Johanna Gerwin (Queen Mary University London, UK/University of Kiel, Germany)

The role of dialect in comedy performances
Focus on humour and enregisterment

Many of the most popular and entertaining comedy performances are rich in non-standard and regional dialect features. This paper addresses how dialect contributes to the humour in comedy performances, and how humorous dialect performance leads to the "enregisterment" of a dialect (see also Johnstone 2011).

The concept of 'enregisterment' was developed by the linguistic anthropologists Michael Silverstein (2003) and Asif Agha (2003, 2007) and describes processes and practices which result in the association of a linguistic repertoire or style with particular social meanings, values, or contexts. This paper illustrates this point by analysing three YouTube clips featuring parts of live performances: Riaad Moosa's "I have a weird accent" rendered in an Indian South African accent, Stephen Buchanan's "How to survive Glasgow" featuring a Glaswegian accent, and Ali G's "Harvard Commencement Speech 2004", presented in a unique style based on Multicultural London English. All three performances put the relevant dialect on display and create linguistic metadiscourse – two activities important in enregisterment processes. But in each performance, the dialect also fulfils a different function in the construction of humour, defined here as a 'playful incongruity/bisociation', arising through the simultaneous perception of "two self-consistent but normally unrelated and incompatible frames of reference" (Martin 2007: 10). In the analysed performances, these functions range from self-deprecation, relatability, or divergence from the audience to the subversion of a (linguistic) status quo, existing social indexes, or what is perceived as offensive.

Just as dialect can help performers to be funnier, humour can help a dialect to become more "enregistered".

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