

‘Let’s talk about Reading!’: The role of rhythm in drag queen ritual insult

Jeremy Calder (*Stanford University*)

READING is the art of ritual insult as practiced within communities of drag queens, transpeople, and queer people of color. I argue that READING is performed with a distinct rhythmic style that cues to the listener that the speaker has shifted into a more highly performative frame. This frame shift allows the listener to interpret the READ as a speech act with a solidarity-building effect, rather than interpreting it as a proposition with potentially face-threatening truth-conditional semantic content.

Previous studies on ritual insult have discussed the context cues that allow a listener to interpret the insult as ‘play’ (Bateson 1955) rather than as a personal insult. For example, in THE DOZENS or SOUNDING, each SOUND is characterized by a semantic proposition that the interlocutor knows the speaker believes to be false (Labov 1972), and ESKIMO SONG DUELS are formalized, structured events in which the insults performed by the participants are socially sanctioned (Eckert and Newmark 1980). However, in READING, the semantic content of a READ is not always obviously false, and the venue in which it takes place is not always fixed. I argue that the cues into the READING FRAME are located within the linguistic style itself and not necessarily external to the event.

In examining how rhythm sets READING apart as a performative speech act, I examined data from three speech conditions, all taken from the reality TV competition *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The most performative condition was the READING CHALLENGE, a formalized challenge each season in which each drag queen READS all of her competitors and a winner is chosen. The second condition is SPONTANEOUS READING, consisting of off-the-cuff READS that happen organically as the queens converse backstage. Finally, the minimally performative condition is the TALKING condition, comprised of backstage conversations between the queens after the challenges for that episode have been completed. Speech data from each condition was segmented by clause, and two rhythmic variables were examined for each condition: **clause-internal syllable duration variability** and **clause-internal pauses**.

Both the READING CHALLENGE ($p < 0.001$) and SPONTANEOUS READING ($p < 0.01$) exhibited greater degrees of **clause-internal syllable duration variability** than the TALKING condition, largely driven by greater degrees of clause-final lengthening in the READING conditions. Furthermore, the READING CHALLENGE ($p < 0.001$) and SPONTANEOUS READING ($p < 0.001$) contained significantly fewer **clause-internal pauses** than the TALKING CONDITION. In sum, both READING conditions are executed in a formalized rhythmic style. The greater degree of clause-final lengthening in READING suggests that performers use an affective, rhythmic style that mirrors the structure of the READ, in which the durational affect is laid on top of the semantic punchline at the coda of the READ. In addition, the lack of clause-internal pauses in READING reflects a performative fluidity that must be executed in order for a READ to be seen as successful. The use of this formalized rhythmic style sets READING apart as a performative speech act whose effect is increased solidarity between the performers.

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