This study examines style-shifting in the speech of a single interviewer conducting 35 sociolinguistic interviews. Previous studies of the style of a single speaker across different speech events (Coupland 1980, Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994, Johstone 1996, Sweetland 2002, Podesva 2007) have analyzed topic, setting, and addressee, and more recently, topic-oriented stance (e.g. Tseng 2011). In this paper, topic and setting are kept relatively constant across interviews with interlocutors who are familiar to the interviewer, allowing for a focus on style-shifting according to addressee.

A close examination of style-shifting and the discourse function of particular variables is especially important in cases of language shift, since it is well known that although linguists purport to “document a language”, we are in fact only documenting a piece of the language and in most cases not documenting multiple styles. The interviewer (MK) is a speaker of Garifuna, an endangered language, and the interviews were conducted as part of a study of language shift in the community. He was recruited for the project because he is interested in language and cultural maintenance, and is characterized as a “conservative” speaker in that his speech patterns resemble older speakers with respect to at least two phonological variables.

The question arises as to whether the most important predictor of any effect of audience design in cases of language shift is addressee age, as this social category alone frequently determines proficiency in the endangered language. In the case discussed here, contact between Garifuna and English has led to a rise in use of the affricate variant of variable (ch) among speakers born after 1977. By contrast, MK, himself a younger member of the community, is linguistically conservative: a majority user of the alternate fricative variant that is evaluated by young speakers as rural and old-fashioned. Given the social evaluation of the fricative variant by his peers, one might expect him to linguistically accommodate to them during the interviews. And yet his range of variation is very low with respect to the community, let alone his age group. Younger speakers are generally categorial users of the affricate, but MK’s highest percentage is 40%. The lowest percentage of the affricate exhibited by a single interviewee in any interview is 20%, but in one interview MK produces no tokens of the affricate at all. MK’s production varies, but does not strictly accommodate to age or any other social category according to a traditional audience-design model (Giles 1973, Bell 1984). He does not uniformly produce more of the conservative variant with speakers who are more conservative/older and fewer with speakers who are more innovative/younger (or conversely, diverge from these speakers by doing the opposite). Rather, in some interviews use of the fricative appears to show solidarity, where in others it serves to position MK as an authority. This paper proposes that his unusually frequent use of the fricative is indexical of his role as a proponent of language maintenance and that his accommodation to interlocutor age must be examined in a more nuanced way.