Performing an Appalachian Story: A quantitative, qualitative, and metalinguistic analysis
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Studies of the performance register have provided important insight into the sociolinguistic manipulation of linguistic variants for audience design. However, for the most part, this register has been analyzed from a discourse perspective (Bauman 1975, Johnstone 1999, et al.) rather than a variable-based, quantitative approach. Schilling-Estes (1998) conducted one of the first quantitative studies on sociolinguistic performance, examining the speech of a resident of Ocracoke Island in terms of a single iconic /ai/ diphthong across three separate registers. Her conclusion was that performance speech was proactive rather than reactive, with concomitant implications for Bell’s audience design model (Schilling-Estes 1998: 77).

This study extends the study of performance speech to a different language variety and a set of dialect variants, examining a well-known storyteller in Appalachia who uses storytelling to preserve traditions of Appalachian mountain heritage, including the preservation of Jack Tales and other oral traditions. The subject, Orville Hicks, from the western mountains of North Carolina, comes from a long line of Appalachian storytellers that includes direct lineage from Council Harmon, who is regarded as one of Appalachia’s most well-known storytellers (Ebel 2005).

Three data sources are used in the comparison of different registers. The performance data comes from an audio recording of Hicks performing Jack Tales and other stories in front of a live audience. The performance is then cross-analyzed with two other types of registers: his pre-performance register (i.e. his introductory remarks to the audience) and his speech during a casual sociolinguistic interview conducted in his home with his wife by a fieldworker from Appalachia. Acoustic analyses of the /au/ and /ai/ diphthongs are conducted, revealing phonetic differences across the three registers. Instances of /ð/ stopping and velar-nasal fronting have also been analyzed, showing significant differences between the registers. Morphosyntactic variants (past tense be regularization, a-prefixing, and irregular verbs) are analyzed in order to demonstrate how grammatical variables are manipulated across the different registers, showing selective statistical differences. To complement the quantitative and acoustic analysis, a metalinguistic interview was also conducted to enhance our understanding of “self-conscious” performance speech. To a large extent, Hicks does not show awareness of the particular variables he manipulates in his performance register, indicating that self-consciousness may not include specific linguistic structural awareness. The evidence suggests that not only is Hicks’ performance register highly systematic in terms of variable structures, but that it is also selective in the variables chosen for performance. This study, along with the growing body of evidence on performance speech, indicates that performance speech can be quite selective and complex in its composition, and that self-consciousness is a gradient, selective notion that does not necessarily include specific structural awareness.