

Awareness in enregisterment: Performances of the California Vowel Shift in SNL's *The Californians*

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Enregisterment, the process by which linguistic features become linked to social types (Agha 2005), has been framed as involving metapragmatic practices (e.g. Silverstein 1993). Less attention has been paid to the role of feature-meaning links *below* the level of conscious awareness, or 'markers' and 'indicators' (Labov, 1972), in the makeup of these ideological packages. In this paper we examine one such set of features, the California Vowel Shift (CVS) (Hinton et al. 1987, Podesva 2011). Analyzing parodic performances of Southern California character types, we emphasize the role of such features in creating enregistered ideological representations of these types. We suggest that embodied aspects of language figure heavily in the proliferation of sub-conscious features in ideologies that connect language and social types.

In this study, we draw upon a recent series of sketch comedy performances, *The Californians*, on NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. This mock soap opera parodies the lives of affluent Los Angelenos. We analyze the speech of two actors, both born and raised in New York, who play recurring characters on the series. Taking midpoint measurements from every token of 11 vowel classes (N=359) in seven total performances, we compare their *The Californians* vowel spaces to their vowel spaces in non-Californian characters also featured in recurring performances on *SNL*.

Mixed-effects regressions show that for both actors, vowels were significantly shifted in the direction of the CVS when the actors were performing their Californian characters as compared to their non-Californian characters. Both Californian characters' back vowels BOOT and BOAT were significantly fronter ($p < 0.02$), front lax vowels BIT, BET and BAT were significantly lower and backer ($p < 0.05$), and for one actor, the Californian character's low-back vowels BOT and BOUGHT, were significantly more merged ($p < 0.002$), all features previously documented as part of the CVS (e.g. Kennedy & Grama 2012).

In using the CVS in their performances, the actors both draw on and contribute to the circulation of the ideological link between Californians and the CVS, though meta-linguistic discussion of the Shift is absent in popular discourse. Further, the use of the CVS in these skits is packaged with more explicitly discussed stereotypes of Californian identity, like clothing style and preoccupation with driving routes. The actors also employ specific articulatory settings (one an open jaw, one rounded lips) to achieve their parodic styles. These settings correspond with stereotyped bodily hexis (Bourdieu, 1977) of these character types, and almost certainly contribute to the production of California-shifted vowels: the open jaw causes a backing and lowering of the vowel space, for example. Through co-occurrence with more explicitly stereotyped stylistic features, these parodic performances can reinforce the link between sub-conscious features and social meanings in the popular imagination. Crucially, features below the level of consciousness may be produced via an enregistered bodily hexis that contributes to particular articulatory patterns. We argue that conceptions of enregisterment should include the contribution of linguistic features that are implicitly recognized, though not overtly discussed, and we advocate for further examinations of the role of embodiment in enregisterment.

References

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