

“Makin’ A Way Outta No Way”: African-American Comedic Character Construction

The work of socially conscious African-American comedians, performed before largely African-American audiences, is often a gauge of the beliefs and ideologies that inform the views that African-Americans hold about language and about themselves. Comedians such as Richard Pryor, Adele Givens, and D.L. Hughley place their constructed characters into situations where their attitudes and behavior reveal the traits the comedians ascribe to them, while salient linguistic features serve as representations of those traits (Rahman, 2004, 2006). African-American characters appear, almost universally, and in a hyperbolic and humorous way, as practical, resourceful, and resilient - able to “make a way out of no way.” AAVE, which is generally symbolic of identification and solidarity with the African-American community (Baugh, 1983; Rickford and Rickford, 2000; Green, 2002; Rahman, 2004, 2006), becomes more specifically, symbolic of participation in a culture of survival. The comedians exaggerate in producing salient features such as vocalization of post-vocalic /r/ and a stop variant of word-initial [dh]. Most significant among the segmental features comedians deploy in constructing African-American characters is [a], a variant of the diphthong /ay/, that regression analysis predicts the comedians use almost categorically. VARBRUL shows that the comedians reserve the diphthong for portraying the establishment, which they racialize as white. Writers (Dyer, 1997; Perry, 2001) associate the white establishment with logic and reason, to the exclusion of sentiment; comedians borrow (Hebdidge, 1984; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003) [ay] to portray African-American characters expressing an analytical mode of thinking, as in “I [ay] am so glad y’ all decided [ay] to

come . . .” (Givens, 2001). Establishment characters themselves appear as ultra-analytical and precise, in a contrast that enhances the self-empowering traits ascribed to African-American characters. Below, are two reactions to being fired that highlight [ay] and [a], as well as the traits they represent. The white employee is shocked and helpless, while the African-American employee is perturbed at the impracticality of having wasted his gas.

White employee: Oh, Tom, what am I [ay] gonna to do? What about the mortgage? What about the children's college fund? Oh, Father God! (Harvey, 2001)

African American employee: How come you didn't call me at home . . . ? You knew I [a] was fired [fa:rd] yesterday! Makin' me burn up all my [ma] damn gas! (Hughley, 2000)

In emphasizing survivorship, the comedians draw on a theme that runs through the broader African-American culture. Preachers, as well as writers (Baugh, 1983; Rickford and Rickford; Lanehart, 2001; Rahman, 2004, 2006) recognize the endurance of African-Americans as a primary strength of the community. Reflecting the view that African-Americans hold of themselves, an anonymous Katrina victim said on National Public Radio (2005), “If you kick me when I’m down, I’m just gon get up and be stronger.” The layers of meaning that attach to language in the African-American community, highlighted here in the exaggerated projection of linguistic features that index attitudes and traits, contribute to the collective identity and self-esteem of African-Americans, largely by emphasizing their identity as survivors.

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