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Voicing "Phono-Indexicals": On the Politics of Vocalic Variation in Metasemiosis

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Article abstract

Research on reflexivity in communication has shown that speakers leverage a range of semiotic strategies to segment and characterize linguistic variability. My work explores how entextualization and intertextuality play key roles in dialogically managing interpretations of sociophonetic variability (*cf.* Schilling-Estes 1998). I examine how speakers "voice" and comment on vocalic variation by employing interrelated modes of metapragmatic typification, including eye-dialect spelling, (explicit) metapragmatic discourse, constructed dialogue (Tannen 1989), and parodic double-voicing (Bakhtin 1981; Sclafani 2009). These strategies prove indispensable to the metapragmatic framing of phono-indexicals because most phonetic features in speech become objects of metasemiotic activity by virtue of their realization in specific words and salient texts, which in turn serve as sign vehicles for vocalic variables and other "semiotic hitchhikers" (Mendoza-Denton 2011). Accordingly, our capacity to reflexively model the pragmatics of sociophonotic variables derives in large part from our ability to segment and evaluate the more metalinguistically-available structures in which these phono-indexicals occur.

The case of /aw/ monophthongization in the speech of many young black women and men in Houston, Texas supports this position. Drawing on five years of ethnographic research at a public radio station in Houston, I consider how this pronunciation feature becomes tethered indexically to contested formulations of authenticity and indigineity by virtue of its occurrence in a locally-salient idiom, *COMIN' DINE* ([kʌmn dã:n] "coming down"). This idiom has become an enregistered emblem of a street-savvy "*gangsta*" persona in the popular music of Houston-based hip hop cultures. In this music, recontextualized across globally-circulating media, the expression of COMIN' DINE puts sociophonetic variation on display, rendering it available for metasemiotic negotiation through "Bakhtinian voicing" (Jaffe 2009).

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Voicing "Phono-Indexicals" : On the Politics of Vocalic Variation in Metasemiosis

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Introduction

In her sophisticated treatment of style, Eckert (2000, 2003, 2008) addresses how we position both "self and other" (Bell 1999; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Bucholtz 2011) by exploiting the indexical potentials of stylistic practices. We thereby mobilize the *pragmatic fit* between practices that function as social indexicals – including linguistic, kinesic, and sartorial practices – to construct "forms of personhood" (Agha 2011) and senses of (not) belonging mediated by the social histories of these indexicals, which work together in stylistic practice. In what follows, I focus on the question of pragmatic fit and metasemiotic awareness in cases where sociophonetic indexicals consistently co-occur with specific co-textual elements, such as lexical items (Coupland 2007; Johnstone *et al.* 2002; Woolard 2008; Zhang 2008), discourse markers (Mendoza-Denton 1997, 2011), and formulaic phrases (Schilling-Estes 1998). Specifically, I adopt Agha's (2004) notions of "textuality" and textual (non)congruence to explain how we make sense of the roles played by sociophonetic indexicals in constituting and construing semiotic "textures" (*Ibid.* : 2007).

Regarding the part played by such indexicals, we note that they work in concert with other sign phenomena, as illustrated by recent discussions of style that highlight the importance of focusing on the co-occurrence of variables (Eckert 2008; Mendoza-Denton 2011; Podesva 2008). These discussions of style accord with anthropological treatments of voice (Agha 2007; Hall 1995; Silverstein 1993, 2005) in that

both lines of research advocate an approach that attends to conditions of co-deployment. We find this approach, for example, in Agha's (2004) discussion of "textuality" – a concept he glosses as "co-occurrence with other signs" and describes as co-textual relations between indexicals that function together to regiment (construals of) a particular register :

> The actual use of a register's forms – its textual implementation –connects tokens of the register to other cooccurring signs by relations of contiguity or copresence; such surrounding material, both linguistic and non-linguistic in expression, forms a semiotic co-text that is itself construable (*Ibid.* : 32).

The nature of this construability, Agha argues, involves our capacity to model the fit between co-occurring indexicals in terms of "textual congruence or noncongruence" (2007 : 24). Textuality, from this perspective, "is another way of saying that a larger whole is evaluable for the congruence of its parts" (*Ibid.*). Such is the case, for example, when we apply schemes of value to establish and construct the fit between an utterance and its co-textual "parts". Accordingly, the "semiotic affordances" (van Leeuwen) of a particular utterance not only depend on our ability to segment and interpret the indexical elements that give form to the utterance; such affordances also depend on our capacity to model the textual fit between these co-occurring indexicals.

Regarding this relationship, Agha's (2004) notion of textuality captures the pragmatic coherence that emerges when indexically congruent resources are co-deployed to "voice" a persona or positionality. Over time and with some measure of consistency, these co-deployed resources become tethered indexically to one another, fueling metasemiotic processes whereby voices, voicing structures, and registers emerge as reified constellations of sign phenomena. Through consistent co-deployment across encounters, the semiotic elements that give shape to these constellations become analogously valourized through ideological schemes that motivate the co-occurrence of such elements according to a pragmatic scale of indexical "likeness" or similarity (Agha 2007).

These processes of cross-modal valourization affect individual indexicals only insofar as they co-occur temporally with other pragmatically congruent sign phenomena. Accordingly, sociophonetic variables such as creaky voice (Mendoza-Denton 2011), /ay/ raising (Eckert 2000), and falsetto (Podesva 2008) come to index particular personae and positionalities not in isolation, but by virtue of their co-occurrence with other features of language and context. These features converge temporally (*cf.* Podesva 2008), functioning in concert to regiment how we categorize and understand stretches of discourse as "decodable" tokens of enregistered voices. This convergence is key, as Mendoza-Denton suggests, because in isolation, an indexical feature such as creaky voice "does not suffice to regiment a whole genre" (2011 : 263).

This observation has direct implications for the view of textuality advanced here and by Agha (2004, 2007), insofar as we accord sociopho-

netic indexicals a place in the online processes by which we establish and construct textual (non)congruence. By including these phono-indexicals in such processes, we must assume that they are – in some measure – metasemiotically accessible to (implicit) commentary through voicing phenomena, such as parody and mocking (Chun 2009; Sclafani 2009). Writing about this metasemiotic accessibility, Mendoza-Denton draws on Silverstein (1993) in suggesting that some sociophonetic indexicals, such as creaky voice, are "poor candidate[s] for metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness" (2011 : 263), meaning they are less accessible to processes by which we co-construct textual (non)congruence.

At issue here, as Mendoza-Denton notes, is the extent to which speakers demonstrate the metapragmatic accessibility of phono-indexicals such as "creak" by mobilizing them not only to voice iconic personae, but also to voice and co-construct "character portrayals of these personae" (*Ibid.*). Following Mendoza-Denton, I propose that exploring the nature of this accessibilty is key to understanding how phono-indexicals become salient components of enregistered voices and voicing structures. Along these lines, Mendoza-Denton brings fine-grained phonetic variability into dialogue with a textuality underwritten by metapragmatic awareness in her formulation of "semiotic hitchhiking". This construct captures the observation that some potentially isolable facets of language – such as creak – bootstrap interactional potential from the semiotic vehicles in or through which they occur. Crucially, this structural relationship is not limited to sign phenomena that lack semiotic vehicles of their own, such as creak. We may also leverage the conceptual machinery of semiotic hitchhiking to capture the structural embedding of phono-indexicals in words and formulaic idioms that put sociophonetic variability on display.

To illustrate, consider cases from the sociolinguistic literature where vocalic variants have become stereotyped features of enregistered voices (Johnstone *et al.* 2002; Schilling-Estes 1998). Take the case of /aw/ monophtongization in Pittsburgh, for example, as described by Johnstone and her colleagues (2002). Much of this research focuses on the representation and circulation of monophthongal /aw/, commoditized as an emblem of local identity. We see the intertextual dimensions of these processes in the titles of articles on the subject, as well as in the data cited in such articles. Across these occasions of use, monophthongization is referenced and illustrated by citing its realization in a particular lexical item, 'downtown'.

For example, by leveraging orthographic resources for representing dialectal difference, sellers of commodified dialect products such as coffee mugs and T-shirts (Johnstone 2009) echo the monophthongal pronunciation by spelling the word 'downtown' as *dahntahn*. Key to our current purposes is the fact that this word and its eye-dialect representation serve as touchstones for negotiating an authentic Pitts-

burgh identity. As already established, *dahntahn* occurs in a variety of commodified forms and formulations (Agha 2011), which not only put sociophonetic variability on display, but also create indexical and intertextual relations between explicit formulations of Pittsburgh indigeneity and /aw/ monophthongization. Specifically, because *dahntahn* entextualizes a locally-salient phono-indexical, the denotative and connotative potentials of this lexeme stand to become tethered – indexically and intertextually – to the monophthongal variant it contains.

With that said, we might make some observations regarding the role of monophthongal /aw/ in producing (co)textuality across encounters. As mentioned above, this phonetic variant is frequently realized in the word 'downtown', across both written and spoken modalities. Crucially, eye-dialect spellings in various commodities provide evidence that, for at least some Pittsburghers, /aw/ monophthongization appears to be metapragmatically accessible to portrayals of localness (though see Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) for a critical discussion of the accessibility of this dialectal variant across social groups).

Accordingly, such (indirect) evidence of metasemiotic accessibility helps illustrate that monophthongal /aw/ is not only an identifiable element of a local semiotic, it's a manipulable element as well. What this means for the co-construction of textual congruence is that a phonetic quality appears accessible to voicing in part by virtue of its realization in the phono-lexical variant *dahntahn*. In this way, monophthongal /aw/ becomes an accessible and interpretable element of more complex textual structures, including lexemes and commodity formulations that recruit such lexemes (and the phonetic variability they entextualize) in order to voice the authentically local.

Having thus established the segmentability of monophthongal /aw/, I turn now to its semiotic affordances by considering the ways in which this phono-indexical co-occurs with other sign phenomena. By virtue of its entextualization in *dahntahn*, for example, we note that /aw/ monophthongization co-occurs, as it were, with the lexical item in which it is nested. The entextualization of this variability thus connects phonetic and lexical orders of organization. By extension, Pittsburgh's centre-city as a metonym of local, lived experience stands a good chance to become linked indexically with monophthongization. In this way, lexical meanings are brought into dialogue with the construability of a phono-indexical.

Regarding this relationship between words and the sounds they entextualize, Podesva writes : "[s]ocial meaning may attach to phonetic qualities, but this meaning derives in part from the affect signaled by the referential meaning of words on which phonetic qualities appear" (2008 : 8). Accordingly, through consistent realization in the word 'downtown', the monophthongal variant takes on a spatial quality by virtue of its occurrence in a lexeme that gets recruited to articulate senses of

indigineity. Furthermore, extrapolating from Johnstone's research on commodified dialect (2009), we might also add that *dahntahn* frequently co-occurs on T-shirts with other emblems of a mediatized Pittsburgh indigineity, including the locally circulating pronominal form 'yinz' (*you ones*) and the vernacular form of the toponym Pittsburgh, rendered orthographically as *Pixburgh*. T-shirts bearing such representations of local speech are featured in media that facilitate the advertisement and sale of these cultural products. Consequently, across occasions of use, monophthongal /aw/ becomes tethered not only to the geo-culturally inflected word in which it occurs, but also to a broader co(n)text in which this phono-lexical variant helps articulate an authentically local voice by mobilizing vernacular speech.

Alongside Mendoza-Denton's description of semiotic hitchhiking, the case of /aw/ monophthongization in Pittsburgh helps illustrate that less-than-salient sign phenomena, like vocalic variants, can become metapragmatially accessible and manipulable. As we have established, this metapragmatic potential revolves in part around processes of entextualization and social circulation. Specifically, in the Pittsburgh case, sociophonetic variability is "bundled" (Keane 2003) with the denotative and connotative potentials of 'downtown'. Moreover, in addition to bootstrapping meaning from the word 'downtown', /aw/ monophthongization becomes coloured pragmatically by co-occurrence with (other) indexicals of a Pittsburgh indigineity. As described above, these indexicals co-occur with one another in commodity formulations that bring a semiotics of indigineity to the fore. Through reflexive representations of "local speech" that focus on fine-grained phonetic detail such as vowel quality, these commodified representations do more than put sociophonetic variability on display. They also put such variability into social circulation by inscribing material goods with orthographic representations of sociophonetic variation (*e.g.*, T-shirts that feature the phono-lexical variant *dahntahn*). In these ways, work on /aw/ variation in Pittsburgh complements Mendoza-Denton's (2011) formulation of semiotic hitchhiking by throwing into relief the ways in which phono-indexicals – such as vocalic variants – become identifiable and ideologically-valourized elements of enregistered voices.

Building on these insights, the present paper examines how some cases of entextualized variability – specifically those involving what Mendoza-Denton terms "magnets for variation" (*Ibid.* : 142) – appear to render phono-indexicals accessible to metapragmatic commentary through various voicing phenomena. Put differently, I seek here to address a question Mendoza-Denton poses in her discussion of semiotic hitchhiking : "How do variables in different contexts of use and at different levels of metalinguistic awareness become recurrent features of personae, and become accessible to character portrayals of these personae by other speakers?" (*Ibid.* : 261). I address these questions in the pages that follow by leveraging ideas such as Woolard's "semiotic house

that Jack built" (2008) to elaborate the structural dimensions of semiotic hitchhiking. Specifically, I propose the notion of *indexical nesting* to capture how phono-indexicals bootstrap interactional potential from the texts through which they occur, as well as from recurrent co-textual items. Focusing on indexical nesting as one type of co-occurrence, I highlight the ways in which this relationship renders phono-indexicals accessible to voicing. To this end, my analysis focuses on another case of /aw/ variation, in which the monopthongal variant has become an entextualized element of a local voice.

Regarding the role of monophthongal /aw/ in regimenting senses of indigineity, I discuss how the metapragmatics of a local voice are framed and negotiated through strategies for "Bakhtinian voicing" (Jaffe 2009 : 117) that include constructed dialogue and explicit metapragmatic discourse. By focusing on the place of sociophonetic variability in such strategies, I seek to build on anthropological perspectives of voice by bringing this construct into (closer) dialogue with recent sociolinguistic work on style. Specifically, I further develop the analogy between 'voice' and 'style', advanced at the outset of this article, to highlight the role played by sociophonetic variability in forging the sound-shape of enregistered voices. By focusing on how vocalic variation helps regiment specific utterances as tokens of registered phenomena, I hope to throw light on the metasemiotic functionality of (entextualized) phono-indexicals as interpretable metonyms of enregistered voices.

With these goals in mind, I describe and discuss two case studies in which speakers voice /aw/ variation to negotiate the metapragmatics of this stylistic practice. Crucially, these case studies are part of a larger ethnographic project at a public radio station in Houston, Texas, which focuses on the intertextual bases of metapragmatic awareness in the case of phono-indexicals. I draw on this research here to develop the idea of indexical nesting, with an eye toward understanding what role this relationship plays in facilitating the metapragmatic accessibility of /aw/ monophthongization in particular, and vocalic variation more generally.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In Section Two, I describe indexical nesting in greater detail, situating this construct in relation to relevant ideas in the literature. Next, in Section Three, I discuss the broader research context that informs the present analysis. After this brief contextualization, I present two case studies in Section Four that illustrate how indexical nesting foregrounds phonetic variation, putting it into intertextual circulation. Before I move on to a discussion of these case studies, however, I turn first to a brief explication and illustration of indexical nesting.

Section Two : Indexical Nesting and Related Constructs

Broadly speaking, indexical nesting elaborates the structural relationship that characterizes semiotic hitchhiking by focusing on the

role of entextualized variability in connecting phonetic variants and other indexical sign phenomena with evocatively rich textures, such as taboo words. Regarding this connection, indexical nesting addresses a specific kind of co-occurrence relationship wherein one indexical sign is structurally embedded in some higher-order unit of textual organization. By using metaphors such as "nesting" and "embedding" here, I aim to capture the componentiality of phonetic features and other indexicals that together contribute to the overall semiotic shape of a particular text. Specifically, I seek to highlight how embedded indexicals – such as vocalic variants – come to function as inputs to the co-construction of textuality.

Regarding how such variants contribute to textual (non)congruence, we must consider that a majority of phono-indexicals do not occur freely in isolation (Mendoza-Denton 2011). To illustrate with a case of vocalic variation, consider /I/-lowering in (southern) California English, where neither the lowered nor the unlowered variant occurs in isolation as a monosyllabic word. Accordingly, our situated experience and knowledge of /I/-lowering must derive from our exposure to lexical items and texts through which the lowered variant not only occurs, but also crystallizes and acquires interactional potential (*cf.* Mendoza-Denton2011; Podesva 2008; Woolard 2008).

Crucially, this acquisition of pragmatic functionality hinges on consistent realizations of the lowered variant in a text that bears important discourse functions or evokes some salient position in the sociocultural landscape (Coupland 2007; Mendoza-Denton 2011; Podesva 2008; Woolard 2008). In the case of /I/-lowering, for example, we note that speakers leverage the taboo word 'bitch' in both spoken and written portrayals of an enregistered Californian voice – much in the same way that locals leverage the phono-lexical variant *dahntahn* to represent authentic "Pittsburghese". Such similarities extend to the parallel use of orthographic resources to capture the entextualization of a marked vocalic variant. For example, metapragmatic stereotyping of /I/-lowering in California draws attention to this stylistic practice in part through eye-dialect spellings of the phono-lexical variant *betch*. In such cases, speakers foreground and negotiate the metapragmatics of /I/-lowering by referencing its use in this evocatively rich taboo word.

What these and similar cases of entextualized variability (Eckert 2000; Johnstone *et al.* 2002; Mendoza-Denton 1997, 2011; Schilling-Estes 1998; Woolard 2008; Zhang 2008) help to illustrate is how the indexical potential of a sociophonetic feature is shaped by its consistent realization in a particular text. This text may even function as a sign vehicle for phonetic features that do not occur in isolation, as Mendoza-Denton's 2011 discussion of creaky voice shows. In this work, for example, the author describes how discourse markers entextualize a phonetic quality, putting it into intertextual circulation and making

this feature accessible to certain voicing phenomena (including what Mendoza-Denton dubs "character portrayals" of socially available personae [2011]).

Thus formulated, semiotic hitchhiking and indexical nesting share an interest in conditions of co-occurrence that render phono-indexicals available for voicing. For instance, both constructs suggest that entextualization is a fundamental prerequisite to the reproducibility and metapragmatic accessibility of sociophonetic features. Furthermore, both constructs focus on a specific type of co-occurrence relationship, wherein a phonetic variable does more than simply co-occur *with* another indexical, it co-occurs *through* another indexical. More specifically, in the case of semiotic hitchhiking, creaky voice "docks onto" (*Ibid.* : 2011) discourse markers that put this feature on display and into social circulation.

In much the same way, indexical nesting focuses on the entextualization of a (phono)indexical in some lexical item, idiom, or higher-order semiotic texture. More specifically, this construct seeks to capture how embedding textures function as intertextual touchstones for voicing and metapragmatically framing social-semiotic variability. Here, we might acknowledge not only the conceptual overlap between indexical nesting and semiotic hitchhiking, but also the subtle ways in which these constructs differ in both scope and foci.

For instance, Mendoza-Denton formulates semiotic hitchhiking to specifically address the spread and reproducibility of creaky voice, a supra-segmental sign phenomenon that "has no referential meaning, no continuous segmentability", and which "can't even be pronounced in isolation" (2011 : 262). Some vocalic variables, by contrast, *can* occur in isolation as various monosyllabic words. Consider Woolard's 2008 discussion of /ay/ monophthongization in Texas, for instance. In this case, the vocalic variable ,/ay/ – specifically the monophthongal variant [a :] – has become an emblematic feature of a local, enregistered voice. Regarding conditions of occurrence, we note that both variants of /ay/ may be realized in isolation, as the words 'eye' and 'awe' illustrate. Consequently, following Mendoza-Denton's criteria for hitchhiking, some vocalic variables would not qualify as semiotic hitchhikers because they require no additional sign vehicle to occur. That being said, while such variables fail to meet the first criterion of semiotic hitchhiking, they certainly meet the second criterion involving co-occurrence and "simultaneous circulation" (2011 : 263). Specifically, as we saw in the case of /aw/ variation in Pittsburgh, the monophthongal variant "hitches a ride on another co-occurring vehicle to circulate and spread" (*Ibid.*).

In this regard then, both indexical nesting and semiotic hitchhiking focus on conditions of co-occurrence that catapult variables such as vowels and voice quality into wider social circulation. Regarding foci, however, we note several important differences between the two

constructs. With semiotic hitchhiking, for instance, we see a focus on understanding how supra-segmental features of language gain wide social currency, despite appearing to lie beyond the conscious grasp of even those speakers who use such features. Indexical nesting, on the other hand, focuses less on spread and more on how the crystallization of a linguistic variant in an embedding texture produces an intertextual resource that enables speakers to mobilize sociolinguistic variability in the service of creating "voicing contrasts" (Agha 2005).

Furthermore, as it is formulated here, indexical nesting applies to a wider range of phenomena than semiotic hitchhiking, which focuses specifically on features of language that have no dedicated sign vehicle of their own. By contrast, indexical nesting includes within its scope any structural relationship where one indexical sign is embedded in some higher-order textual unit, from which the nested indexical bootstraps metapragmatic accessibility. Thus, while I leverage indexical nesting here and below to motivate the role played by vocalic variants in constructing and exploiting forms of textuality, this construct equally applies to any case of structural embedding in which one indexical sign acquires greater salience by virtue of its sedimentation in a particularly evocative text.

In the case of vocalic variation, indexical nesting works to effectively bundle a phonetic variant together with a particular text. Such bundling involves both structural embedding and some functional correlation or pragmatic fit between phono-indexicals and the texts through which they occur. Regarding such a pragmatic fit, we might ask why these particular texts appear to attract the use of marked phonetic variants. Put differently, what is it about these specific texts that makes them "magnets for variation?" (Mendoza-Denton 1997).

Woolard asks a similar question in her essay on the emergence of "iconic variables". In this work, the author inquires : "Through what mechanisms do speakers' cultural construals – whether of community, stance, or self – come to settle on particular linguistic forms for their semiotic work of social differentiation while others are ignored?" (2008 : 440). To address this question, he leverages Errington's (1985) idea of "pragmatic salience" to motivate the reproducibility and accessibility of (DH) variation. As the author notes, pragmatic salience seeks to capture the observation that some linguistic elements are "recognized by speakers as more crucial mediators of social relations" (*Ibid.*). Consider for example the case of participant deictics, which Woolard argues exhibit high pragmatic salience because they refer to persons indexically, anchoring this reference to the circumstances of particular encounters through which social relations are negotiated (Agha 2007). Following this logic then, a phonetic variable that occurs in a participant deictic stands a greater chance of becoming metapragmatically available than variables whose (lexical) distributions do not include such high-salience items. Woolard makes precisely this point while discussing the phono-

indexical (DH), whose distribution includes several participant deictics (*e.g.*, 'them', 'they').

Writing about the iconic status of this variable as a stereotyped feature of U.S. English, Woolard argues that "its specialization in indexical reference makes this phonological element pragmatically salient and especially ripe for social semiotic and stylistic work…" (*Ibid.* : 443). Put differently, the frequent occurrence of (DH) in pragmatically salient textures puts this variable on display, calling attention to the marked variant and tethering its construal to the indexical work done by the embedding textures. Regarding the role of structural embedding in focusing attention on phonetic features, Woolard proposes that "specific phonological elements are foregrounded when and because they occur within morphemes or lexical items that are themselves foregrounded in interaction" (*Ibid.* : 447). The author continues, arguing that

> [t]hese morphological and lexical elements are foregrounded socially because of their role in articulating interactants' evaluative stances or relations in interaction and/or culturally because of their centrality to identity-defining activities, in a kind of *semiotic house that Jack built* (*Ibid.* Emphasis added).

With this metaphor, Woolard captures the indexical connections between phonetic variants and the salient texts through which they both occur and circulate. The logic behind Woolard's "semiotic house that Jack built" thus accords with Mendoza-Denton's 2011 formulation of semiotic hitchhiking, in that both ideas emphasize how the realization of phonetic features in salient texts highlights their occurrence. Crucially, this structural nesting links the construal of such features to the interactive potential of the texts in which they are embedded.

In what follows, I build on Woolard's discussion of the "semiotic house that Jack built" by focusing on a case in which a phono-indexical has become an entextualized component of the idiomatic text in which it occurs. Specifically, I seek to expose how the entextualization of a marked phonetic variant produces an intertextual resource for voicing and metapragmatically framing phonetic variability. Put differently, my aim here is to highlight the ways in which speakers mobilize entextualized variability in order to create voicing contrasts, as well as to negotiate the pragmatic contribution made by nested phono-indexicals in the co-construction of textuality.

With these aims in mind, I present below two case studies that examine how monopthongal /aw/ becomes culturally legible through its realization in an idiomatic text. Specifically, I take a discourse-analytic perspective on the ways in which /aw/ monophthongization crystallizes through its occurrence in an expression used among many younger Black Houstonians. This expression – 'coming down' – entextualizes monopthongal /aw/, as reflected by cases of eye-dialect spelling in which the expression is rendered as *COMIN DINE*. Crucially, the orthographic choice here echoes the homophony of words like 'down' and 'dine', which

may both be realized with monopthongs as [da : n].

As I will show, the idiom *COMIN DINE* functions as a magnet for marked variation because this texture is tied intertextually to articulations of indigineity and personhood. Through its use in such "identity-defining activities" (Woolard 2008 : 447), this idiom has become emblematic of a local voice, indexed by *COMIN DINE* and the monopthongal variant it entextualizes. Thus, similar to the case of /aw/ monopthongization in Pittsburgh, the Houston case illustrates how an embedding texture connects phono-indexical variation to explicit representations of the authentically local. Before we consider how speakers leverage this connection, I turn first to a brief description of the broader research context that informs the present analysis.

Section 3 : Indexical Nesting in its Broader Research Context

The work I report on here was carried out as part of a larger ethnographic study focusing on the semiotics of inclusion and indigineity at a public radio station in Houston, Texas. Grounded in over four years of fieldwork, this research examines how speakers leverage entextualized variation to foreground, talk about, and manage the situated interpretation of phono-indexicals. Specifically, my work in Houston focuses on the contribution that such indexicals make in forging representations of indigineity. In this regard, the present study shares an emphasis on the politics of phonetic variation with sociolinguistic studies of style (Bucholtz 2011; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Podesva 2008; Zhang 2008), which continue to demonstrate how subtle forms of variability contribute semiotically to articulations of groupness and senses of inclusion and exclusion.

Building on the insights of such studies, the case of variation that I examine below is tied intimately to contested representations of the authentically local in hip hop lyrics. As numerous scholars have shown (Alim 2002; Forman 2002; Harrison 2009; Ogbar 2007), a focus on indigineity permeates articulations of personhood in a great deal of popular hip hop music. This focus is motivated by an ideology that invests putatively tough, lower-to-working class neighbourhoods with a sense of authenticity. More specifically, these places function as indexicals of the status accorded to prominent figures or social icons who embody the qualities attributed to such neighbourhoods. Thus, by claiming to be from these places, popular rappers make somewhat indirect claims concerning their toughness and other aspects of personal character.

Regarding such metonymic uses of place in hip hop, we observe that the city figures as prominently as the neighborhood in self-presentation. For instance, rappers who claim to be from and speak for a particular neighbourhood also often claim to speak for, or represent, the city as a whole. Through their lyrics, such rappers flesh out images of the city by portraying particular neighbourhoods and the lives lived there as

representative of Houston. In this way, popular artists who claim to speak for the city essentialize one perspective on indigineity through lyrics that selectively portray a cross-section of local practices and personae as essential to what makes Houston distinct from other city-specific music scenes.

Through their essentializing portrayals of the authentically local, established rappers mobilize vernacularity to index an experiential connection to place – mediated by familiarity with and fluency in vernacular norms. For example, consider the colloquial terms for territorialized practices in the following excerpt from an interview with Houston rapper Mike Jones : "I'm from H-Town. I sip lean. I ride candy paint. Grills in the mouth, diamonds shining. I love where I'm from. I'm proud of that". Here, Jones appeals to a number of social practices central to articulations of a distinctive Houston semiotic, including practices related to car culture ("candy paint" refers metonymically to a car with a custom paint job), drug culture ("sippin' lean", or drinking a codeine-laced beverage), and local fashion trends (wearing "grills" or diamond-encrusted jewelry fitted over one's teeth). By juxtaposing these colloquial terms for social practices with the declaration "I'm from H-Town", Jones subtly equates being from Houston with knowledge and usage of a broader vernacular register, to which terms such as "grills" and "lean" belong.

Thus, as this example helps to illustrate, artists like Jones (implicitly) regiment senses of indigineity through the selective foregrounding of vernacular items. Such foregrounding puts these items on display, while relegating competing vernacular norms to the social-semiotic margins. Accordingly, deciding whose vernacular norms to recruit in representing the city proves to be a highly political choice, through which rappers circumscribe the semiotic parameters of a local authenticity. Put differently, by selectively foregrounding indexicals of indigineity such as "grills" and "lean", popular rappers connect these vernacular items with a particular vision of the legitimately local.

In what follows, I consider how the consistent occurrence of monophthongal /aw/ in the expression *COMIN DINE* yields an intertextual resource that foregrounds /aw/ monophthongization, enabling speakers to connect the use of this variant with specific articulations of the local. Crucially, the speakers cited below exploit this connection by putting /aw/ variation to work through a variety of voicing strategies, including explicit metapragmatic discourse and constructed dialogue. As the case studies will show, speakers employ these strategies to highlight how monophthongal /aw/ contributes to the negotiation of a distinctively local aesthetic. Accordingly, the analyses that follow throw light on intertextual processes that enable speakers to voice and comment on vocalic variation.

Section Four : /aw/ Monophthongization : Two Case Studies

The first case study focuses on lyrics from a song called "Autobahn" by Houston-based rapper Savvi. This artist is part of a local group that goes by the name H.I.S.D – playing on an acronym for the Houston Independent School District. The decision to use such a spatially inflected name echoes the group's focus on (re)defining the semiotic contours of a local voice and identity. This focus manifests not only in naming practices, but also in lyrics that directly address the emergence of a local stereotype. Crucially, through their music, members of H.I.S.D. openly challenge lyrics that essentialize the semiotic terms of indigineity.

We have already seen the subtlety of such essentialization, for instance, in the Mike Jones excerpt. There, the artist fleshes out a sense of the local by referencing specific social practices, subsequently pushing forward processes of stereotypification. To illustrate how rappers marginalized by such processes orient to a local stereotype, consider the exchange in the following ethnographic excerpt. In this passage, Houston rapper Fat Tony (*FT*) echoes Mike Jones' comments above in discussing the influence of stereotyping on identity practices in local hip hop (I am speaker *C* in the transcript) :

1 *C* Do you think there's a stereotype for Houston rap music?

2 *FT* Hell yes I think there's a stereotype.

3 *C* What is it? How would you describe it?

4 *FT* Just the whole, scene of like you know, candy cars, grills, stuff like

5 that. Like cuz like that was what was presented first for like

6 Houston rap music. Like when that was from the, the Still Tippin'

7 video came out, that was what the whole country thought of just

8 Houston rap music, period. Like that was, so, so, they just look at

9 that and like obviously every-everybody would sound like that to

10 them, you know? That's a, a big problem.

Here, Fat Tony cites the significance of Mike Jones' song "Still Tippin'" in shaping public images of Houston and distinguishing the city from competing music scenes. For example, the song cited features numerous references to local, lexicalized social practices, such as "tippin', or manipulating a hydraulic suspension while cruising "on four Vogues""(*i.e.*, Vogue-brand tires). Established artists leverage such indices of lived experience by recontextualizing in-group terms for these practices, giving rise to an intertextually grounded framework for legitimizing on-mic identities.

Rappers and groups such as H.I.S.D. draw on this framework to

legitimize their own claims to indigineity, which call for a "multivocal" (Rodman 1992) perspective on the local that leaves room for social-semiotic variability. To illustrate, consider the following example, in which H.I.S.D. group member Equality recontextualizes the expression "still tippin'" to index a distinctive Houston voice. Here, the artist employs a multi-lane highway metaphor to capture the polyphony that characterizes H.I.S.D'.s take on indigineity.

1 "Y'all boys ain't that typical mayne [= man]",

2 Same road, we just tippin' from a different lane

3 beautiful side of an ugly game,

4 H-Town [ta : n], what a lovely twang,

5 What it do? Now the whole world lovin' our slang…

In this passage, we see how constructed dialogue – discussed in the second case study – may be leveraged to position both self and other. Specifically, the dialogue that Equality constructs involves the unknown, arguably fictive, voice of someone saying to H.I.S.D. that they "ain't that typical mayne". In this double-voiced declaration, Equality embeds the distinctive Houston discourse marker and term of salutation, "mayne", in the turn of his fictive interlocutor (line 1), counterposing the cultural images evoked by this vernacular item with something alternative – a style not "typical" in regard, presumably, to popular currents of Houston rap music.

Equality distinguishes between competing currents in the next line, employing metastylistic discourse to compose a metaphor that creates space for multiplicity. Toward this end, Equality emphasizes social similarity by talking about the "same road" of hip hop cultural production in Houston. However, the artist subtly separates himself and his group from other popular currents via the car-culture metaphor, using the multi-lane source domain as a material analogue to the multiplicity that characterizes competing currents of Houston hip hop – each vying for equity or, in some cases, exclusivity when it comes to defining the semiotic parameters of indigineity.

As I have already noted, such parameters include the use of vernacular items like *COMIN DINE*, whose intertextual histories help connect nested phono-indexicals with hegemonic formulations of the local. In the following excerpt, Savvi comments on this connection through explicit metapragmatic discourse, through which he foregrounds the indexical potentials of /aw/ monophthongization.

1 Hear the pound in the beat, H-Town what it be?

2 What it do? What it don't? What it is? What it be?

3 Would it be out of line [la : n], if I said *COMIN DINE* [da : n] or

4 Comin' out hard, with a millimeter nine, or

5 Corner one more time, see that booty from behind

6 This is underground king spit, organized noise with

7 aggravated monkey still swinging from a vine,

8 Grip it on that other level wood-wheel on recline…

To elucidate how phonetic variability is mobilized here to create voicing contrasts, I call attention first to the realization of /aw/ in the passage. There, several words contain the variable in question, including 'pound', 'Town', 'underground', and 'down'. Crucially, each of these words is realized with a pronounced diphthong, except in the case of *COMIN DINE*, where /aw/ is realized monophthongally. I argue that this distribution provides evidence that the monophthongal variant may be mobilized through the expression *COMIN DINE* in order to construct voicing contrasts based in vocalic variability.

Regarding the metapragmatics surrounding this variability, we observe that Savvi calls attention to monophthongal /aw/ through a rhetorical question that explicitly focuses on matters of pragmatic fit. By asking whether it would "be out of line" if he "said *COMIN DINE*", Savvi suggests that his use of this expression might be viewed by some Houstonians as inappropriate or inauthentic. Furthermore, addressing the whole of "H-Town" in line 1, Savvi questions not only who may legitimately use *COMIN DINE*, but also how the use of this expression should be read in relation to prior, authoritative usage in popular hip hop lyrics. In this regard, Savvi challenges ideologies that construe monophthongal /aw/ as an iconized indexical of an exclusive indigineity.

Thus, as this first case illustrates, *COMIN DINE* functions as an intertextual resource for regimenting construals of /aw/ monophthongization. Specifically, Savvi interrogates the popular metapragmatics of monophthongal /aw/ by asking who may legitimately use the iconic expression in which this variant has crystallized. Accordingly, the H.I.S.D. excerpt demonstrates how monophthongal /aw/ is brought into explicit metapragmatic focus through its contextualized use in the emblematic idiom *COMIN DINE*. In the next case, we see how the metapragmatic negotiation of /aw/ monophthongization may take on a subtler, more implicit character.

Specifically, the second case examines the use of constructed dialogue to voice contrasting perspectives of the local in an ethnographic interview, conducted in 2004 with Houston-based DJ Big Chance. Central below are the ways in which Big Chance's ventriloquism interacts with the surrounding co-text of the interview. For example, nowhere else is the phrase *COMIN DINE* used, and throughout the interview, Big Chance realizes /aw/ diphthongally. No other word containing this variable is

realized as monophthongally as the lengthened (39 ms) token in line 5. Accordingly, by monophthizing /aw/ in the expression *COMIN DINE*, Big Chance voices what he and his constructed interactant perceive to be a style representative of Houston hip hop (again, I am the second speaker in the excerpt) :

1 *BC* And and y'know it, uh, uh, like I said it's a style like uh..
2 no other <H> AND, you know what I, you know what I hate, uh..
3 I – this is one thing I dislike about Houston artists…
4 They'll say, "ah" they'll come up to me "ah yeah I don' rap like that
5 *COMIN DINE* and, all that otha stuff", and what I tell people is, Dog, w –
6 it's nothin wrong with, that rappin like you from Houston Texas cause
7 some cats'll come down here and "ah I don't sound like these boys around
8 here" Well there's nothing wrong with nothing wrong with soundin like
9 'em it's what you put into it [I mean]
10 *C* [that's right]
11 *BC* it's, it's not – it's nothing wrong with soundin like 'em, cause I'm a tell
12 you what, The, the people you tryin sound like the East and the, and the,
13 and the, and the ATLs but you know how they tryin to sound like, you
14 know who they, who they listenin to? Yall, Houston cats.

Key here is how Big Chance equates indigineity with a broader register to which *COMIN DINE* belongs : "it's nothing wrong with, that rappin like you from Houston Texas". For Big Chance, *COMIN DINE* is part and parcel of a register he views – and imagines others to view – as representative of hip hop in Houston. Moreover, through a subtle naturalizing move in line 6, my interlocutor portrays this register as *the* way to sound local, indicating indirectly that "rappin like you from Houston Texas" involves the mobilization of vernacular resources such as *COMIN DINE* and the monophthongal variant it entextualizes.

Big Chance leverages these resources in the passage above to construct voicing contrasts grounded in phonetic variability. As already noted, nowhere else in the interview did I find a token of /aw/ as monophthongal as the realization in line 5. Furthermore, scanning the passage for tokens of /aw/, we observe that several words contain this variable, including 'down', 'sound', and 'around'. Crucially, each of these items is produced dipthongally, save for the monophthongal realization of /aw/ in the expression *COMIN DINE*. Moreover, by embedding this expression in constructed dialogue, Big Chance connects an overt change

in voicing structure with the monophthongal production of /aw/.

In these ways then, the two case studies illustrate how *COMIN DINE* and monophthongal /aw/ are leveraged to regiment the social-semiotic parameters of indigineity. In both cases, speakers who otherwise seldom produce the monophthongal variant mobilize this indexical by leveraging *COMIN DINE* to construct voicing contrasts. Drawing on such distributional evidence, the analyses highlight how this expression functions as a cultural touchstone for negotiating the metapragmatics of monophthongal /aw/. Moreover, as the H.I.S.D. excerpt suggests, *COMIN DINE* has become indexically and intertextually tethered to formulations of indigineity that downplay or erase multivocality. Accordingly, rappers such as Savvi of H.I.S.D. employ the expression in question to challenge widely-held beliefs regarding how Houston rappers should sound.

Conclusion

By examining the case of /aw/ variation in context, I have sought in this article to highlight how speakers negotiate the metapragmatics of a phono-indexical through its use in an evocative text. As shown above, the entextualization of this indexical brings phonetic variability into dialogue with the interactional work done by *COMIN DINE*. Regarding this relationship between words and the sounds they entextualize, Podesva says "[s]ocial meaning may attach to phonetic qualities, but this meaning derives in part from the affect signaled by the referential meaning of words on which phonetic qualities appear" (2008 : 8). Accordingly, across occasions of use, monophthongal /aw/ has become tethered not only to the geo-culturally inflected idiom in which it occurs, but also to a broader co(n)text in which this idiom helps articulate an authentically local voice by mobilizing vernacular speech.

Furthermore, focusing on indexical nesting as one type of co-occurrence, I have highlighted the ways in which this structural relationship renders phono-indexicals accessible to voicing strategies, such as constructed dialogue. Through such strategies, artists like Savvi construct voicing contrasts, calling attention to monophthongal /aw/ and questioning its place in a distinctively local aesthetic. In these ways, the present article builds on recent insights into the intertextual bases of phono-indexical meaning (Mendoza-Denton 2011; Schilling-Estes 1998; Woolard 2008) by addressing how intertextuality underwrites the politics of vocalic variation.

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Abstract

Research on reflexivity in communication has shown that speakers leverage a range of semiotic strategies to segment and characterize linguistic variability. My work explores how entextualization and intertextuality play key roles in dialogically managing interpretations of sociophonetic variability (*cf.* Schilling-Estes 1998). I examine how speakers "voice" and comment on vocalic variation by employing interrelated modes of metapragmatic typification, including eye-dialect spelling, (explicit) metapragmatic discourse, constructed dialogue (Tannen 1989), and parodic double-voicing (Bakhtin 1981; Sclafani 2009). These strategies prove indispensable to the metapragmatic framing of phono-indexicals because most phonetic features in speech become objects of metasemiotic activity by virtue of their realization in specific words and salient texts, which in turn serve as sign vehicles for vocalic variables and other "semiotic hitchhikers" (Mendoza-Denton 2011). Accordingly, our capacity to reflexively model the pragmatics of sociophonotic variables derives in large part from our ability to segment and evaluate the more metalinguistically-available structures in which these phono-indexicals occur.

The case of /aw/ monophthongization in the speech of many young black women and men in Houston, Texas supports this position. Drawing on five years of ethnographic research at a public radio station in Houston, I consider how this pronunciation feature becomes tethered indexically to contested formulations of authenticity and indigeneity by virtue of its occurrence in a locally-salient idiom, *COMIN' DINE* ([kʌmn dɑ̃:n] "coming down"). This idiom has become an enregistered emblem of a street-savvy "*gangsta*" persona in the popular music of Houston-based hip hop cultures. In this music, recontextualized across globally-circulating media, the expression of COMIN' DINE puts sociophonetic variation on display, rendering it available for metasemiotic negotiation through "Bakhtinian voicing" (Jaffe 2009).

Résumé

Les travaux portant sur la réflexivité en communication ont montré que les locuteurs font appel à une série de stratégies sémiotiques pour segmenter et décrire la variabilité linguistique. Ma recherche consiste à explorer le rôle dominant joué par la mise en texte et l'intertextualité dans l'interprétation dialogique de la variabilité socio-phonétique (*cf.* Schilling-Estes 1998). Au moyen de différentes stratégies de classification méta-pragmatiques (notamment l'usage d'orthographes non standards; les formes de discours méta-pragmatiques; le dialogue construit [Tannen 1989]; l'hétéroglossie parodique [Bakhtine 1981; Sclafani 2009]), j'examine l'énonciation de variations phonétiques et le commentaire métalinguistique des locuteurs à ce sujet. Ces stratégies se révèlent indispensables au cadrage méta-pragmatique des index phonétiques, car la plupart des traits phonétiques du langage peuvent se transformer en traits méta-sémiotiques dès lors qu'ils se manifestent dans des mots

et des textes : ils deviennent alors des signes de variations phonétiques ou encore tiennent lieu d'autres "autostoppeurs sémiotiques" (*semiotic hitchhikers* au sens de Mendoza-Denton 2011). Par conséquent, notre aptitude à modeler de manière réflexive la pragmatique des variables socio-phonétiques du langage vient en grande partie de notre capacité à segmenter et à évaluer les environnements méta-linguistiques où se manifestent ces index phonétiques.

Le cas du monophtongue /aw/ dans le discours de beaucoup de jeunes gens de race noire à Houston (Texas) confirme cette hypothèse. Sur la base d'une recherche ethnographique conduite depuis cinq ans dans une station de radio publique, j'examine comment cette prononciation caractéristique est devenue un index d'authenticité locale, voire d'autochtonie, en vertu de sa présence dans un idiome propre à cette région : *COMIN' DINE* ([kʌmn dɑ̃ːn] "*coming down*"). Cet idiome est devenu un emblème reconnu du personnage "*gangsta*" de la musique populaire issue des cultures hip hop de Houston. Dans cette musique, maintenant re-contextualisée à l'échelle globale grâce à la circulation des média, l'expression *COMIN' DINE* exhibe la variabilité socio-phonétique et l'ouvre à une négociation méta-sémiotique à travers le jeu d'une multiplicité de voix au sens bakhtinien (Jaffe 2009).

CHRIS TAYLOR (Ph.D. Candidate, Rice University) is currently finishing his dissertation in Linguistics. His research focuses on processes of sedimentation cross-cutting various semiotic modalities (sartorial, kinesic, linguistic, etc.) as they can be observed to undergird stylistic conventionalization and its political implications in Houston Hip Hop music and culture. Within the broader linguistic tradition, his work is situated at the intersection of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, exploring the relations between phonetic variation, entextualization, repetition, and salience. Social theory and (sub)cultural literature inform it as well.