Concerns about what constitutes ‘authentic speech’ and who is an ‘authentic speaker,’ have been central to sociolinguistics since its inception (Bucholtz, 2003; Coupland, 2003). In traditional sociolinguistics, authenticity was operationalized through a continuum of formality, with authentic speech assumed to increase as formality decreased (Labov, 1966). When the behavior of groups of speakers was organized within a social class framework, the behavior of individual speakers could be judged as more or less authentic based on how their linguistic behavior correlated with that of their social class peers (Coupland, 2003). This methodology was transferred directly into early studies of ethnic dialects, bringing with it the largely unexamined notion that any given speaker could be more or less representative of the authentic speech behavior of their particular ethnic group (Labov, 1973; Morgan, 1994).

Within this model, moves away from the theorized ‘true ethnic vernacular’ might be negatively interpreted as both inauthentic and assimilationist. In one stunning example of this, Mary Pratt relates an instance of a researcher who denounces a black middle-class subject for showing accommodation to the prestige dialect of a white interviewer (Pratt, 1987). In the researcher’s analysis of the interaction, the subject “fails to speak in BEV”, and instead produces the ‘turgid, redundant, bombastic and empty,’ English of the American middle class” (Pratt, 1987, p. 57). The desire reflected here for examples of authentic ethnic speech, all too often resulted in an essentialized portrayal of ‘real’ ethnicity—one that was, by and large, poor, rebellious, urban and male (Bucholtz, 2003; Eckert, 2003; Morgan, 1994).

The present study challenges the historical assumptions that upward mobility and education are at odds with authentic ethnic speech by examining linguistic ideologies and behavior within the Latino community at a top-tier university. The focus of the study is a set of recordings of a high-achieving Latino student in his senior year, and an investigation of his use of a Latino English light /l/ in two very distinct social situations – a dorm-room discussion with a close friend and a formal presentation of his master’s thesis. Acoustic analysis shows that despite vast differences in the formality of the two situations and a linguistic repertoire that includes more standard variants of /l/, the student does not reduce his usage of light /l/ in the formal setting. Furthermore, meta-linguistic commentary reveals it to be critically important to the student that he not cease to “sound Latino” even in such a formal situation. Is it possible then that a formal master’s thesis presentation might qualify as an authentic performance of an ethnic dialect?

If the historical model is left unchanged then the answer is, overwhelming and definitively, no. This is particularly the case since my subject—despite his male gender, working class parents, and urban background—is a high-achieving top-tier University student, what Labov might have referred to as a linguistic “lame” (Labov, 1977). However, I show how the use of third-wave methodologies in sociolinguistics, (c.f. Eckert 2002, 2005), provide a more complex and ultimately satisfying answer to the question posed. Viewing ethnic speech styles as monolithic wholes forces analyses into zero sum game between authenticity and assimilation. In contrast, allowing for dialects to be constructed varieties allows for ethnically and non-ethnically defined features to combine in any number of equally authentic linguistics styles.
References


