Case Closed?: Authenticity in Media Portrayals of Southern Dialects in *The Closer* and *CSI: Miami*

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Authenticity has shifted from a static to a dynamic sociolinguistic construct in recent years (Bucholtz 2003, Coupland 2003). With this shift has come a plethora of studies of authenticity through discourse. This project proposes a model of authenticity incorporating sociophonetic (as opposed to discursive) data.

The sociophonetic analysis presented here offers a quantitative approach to authenticity to supplement qualitative discourse studies. While this approach may seem to draw research back towards a static definition of authenticity, this is not necessarily the case. Blommaert and Varis (2011) introduce quantification by asserting that a key role in authenticity is "enoughness", when an individual uses enough "emblematic features" of a group to be considered an authentic member. Quantitative analyses may help reveal the mechanisms behind enoughness while also capturing the construct's dynamic nature, as features could shift so long as enoughness still exists. The present study builds on this quantification in a different way. Instead of looking at the effect of having enough features, the study presented here examines a case in which there may be too many features produced too extremely.

This project focuses on the Southern accents of two Southern television characters: Brenda Johnson, played by Kyra Sedgwick in *The Closer*, and Calleigh Duquesne, played by Emily Procter in *CSI: Miami*. Informal surveys of fans reveal polarized feelings towards the authenticity of Brenda's Southern dialect. While some approve of the dialect, others express strong opinions of inauthenticity. Viewers appear to perceive Calleigh more favorably than Brenda and do not present the same polarization in opinion.

My interest is in the polarized response to Brenda. The extremity of the bipolarity in audience responses sets this case apart. The project explores the source of some of these responses. Taking a quantitative and descriptive approach to the data, this project explores differences between Brenda and Calleigh's performed accents and suggests ways that differences and similarities between the characters may help develop a broader theory of authenticity.

Building on research presented at NWAV 42 (an impressionistic study of style-shifting in Brenda's velar nasal fronting and /ai/ glide weakening), this project presents an acoustic analysis of Brenda and Calleigh's vowels across multiple seasons. Ten to twenty tokens of fifteen vowels were measured then compared within and between speakers. Overall, Brenda's vowels show less consistency in placement and her dialect features show exaggerated variability relative to Calleigh. I propose that these differences indicate that consistency and exaggeration may be important components of theories that seek to explore authenticity. This finding complements Blommaert and Varis' assertion that part of authenticity is "enoughness." Linguistically, an authentic character must not only produce enough features, but also cannot have too many or produce them too extremely.

References

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