

## Social Class Distinctions Performed through Language in Northern Alabama

Within the tradition of the study of conversational joking (Fry 1963; Tannen 2005; Davies 1984, 2003, 2006; Norrick 1993; Kotthoff 1999), combined with the discourse analysis of radio talk (Coupland 2002; Goffman 1981), this study examines joking interaction on a popular morning radio talk show hosted by two local men in northern Alabama. The data are drawn from a set of CD recordings identified as “The Best” of the show, supplemented with additional regular shows. Examining the joking as an important part of a linguistic “presentation of self” (Goffman 1959; Davies 2002), the analysis reveals how the joking between the two hosts and with members of the audience is rooted in sociolinguistic and cultural dimensions of the working class in this southern Appalachian area of the American South (Feagin 1979; Wolfram & Christian 1976; Labov & Ash 1997; Montgomery & Hall 2004). The use of language representing a continuum of varieties is of course part of a sociolinguistic persona, but the excerpts selected for presentation show how joking is used to convey finer social distinctions within the white Southern working class (Flynt 1989, 2004; Metzgar 2005). An extended joint narrative is analyzed, about a trip with two characters named Wanda and Willie, together with a jointly performed joke cycle modeled on the earlier “Redneck Test” by the comedian Jeff Foxworthy (Shelby 1999; Newitz & Wray 1997; Wray & Newitz 1997;). The joke cycle is framed as a mock didactic exercise for the radio audience which will allow them to differentiate between the social categories of “redneck” and the lower social level of “white trash.” Drawing on work by Schilling-Estes (1998), Johnstone (1999), Rampton (1995), and Preston (1992), the study examines how the radio hosts modify their speech to “perform” characters from a lower social stratum.

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