conclusion summarizes the most important insights achieved by the study. Transcripts for the analyzed speech samples can be found in the Appendix.

Chapter 1: Style And Style-Shifting

In order to analyze *if*; *to what extent*; *in what form*; and *why* Obama and Carson speak differently when addressing different audiences, the concepts of style and style-shifting are introduced in this chapter.

Speech is influenced by multiple different factors, and sociolinguists have tried to pinpoint these in an attempt to analyze how strongly they can affect a given speaker's style[1]. Language style is the variation present in the speech of any given individual speaker (Wolfram & Schilling 2015, p.387), meaning we can classify "style" as intra-speaker variation; inter-speaker variation, on the other hand, is the variation which is present across whole groups of speakers (Schilling-Estes 2008, p.375). Switching between a range of speech styles – for example by employing features of different varieties like AAE and GAE – within the same conversation or the same speech act is called style-shifting. Schilling-Estes (2008, p.376) defines style-shifting as "shifts into and out of different language varieties, and shifts in usage levels for features associated with these varieties[,]" which may be "deliberate and involve the self-conscious use of features of which the speaker and audience are very aware, or they may be unconscious, involving features that people do not even realize they are using." These shifts might only last for a few seconds or make up large parts of a person's daily utterances, whether they are verbal or written. People engage in style-shifting, "because language variation is intricately tied to social meaning" and use it to "convey, shape, and re-shape social, interpersonal, personal, and sociolinguistic meanings" (Wolfram & Schilling 2015, p.387).

Within sociolinguistics, there is no unified theory to explain what exactly constitutes style, or why speakers use certain styles in certain situations. What has widely been agreed upon, however, is that style operates on all linguistic levels: phonological, grammatical, lexical, semantic, pragmatical and discoursive. Additionally, it is widely recognized that style may be influenced by a significant range of social factors and contexts, such as: type of audience, type of channel, topic, mode, age, gender, social class, genre, setting and situation (Patrick 2016, n.p.). Also agreed on is the fact that there are different types of style-shifting, including shifting between features associated with different registers, dialects ('crossing'), varieties and languages ('code-switching') (Mendoza-Denton 2008, p.482). Since the boundaries between these types of style-shifting are often unclear, it makes sense "to think about stylistic variation […] in terms of stylistic repertoires" (Wolfram & Schilling 2015,

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1   Another term closely related to 'style' is 'performance', which was first introduced by Labov and also refers to "the way the individual goes about using language" (Mey 2008, p.5).

p.391) that speakers can draw on, rather than thinking about it as switching back and forth between certain categories. The term "repertoire" comprises the "collection of linguistic features that each individual has at his or her disposal at any given moment, to be employed as needed for different social, interactional and personal reasons" (Wolfram & Schilling 2015, p.391). The notion of the stylistic repertoire is an important one for the study at hand; an assessment of Obama and Carson's individual linguistic repertoires is given in Chapter 3.

Scholars in the field of sociolinguistics have developed various different approaches to explain what constitutes style and why speakers and interlocutors (choose to) speak in a particular manner on a particular occasion. This chapter introduces the most important approaches on the topics deemed relevant for this study. The early approaches on language style are closely linked to three big names in sociolinguistics: William Labov, who lay down the groundwork for the idea of style and stylistic variation in the 1960s, with his Attention To Speech approach (Labov 1966); Howard Giles, who developed the Accommodation Theory in the 1970s (Giles & Powesland 1975); and Allan Bell, who devised the theory of Audience Design in the 1980s (Bell 1984). Contemporary scholars developing theories on style and style-shifting in Speaker Design approaches include Coupland (1985, 2001), Schilling-Estes (1999), Eckert (2000), Podesva (2008) and Hernández-Campoy & Cutillas-Espinosa (2012).

Labov's Attention To Speech

The idea of style and stylistic variation was first introduced by William Labov, based on his Lower East Side New York study, which was published in 1966 (though he did not use the terms "style/style-shifting" back then). He found that "there are no single style speakers" (Labov 1984, p.29) and produced empirical evidence that virtually every person engages in style-shifting. Labov's studies enabled him to observe that the use of a more 'casual' style is the result of unmonitored speech, whereas the subjects of his study made use of a more 'formal' style at times when they were more actively aware of their speech (Mather 2012, p.339). According to this first encounter with the concept of style, Labov described style and style-shifting as dependent on the attention paid to speech (Coupland 2007, p.36). Thus, one important factor influencing the way we speak is how self-aware we are at the times when we talk (Wolfram & Schilling 2015, p.391). This can be observed in everyday life: people mostly speak in more formal or more 'standard' speech during occasions such as job interviews, but when chatting to friends or family they tend to speak in a more casual and relaxed manner.

Labov conceived of the sociolinguistic interview in order to measure different speech styles, which he saw as ranging "along a single dimension, measured by the amount of attention paid to speech" (Labov 1984, p.29). The most natural speech was gathered through conversation about personal and emotional subjects – such as near-death experiences – while increasingly careful speech was obtained by having participants read out passages, word lists and eventually minimal pairs. Labov's main goal was to elicit the most casual and natural speech, since he assumed that each speaker had a single vernacular; which would provide "the most systematic data for linguistic analysis" (Labov 1984, p.29)[2]. These studies were among the first to produce regular patterns of stylistic variation across social groups. More specifically, "speakers used stigmatized dialect features […] at progressively lower frequency as they moved from casual style to minimal pair style[,] […] which mirrors the patterning of stigmatized features as one moves from the lowest to highest socioeconomic class" (Wolfram & Schilling 2015, p.391). If applying Labov's Attention To Speech theory to the study at hand, one would expect Obama and Carson not to use features of AAE in the analyzed speech samples for a few different reasons, including but not limited to: all of the interviews and speeches took place in formal settings; both Obama and Carson have a high socioeconomic background; and both were under public scrutiny (and can therefore be assumed to pay careful attention to their speech).

Although Labov's "Attention to Speech" is an important concept in the sociolinguistic study of style, it has been deemed insufficient as a lone-standing tool for the analysis of this study's speech samples. For starters, Labov's approach was interview-based, where speech was treated primarily as a responsive action – a methodology significantly different to that of this study. Additionally to this, several researchers have questioned Labov's theoretical and methodological assumptions (Wolfram & Schilling 2015, p.395) as well as the validity of the Attention To Speech theory as the only or primary cause for style-shifting (Bell 1984, p.149). As a result, looking exclusively at Labov's understanding of style and stylistic variation has been considered inadequate for the purpose of this study. As such, further theories of style in which other factors are taken into account – such as the abundance of self-conscious speech which Labov's initial Attention To Speech approach largely disregarded – are presented.

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2   Note that vernacular here refers to the most natural and least self-conscious speaking style, which will differ from person to person and may range from a highly stigmatized version of AAE to British RP.