

Young Women in the U.S. South: The Emergence of a New Southern Identity

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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))

- 10 Sally Lydia's like the epitome of like
11 Amanda = a Southern girl
12 Sally Lydia Lee Sumter
13 Lydia yeah that's true
14 Sara nice
15 so I was going to ask which of y'all is the most Southern
16 Amanda Lydia
17 Sally Lydia
18 Emily probably Lydia
19 Sara why?
20 Amanda I don't know
21 I like Southern foods though
22 Lydia you just like food ((laughing))
23 Amanda that's true

The role of Southern language in Southern identity

Regional language practices are variably linked to in 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

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

Example 13. Rural masculine Southern identity and language

Speaker	Utterance	Southern Features
Claire	" <u>them</u> <u>stink</u> bugs"	/i/ → /æ/ lowering before velar nasal "stink" demonstrative "them"
	" <u>stink</u> bugs"	/i/ → /æ/ lowering before velar nasal "stink"
	"I feel like I'm in <u>space</u> "	/ai/ monophthongization "I" "I'm" /ei/ → /ai/ "space"
Liza	"this <u>makes</u> me feel like I'm in sp- "	/ei/ → /ai/ "makes" /ai/ monophthongization "I'm"

Example 14. Rural feminine Southern identity and language

Line	Speaker	Utterance	Southern Features
1	Lydia	and were like	
2		"can you help me do <u>my</u> <u>face</u> <u>paint</u> "	/ai/ monophthongization "my" /ei/ → /ai/ "face paint"
3		I was like	
4		can you not get one of your own cheerleaders to face paint you	
5	All	((laughter))	
6	Claire	their half time two weeks ago was just great	
7		"[SCHOOL] <u>A</u> all the <u>way</u> " ((while clapping))	/ei/ → /ai/ "A" "way"
8		((lots of laughter))	
9	Amanda	oh my gosh	
10	Claire	oh my god	
11	All	((laughter))	

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