

Intertextuality and the Metapragmatic Regimentation of Vocalic Variation¹

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I consider how the entextualization of a vocalic variant in a salient text renders phonetic variability accessible to metapragmatic commentary. Specifically, I seek here to address a question Mendoza-Denton (2011:261) 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?” I address these questions in what follows by formulating the notion of INDEXICAL NESTING, through which I seek to capture how sociophonetic features, functioning as phono-indexicals, bootstrap interactional potential from the texts through which they occur.

Focusing on indexical nesting as one type of “co-occurrence,” (Agha, 2005; Irvine, 1985; Podesva, 2008; Rampton, 2009; Sclafani, 2009; Zhang, 2008) I highlight the ways in which this relationship renders phono-indexicals accessible to voicing phenomena. To this end, my analysis considers the case of (aw) variation in Houston, where the monophthongal variant has become an enregistered feature of a distinguishable 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 constructed dialogue and explicit metapragmatic discourse. Furthermore, by focusing on how vocalic variation helps regiment specific utterances as tokens of register 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 cases studies in which speakers voice (aw) monophthongization to negotiate the metapragmatics of this stylistic practice. As the case studies will show, indexical nesting sets the stage for sociophonetic indexicals to bootstrap meaning potential from the larger structures in and through which they occur.

¹ I owe thanks to Nancy Niedzielski, Chris Koops, Norma Mendoza-Denton, Kit Woolard, and Kira Hall for discussions of the ideas examined in this paper. I am also indebted to audiences at SALSA and LISO. Any errors remaining are my own.

Specifically, structural nesting puts phono-indexicals on display, connecting sounds to the words and larger textual vehicles in which they occur. Accordingly, I will argue that indexical nesting facilitates metapragmatic accessibility, insofar as this relationship yields intertextual resources through which speakers strategically mobilize sociophonetic variability toward interactional ends.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In Section 2, I describe indexical nesting in greater detail, situating this construct in relation to relevant ideas in the literature. Next, in Section 3, I discuss the broader research context that informs the present analysis. After this brief contextualization, I present two case studies in Section 4 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.

2. Indexical Nesting and Related Constructs

Broadly speaking, indexical nesting elaborates the structural relationship that characterizes Mendoza-Denton's (2011) formulation of 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 "voicing contrasts" (Agha, 2005).

Regarding how marked phono-indexicals contribute to such contrasts, we must first consider that a majority of these 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-Denton, 2011; Podesva, 2008; Schilling-Estes, 1998; 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 instance, we note that speakers leverage the taboo word 'bitch' in both spoken and written portrayals of an enregistered Californian voice. For example, metapragmatic stereotyping in representations of local speech draw attention to /I/-lowering in part through eye-dialect spellings of the phono-lexical variant *betch*. In such cases, speakers foreground and negotiate the metapragmatics of the lowered variant by referencing its use in this evocatively-rich taboo word.

What this and similar cases of entextualized variability (Eckert, 2000; 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. Extending this logic, 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. In this way, the present account accords with Mendoza-Denton's (2011) examination of semiotic hitchhiking – particularly as both works focus on a kind of metapragmatic bootstrapping that arises through what Keane (2003) terms “bundling.” Despite such similarities, indexical nesting differs from semiotic hitchhiking in both scope and foci.

For example, Mendoza-Denton (2011) formulates semiotic hitchhiking to address specifically 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.” (Mendoza-Denton, 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 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.” (Mendoza-Denton, 2011:263)

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, 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.

Furthermore, 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 below to motivate the role played by vocalic variants in constructing and exploiting voicing contrasts, this construct applies equally to any case of structural embedding in which one indexical sign acquires greater salience by virtue of its sedimentation in an evocative text.

With these points in mind, I further elaborate indexical nesting below through two case studies that examine how monophthongal (aw) becomes culturally legible through its realization in an idiomatic text. Specifically, I take a discourse-analytic perspective on the ways in which this feature crystallizes through its occurrence in an expression used among

many younger Black Houstonians. This expression – ‘coming down’ – entextualizes monophthongal (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 monophthong 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. Specifically, this expression extends a spatial metaphor used to describe a procession of cars ‘coming down’ the street. Through pragmatic extension, rappers have shaped an extended usage of *COMIN DINE* that means roughly “to show up and be recognized.” Crucially, this extended use of the expression is connected through popular hip hop lyrics with explicit claims to indigineity, as the following analyses show. Through its use in such “identity-defining activities,” (Woolard, 2008:447) *COMIN DINE* has become emblematic of a local voice, thus highlighting the use and meaning potential of monophthongal (aw).

Accordingly, the Houston case illustrates how an embedding texture ties phono-indexical variation to explicit representations of the “authentically-local.” Furthermore, as my analysis will show, the entextualization of monophthongal (aw) in the idiom *COMIN DINE* provides speakers with an intertextual resource for highlighting and negotiating the import of (aw) variation. By examining how speakers leverage *COMIN DINE* in explicit metapragmatic discourse and constructed dialogue, the case studies illustrate how this expression enables speakers to mobilize phonetic variability in the service of constructing voicing contrasts. Before we examine exactly how such contrasts are achieved, I turn first to a brief description of the broader research context that informs the present study.

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 then, 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 neighborhoods 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 neighborhoods. Thus, by claiming to be from these places, popular rappers make somewhat indirect claims regarding their toughness and other aspects of personal character.

Regarding such metonymic uses of place in hip hop lyrics, 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 neighborhood 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 neighborhoods and the lives lived there as representative of Houston. In this way then, popular artists who claim to speak for the city essentialize one perspective on indigeneity 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, taken 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 indigeneity 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 indigeneity 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.

4. (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 "Yall 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 then, 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 an emblematic idiom. 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 monophthongizing (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 diphthongally, 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 tethered indexically and intertextually 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.

5. 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 (2008:8) 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.” 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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