Young Women in the U.S. South: The Emergence of a New Southern Identity
Sara Lide, University of South Carolina
lides@mailbox.sc.edu

Panel Title: Speaking Southern American English: Locality, multiplicity, and temporality

Abstract
Numerous language scholars are moving towards understanding linguistic variation in the context of enacting various social personae (Eckert 2008, Moore & Podesva 2009, Zhang 2005). Using ethnographic methods, which view language practices within local cultural contexts, can reveal correlations between linguistic choices and various displays of such personae, for example in linking language practices to ethnic ties (Mendoza-Denton 2008) or city orientation (Johnstone 2006). In this paper, I examine how adolescent females in the urban U.S. South construct regionally-meaningful personae using various Southern linguistic features, but I argue that it is their use of other nonlinguistic levels of identity that may in fact be more meaningful as they construct Southernness.

I examine a locally defined Southern identity through an ethnographic study of the members of an elite high school sorority in the U.S. South. While members of this group minimally use traditionally-defined Southern dialect features (e.g., pin/pen merger, /ay/ monophthongization), they maintain strong beliefs about their Southern identities. That is, language is only one, often minor, component of these speakers’ Southern identities. Furthermore, these adolescents’ orientations to Southern models of personhood (Agha 2007) are defined in terms of other macro-social features, including attitudes toward traditional gender roles, conservative Christianity, family practices, and Southern foods. Thus, I argue that for these speakers, language use alone may not indicate Southern identity, but by being attuned to other resources, we can see that these speakers still construct themselves as Southern while they redefine what it means to be young women in the South.

Southernness at the intersection of identity and practice
Southern identity is conceptualized as a combination of social dimensions, including region, gender, and language, but more dependent on the necessary intersection of these with other practices such as food, clothing, and activities. In particular, the type of Southern identity described by LGF members is their own urban, preppy kind of Southernness.

Example 1. Southern identity and clothing
1 Claire I think of the girls wearing like
2 like Lilly [ Pulitzer] or pearls and
3 Karen yeah
4 Claire and then the guys who wear like Southern Tide or like
5 Peyton seersucker
6 Liza like seersucker
7 Claire seersucker
8 Liza white bucks
9 Karen yeah
10 Claire not that [ ] stuff
11 Peyton mm mm
12 Claire mm mm
13 Peyton classy
14 manners
15 Claire bowties
Example 2. Southern identity and food
1 Sara when you think of stereotypical Southern people
2 what do you think of
3 Emily sweet tea
4 ((laughter))
5 Sally heavy accents
6 Amanda fried chicken

Example 3. Southern identity and economic class
1 Sally pearls
2 Emily monogrammed stuff
3 lots of monograms ((quiet))
4 Sara do y'all do that stuff
5 Emily I think of horse races too
6 Lydia Lilly [Pulitzer]
7 Sally like really preppy
8 like Southern Tide

Example 4. Southern identity and economic class
1 Lauren I think of like sailing too
2 sailing reminds me of like being Southern
3 Claire oh and golfing
4 like [COUNTRY CLUB]

Example 5. Southern identity and gender
1 Claire but I love Lilly and I wear a lot of seersucker
2 like girl seersucker

Example 6. Southern identity and gender
1 Liza like guys who wear a lot of camo
2 really Southern

Example 7. Southern identity as intersectional
1 Sara do y'all do monogrammed stuff
2 Emily oh yeah
3 Lydia yes
4 Sara pearls?
5 Amanda kind of
6 Emily well I don't wear pearls but
7 Lydia yeah I'm wearing pearls
8 ((laughter))
9 Amanda I lost- I lost my pearls ((laughing))
The role of Southern language in Southern identity

Regional language practices are variably linked to Southern identities, such that LGF members align themselves only with positively-valued Southern language, while stigmatized language features are instead associated with other models of Southernness, such as rural and masculine Southerners.

Example 8. Southern identity and positively-valued language

1. Lydia and we have good manners
2. Amanda to have that Southern charm
3. Emily I think it’s fun
4. you can just be like outgoing
5. and like
6. “hey y’all”
7. Amanda “y’all”
8. Lydia and cute
9. Emily and it’s acceptable
10. Amanda like “yes ma’am no ma’am”

Example 9. Southern identity and negatively-valued language

1. Lauren she has a pretty thick Southern accent
2. Claire it’s not that thick

Example 10. Southern identity and negatively-valued language

1. Sara how Southern do you think you are
2. Taylor oh gosh ((quiet!))
3. hopefully
4. I hope my voice isn’t like too Southern
**Example 12.** **Rural masculine Southern identity and language**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
<th>Southern Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>when I think of Sou-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>or the most Southern person at [SCHOOL]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>I think of [NAME]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>((laughter))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>me too</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>he's like</td>
<td>nasal fronting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>he loves going &quot;hunting and fishing&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>he has like a camo truck</td>
<td>lexical item &quot;bo&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>&quot;bo:;&quot;</td>
<td>nasal fronting /ŋ/ → /n/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>and he wears c-</td>
<td>lexical item &quot;bo&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>&quot;hunting and fishing bo&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>wears camo and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example 13.** **Rural masculine Southern identity and language**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
<th>Southern Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>“them stink bugs”</td>
<td>/i/ → /æ/ lowering before velar nasal “stink” demonstrative “them”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“stink bugs”</td>
<td>/i/ → /æ/ lowering before velar nasal “stink”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I feel like I’m in space”</td>
<td>/ai/ monophthongization “I” “I’m”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“this makes me feel like I’m in sp-”</td>
<td>/ei/ → /ai/ “makes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“space”</td>
<td>/ai/ monophthongization “I’m”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liza</td>
<td>“this makes me feel like I’m in sp-”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example 14.** **Rural feminine Southern identity and language**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
<th>Southern Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>and were like</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;can you help me do my face paint&quot;</td>
<td>/ai/ monophthongization “my”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>I was like</td>
<td>/ei/ → /ai/ “face paint”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>can you not get one of your own cheerleaders to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>face paint you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>their half time two weeks ago was just great</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;[SCHOOL] A all the way&quot; ((while clapping))</td>
<td>/ei/ → /ai/ “A” “way”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>((lots of laughter))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>oh my gosh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>oh my god</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>((laughter))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Selected References
Labrador, Roderick N. (2004) “We can laugh at ourselves”: Hawai`i ethnic humor, local identity and the
Preston, Dennis. 1996. Where the worst English is spoken. In Edgard Schneider (ed.), *Focus on the USA*,
297-360. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Thomas, Erik R. 1997. A rural/metropolitan split in the speech of Texas Anglos. *Language Variation and
  Walter de Gruyter.