

## **Imitation or Influence: White actors and Black language in film<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction**

Sociolinguistic research has increasingly turned to examining the use of both the grammar and speech events of black speech by non-blacks. This phenomenon, called language crossing, is defined as, “the use of language varieties associated with social or ethnic groups that the speaker does not normally ‘belong’ to” (Rampton, 1995, p. 14). Literature on this topic has indicated that it can be used in order to parody black speech (Hewitt, 1986), but has also demonstrated that crossers can use the language they cross into effectively and for non-negative purposes (Rampton, 1995). This article examines these two types of crossing in film. Specifically, it compares crossing that appears to imitate for comedic purposes with crossing that illustrates a genuine attempt to correctly represent the language/dialect.

Although most research has looked at language crossing in everyday interactional contexts, crossing is also common in popular film contexts when white actors use features associated with African American English (AAE). Many white actors use only the most saliently stereotypical elements of AAE and by doing so reinforce ideologies about AAE (Bucholtz, 2007; Lopez, 2008). Specifically, these examples of language crossing are often rooted in racial as well as gendered stereotypes since the linguistic elements used are characterized as Black male speech. In addition to the linguistic performance, many white actors replace the blackface of traditional minstrelsy with street or hip-hop clothing and mannerisms (Green, 2002; Strausbaugh, 2006; Lopez, 2008) and therefore can be considered as performing blackness. What I call “performing blackness” in this paper is the “doing” of a black identity but drawing only on stereotypes of African Americans and indirect knowledge of African American culture.

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By analyzing the language crossing of white actors in four films, I address how crossing in order to perform blackness (which is perceived to be embodied by young, urban, Black men) is different from crossing that presents natural uses of an ethnically marked dialect (Sweetland, 2002). Drawing on Chun (2007), I suggest that one distinction between the two groups comes from the fact that in one set of movies AAE is low in prestige while in the other set it is high in prestige. Specifically, Chun discusses two types of contexts: an ideological one and an interactional one. The ideological context classifies a speaker as an in- or out-group member and determines if a variety is considered high or low in prestige. If a speaker is an out-group member using a variety that is low in prestige it has the potential to be interpreted ideologically as mock language, even if the speaker does not intend it as such. The interactional context expresses the intent of the speaker. If the intention is to mock, then the speaker frames the variety as if it were not his own. If the purpose is not to mock, then the variety will be presented as the speaker's at least in the situation in which it is used.

While I recognize that each of the performances considered in the present paper are complex and can have alternate readings, what I try to illustrate in this paper is that the reason that the movies in which AAE is low in prestige are considered mock versions of AAE (henceforth called Mock AAE) comes from the semiotics that frame the language crossings. Because these movies use specific locations/environments, clothing, gestures, and indexicality of AAE authenticity in order to try and authenticate their language use, the performances become modern forms of minstrelsy. Minstrel shows relied on specific tools in order to construct a black image. They used plantation style clothing, exaggerated gestures, ignorant and clumsy language, a stage setting such as a chicken coup or watermelon patch and, most importantly, blackface. Some movies have updated these images into street clothing, body language such as the pimp strut, 'cool' 'street' language, and a nightclub to set the stage. The only thing missing is actual blackface, which if they applied, they would have no credibility at all (Green, 2002).

That they do not literally apply blackface allows the humor surrounding the fact that these characters are clearly out of place in these environments to be foregrounded while the monolithic presentation of black males is backgrounded. This permits the white characters in the film who unsuccessfully attempt to "act black" to also become objects of parody by the other characters and the audience. This makes modern day minstrelsy more damaging because the stereotypes are hidden behind the pretense of making fun of the white male characters when it's possible that they're behavior can be interpreted as making fun of Black language and culture.

## 2. Methodology

The excerpts analyzed in the following section come from the movies *Bulworth*, *Bringing Down the House* (BDH), *Black & White* (B&W) and *Underclassman*. In each of the films, a white upper-middle-class male character uses what may be viewed as AAE<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the construction of race, class, and gender through AAE in these films parallels cases described in the current literature on everyday uses of language crossing.

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<sup>2</sup> Since both the parodied and natural uses of AAE in these films rely heavily on hip hop language, AAE in these films is different from AAE used in the African American speech community.

*Bringing Down the House* and *Bulworth* were chosen because the two actors in the films appear to have no personal ties to the African American speech community or hip hop community. On the other hand, *Black & White* and *Underclassman* were chosen because they both utilize actors who have played other characters that use linguistic features associated with AAE or use features of AAE at least sometimes in their real lives. This distinction between actors who have ties to the speech community and those who do not was important to the study because it has been stated (Bucholtz, 2007) that actors who portray characters who use features associated with black speech in films are not required to go through any dialect training. Furthermore, in some films certain features used are inventions of the actors themselves. Because of this, I was interested in seeing if there was a correlation between which category the actors' performances were placed into and their background. Moreover, the differences in age between the actors in the first two movies in comparison to the actors in the second two may provide information about the relationship between crossing and age.

I then analyzed the locations/environments where the crossings took place, what the characters were wearing, whether or not other characters in the film questioned their use of the language, and what ideologies if any were indexed by the language use. The films were then grouped on the basis of whether or not they shared these characteristics.

### 3. Imitation

In the first two films—*Bringing Down the House* (BDH) with Steve Martin and *Bulworth* with Warren Beatty—we will look at the actors considered to be performing blackness. The language crossing in these films can be considered mocked versions of AAE because in both of these films, AAE is low in prestige. It is used to demonstrate linguistic hierarchical differences between the standard and nonstandard languages in the film (Ronkin & Harn, 1999) as well as social differences between the character who is appropriating the language and the group whose language is being appropriated. For example, neither film has examples of blacks whose primary dialect is Standard English (SE) and when the black female leads in the movie do use speech associated with SE, it is marked and comes as a shock to the white male leads to whom the speech is directed.

In BDH, Martin's character Sanderson has the ability to control the perceptions of black speech through his critique of the dialect used by Queen Latifah's character Charlene as well as use it for whatever purposes he sees fit. Specifically, there is a scene in the film where it is obvious that he disapproves of her speech and believes it is preventing her from being successful:

- (1) *Bringing Down the House*
- Charlene: Oh, look at the legs on this wine. I'm telling you, this place is banging.
- Peter: Don't you just mean this is a nice place?
- Charlene: Why the word "banging" make you so uptight?
- Peter: You know something? You're smart. If you'd just deign to speak English, with what you learned on the Internet, and in prison, you could be a paralegal tomorrow.

Later in the movie, he uses what he perceives to be features of this dialect he devalues in order to accomplish the goal of getting into a nightclub. After he gets in to see the person

he came to see, he goes back to his own voice (example 2). Whether or not his opinion of the dialect has changed by the end of the movie is never addressed.

(2) *Bringing Down the House*

Widow: Damn, boy, you lookin' all kind of stupid.

Sanderson: [In affected "black" accent] Really? Cause I got this outfit from **yo' mama**.

Widow: Yo, Eminem, cut the wigger shit. I don't think you know how much trouble you in.

Sanderson: Fine, fine, [Intonation change into real voice] fine. I'm here to talk business, private business.

Although Beatty's character Bulworth does not appear to hold the same criticisms of the dialect, his situation is similar to that of Sanderson's in that he is able to control/represent the voice of the black people within the film. By rapping throughout the film (example 3), he is able to take an aspect of black culture—one that some consider to be used as a voice for a particular group within the black community (Rose, 1994; Kitwana, 2002; Perry, 2004; Alim, 2006)—and speak on their behalf (as well as others) without ever consulting them.

(3) *Bulworth*

We got millions of **brothas** in prison/I mean the walls are really **rockin'**./But you can bet your ass they'd all be out if they could afford Johnny Cochran.

It has been argued that the speech associated with AAE is used in these films in order to redeem the characters and authenticate them as "cool" (Bulchotz, 2007). Beyond these uses, the characters demonstrate white privilege (Hill, 2008) because they are able to utilize the dialect without being affected by the stigmatizations that usually go along with using it. Once they have no further need to be "urban" they are able to return to their suburban lifestyle and language variety with a newfound sense of "coolness" from their experience. This use of the dialect by out-group members is one reason why it is considered a form of mock language.

In addition, the two movies also share similarities in each of the semiotics mentioned in section 1. In the following, I will discuss how the semiotics adds another level of imitation of black language and culture to these performances.

### 3.1 Semiotics

Although there are earlier instances of crossing by both Sanderson and Bulworth, both of their first extended instances of crossing occur in nightclubs. In *BDH*, Sanderson's nightclub crossing occurs when he is trying to clear the name of his houseguest Charlene. The dialogue from the beginning of the nightclub scene can be found in (4). The scene plays out in the following way: after observing the activities outside of the club for a while, he pays one of two "homeboys" for his clothes so that he can perform his blackness act. This costume plays a part in his transformation from an uptight white male (represented by the suit and tie) to someone who is as he says "from the 'hood and

mizunderstood” (represented by the hip hop uniform of jeans, throwback jersey and beanie).

When he addresses the two young men from whom he gets his clothes, his voice is high pitched. However, once he arrives at the door of the nightclub (through the adoption of what Dillard [1972] calls a “pimp strut”), his intonation deepens. This prosodic change results in an affected “black” accent.

- (4) *Bringing Down the House*  
 [In car talking to the young men: high pitch voice] Excuse me. **Homeboys**.  
 [At club’s entrance: intonation change voice deepens] Say **yo**, you got a **bafroom** in there?  
 Say **yo**, what’s the **dealio**?  
 Umm, **who’s yo’ daddy**? Back that **booty** up and put it on a glass.  
 Anybody else **dig** what I’m **sayin’**?

This dialogue contains lexical features of Mock AAE that index hypersexuality. For example, his use of the word *booty* along with the phrase *who’s yo’ daddy?* is the character’s way of making sexual advances toward a female in the club. This interaction fits the definition of the speech event *rapping* in African American discourse. This use of *rapping* carries the meaning of “creative conversation from man to woman for the purposes of winning her affection and ultimately for getting sex” (Smitherman, 1994, p. 242). Therefore, example (4) can be used to support arguments that the use of AAE by some non-blacks is rooted in the ideology that links black males to a hyper(hetero)sexuality (Chun, 2001).

In other parts of the club scene, he indexes masculinity and links blackness to dancing skills. The example in (5) illustrates a construction of masculinity through language use. Here, Martin’s character responds to a Latino male’s confrontational question with a question of his own which can be translated to mean, “Why are you demonstrating envy or opposition to me?” This is a bold statement considering the fact that he is in a nightclub where he does not know anyone. A statement like that can be taken as “fighting words”. But while he is performing blackness (which is how he acquires his masculinity) he is confident and self-assured which is in opposition to how he is throughout the rest of the movie.

- (5) Male: What’s on yo’ mind playa?  
 Sanderson: You been **drinkin’ some of that haterade**?

Sanderson’s question in (6) is rooted in the ideology that links blackness to dancing skills. The word ‘honky’ is a derogatory term for a white person used by African Americans. In making this statement he is saying, “look at my style of dress, my behavior, and my speech. I am no ordinary white male, I’m like all the other men in here, so of course I can dance.”

- (6) Female: Can you swerve snowman?  
 Sanderson: Do I got **Honky** spray-painted on my forehead? Of course I can.

Bulworth's club scene is not much different from that of Sanderson's. This is where he is first introduced to urban black life in the film. Here, he participates in stereotypical aspects of black culture such as dancing and eating ribs in order to align himself with the black community (Green, 2002). It is through his use of Mock AAE that he is able to become a politician who is completely forthright and confident instead of one who is more concerned with making everyone happy (Green, 2002). As stated in the previous section, his participation in the African American speech community mostly consists of him using the African American speech event *rap* in order to "tell it like it is" (example 7).

(7) *Bulworth*

I mean those boys over there on the monitor/they want a government smaller and weak./But they **be** speaking for the richest twenty percent when they **pretendin'** they **defendin'** the meek.

During his last delivered speech in the movie, he has totally appropriated the street culture depicted in the film and therefore his style of dress (which consists of a beanie, sunglasses, as well as an oversized jacket and shorts) and gestures also match that of the streets (Green, 2002).

What is established through the analysis of the semiotics in these two films is that lexical, grammatical, and phonological features of Mock AAE in addition to dress and stance are used to construct a type of masculinity in order to exude confidence. Linguistically, the characters "are being studiedly 'artificial' or 'putting on a voice'" (Coupland 2001, p. 346). This is illustrated through Sanderson's adoption of a fake "black" accent as well as Bulworth's need to state everything in the form of a rap. Neither of these adoptions is representative of the actors' or characters' actual speech style. Outside of their linguistic performance, the use of the oversized clothes and exaggerated gestures are visually "overdrawn, defining the generic principle of cartooning" (Coupland, 2001, p. 346). Because these performances are a way for whites in the films to replicate unfavorable stereotypes of black males it can be considered a form of "covert racist discourse" (Hill, 2008).

The fact that these films rely heavily on distortions of popular culture without concern for authenticity causes their linguistic performances to be questioned by other characters in the film. For example, the end of the dialogue of the first club scene in *BDH* (see 4 above) ends with everyone in the club staring at Sanderson in disbelief. Also, as explained in the previous section, after he has accomplished the task of getting in to see the person he came to speak to, he is asked to drop the act, which he promptly does (see example 2 above).

The authenticity of Bulworth's performance is also challenged. Members of the black community (a young boy asks whether or not the way Bulworth raps is representative of all white people) as well as others in the film (an interviewer asks him why he has changed his manner of speech and dress) question his new style of clothing and speech. This suggests that they are aware that this behavior is out of character for Bulworth and therefore inauthentic.

What I intended to suggest through the analysis of the semiotics that frame the crossing in these films is that they help lead to an interpretation of the linguistic performances of the actors as mocked speech. Even though both characters frame the

variety as their own in each instance they use it, the addition of the semiotics as a way to authenticate the linguistic performance actually de-authenticates it (Coupland, 2001).

#### 4. Influence

The second set of films—*Black & White* with William Lee Scott as Will King, and *Underclassman* with Vishiss as Edward Murdock—also have white males using features associated with AAE. Unlike the first two movies, AAE is not considered low in prestige. Chun (2007) states that when an out-group speaker adopts a style with prestige and frames it as his or her own, it is a form of emulation. Although the speech style can still be considered ideologically inauthentic, at the level of interaction it is considered “both positive in value and authentic to the speaker” (Chun, 2007, p. 278). This type of accommodation is different from the first set of movies in that it is upward instead of downward. Downward convergent adoption occurs when the dialect a speaker is accommodating to is low in prestige and can be considered condescension instead of emulation (Chun, 2007). The fact that the actors in the present set of films fit into this category is one reason I do not consider their language crossing a mock version of AAE, but instead I consider them examples of performances that present natural occurrences of an ethnically-marked dialect (Sweetland, 2002). The language of the characters in these films is influenced by the surrounding black characters, but there is also influence that comes from the actors’ real life. Another reason I place these characters in this group is that the semiotics in these movies are not used as tools in the characters’ language crossing. For example, the characters do not undergo a transformation where their clothing, social places and speech change from “uncool” to “cool”. Also, because the actors in these films use the same linguistic code throughout the movie and not just for specific purposes or events, there is never a sense that they are just imitating the language around them, but that they are speaking a variety they consider their own.

Although there are nightclub scenes in both *Black & White* and *Underclassman*, they are not used to set up crossing scenes or to introduce the character to urban life. Instead they are used to highlight youth and celebrity activity. In fact, unlike the club scenes in the previous movies, these club scenes include a mixture of both white and black people.

For instance, the scenes in *Black & White* where Will uses features of AAE occur after it has already been established that he has friendships with urban African Americans and spends much time in their neighborhood. His language use is considered authentic by his younger brother and his brother’s friends and is never questioned by his African American associates. Moreover, his language use does not index stereotypical ideologies about blacks, but instead indexes his affiliation with the black community. Finally, he does not adopt an affected accent. Instead, the pitch and prosody of his voice reflects the actor’s real life New York upbringing.

- (8) *Black & White*  
 Rich: Where the fuck you been at white boy? I’ve been lookin’ for your little ass. What’s going on man?  
 Will: Come on man, watch the ‘do.  
 Rich: Come on. Your ‘do is fucked up anyway, man. Stop this bullshit.  
 Will: **What’s up, yo?** What you think of the digs, yo?  
 Rich: Shit is right.  
 Will: It’s right, right?

Rich: What's up with you, though? What's going down?  
 Will: Nothing, **chillin'**. I'm **feelin'** this vibe.  
 Rich: Feelin' it? You feelin' it?  
 Will: Yeah.

The same can be said of the character Edward Murdock in *Underclassman*. This character played by Vishiss is an upper-middle class white student who was kicked out of an elite private school where the majority of the movie takes place. Most of his instances of language crossing occur in scenes during a basketball game (9) and at the beach where the private school students have congregated. Both of the settings index youth/male culture and not black culture. Similarly to Scott, Vishiss does not take on a phony accent. Instead, the prosody of his speech reflects the actor's upbringing in Detroit. I argue that this allows his speech to sound natural and not stilted like Martin's or Beatty's.

(9) *Underclassman*

a. Ed: Come on Des, you know you wanna break up **wit** daddy's little girl and **git wit** me. Come, on.  
 Des: I don't think so Eddie.  
 Rob: Man, why don't you save yourself some face- some face and take off before I beat you twice in one night?  
 Ed: **Aight**, but lemme ask you a question first. What's it like getting my sloppy seconds?  
 Sleepy: Hey, break it up.  
 Ed: Get off me, Sleepy.  
 Tre: Yeah, Sleepy, hold yo boy back. Look like a big-ass Gerber baby.  
 Ed: You got a big **ass** mouth.  
 Ref: Break it up! Break it up!  
 Sleepy: Let's go.  
 Ed: This ain't over Donovan!  
 Sleepy: Alright, chill out!

b. Ed: Hey, **yo**. That **punk** from Westbury's followin' me.  
 WM<sup>3</sup>: Hey, what's going on? This ain't cool.  
 Ed: Hey, **yo man**, what are you doin' here?  
 Tre: Who, me?  
 WM: He's got a gun.

The crossing in *Black & White* and *Underclassmen* seems to reflect young whites in America who, through absorbing aspects of black youth culture, have created their own youth subculture (Kitwana, 2005). I think that this can be observed in part by the fact that the accents and language used by the actors reflect instances of their real life language use and the fact they include both AAE specific (boldfaced in 8 and 9) and general nonstandard features (underlined in 8 and 9). Relying more on general non-standard features and not AAE specific features was considered by Fine and Anderson (1980) and Harper (2008) to be a negative attribute of the language use of black actors in the media. They suggested that it was the actors' way of appearing "black, but not too black". However, I argue that when this is done by white actors it is a positive attribute, because it

<sup>3</sup> Stands for white male.



prevents the actors from having a mocking or performative tone in favor of a more realistic one that can actually be seen in their off-screen lives.

These two movies illustrate that not all forms of crossing by white middle-class characters in film should be considered imitations or judgments on the group whose language is being appropriated. Because these films do not use the semiotic features in the same way as the movies in the imitation category, they do not have the same semiotic valence as those films either. Due to this difference, instead of performing blackness the actors appear to be performing white youthfulness and are indexing both their affiliation with their black friends within the movie and their own ethnic identity as a member of an outside group. Furthermore, because the actors make use of both AAE specific features and general non-standard features it allows for a more natural use of language. These films seem to suggest that white actors who are a part of the hip-hop culture may be utilizing a linguistic style which originates and is influenced by Black culture but does not parody it (Kitwana, 2005).

## 5. Conclusions

Most research on crossing indicates that the use of language by out-group members of the speech community should be considered inauthentic (Bell, 1999; Bucholtz, 1999). Considering the language used in movies such as *Bulworth* and *Bringing Down the House*, this belief is not limited to academic circles. However, by comparing those two movies with *Black & White* and *Underclassman*, the present paper concludes that not all forms of language crossing should be deemed inauthentic. Instead, the findings imply that there are at least two types of language crossing in film: those meant to imitate blackness through linguistic mocking (inauthentic) and those meant to align the character with the black community through genuine natural language use (authentic?<sup>4</sup>). Nevertheless, similarly to Sweetland (2002), this paper illustrates that non-African Americans can use features of AAE naturally.

This paper has also tried to demonstrate why some language crossing in film appears to be “mock language” while others do not. As previously stated, explanations include the fact that AAE holds different levels of prestige and that the semiotic valences are different in the two groups of films. Another explanation included in this discussion is that one set of actors changed the prosody of their speech when using features associated with AAE while the other set did not. Noticing that black Creole speakers in South London reacted negatively to white South Londoners who used Creole pronunciation when crossing, Hewitt (1986) argues, “pronunciation especially is treated as a marker of ethnic membership” (p. 152). He further indicates that those who did not want to appear to claim Afro-Caribbean membership “avoided using anything but white South London pronunciation when employing words which may be marked for ethnicity” (p. 152). I extend his argument to the present analysis. Part of the reason that Martin and Beatty’s linguistic performances are negatively received is because they attempt to use prosodic features tied to an ethnic group to which they do not belong<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> A question mark is placed after the word *authentic* in order to emphasize the author’s uneasiness with labeling the language use of actors as such.

<sup>5</sup> One other possibility mentioned but not yet discussed, is the difference in age between the two sets of actors. Martin and Beatty are part of the baby boom generation while Scott and Vishiss are both members of Generation X. By comparing these specific movies with these specific actors, age may appear to play a bigger role in the interpretation of some forms of crossing being considered

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“mock language”. Although age may indeed play a part, it is my belief that films such as *Malibu's Most Wanted* (2003) and *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998) with Jamie Kennedy and Seth Green in similar white-upper-middle class roles would make age seem less important. These actors are closer in age to Scott and Vishiss yet their performances would be placed in the same category as Martin and Beatty's.

## Films:

*Black and White*. (1999). Dir. James Toback. Palm Pictures.

*Bringing Down the House*. (2003). Dir. Adam Shankman. Touchstone Pictures.

*Bulworth* (1998). Dir. Warren Beatty. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Underclassman*. (2005). Dir. Marcos Siega. Miramax Films.

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