UC Santa Barbara
UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title
Play, Identity, and Linguistic Representation in the Performance of Accent

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9nr182v7

Author
Bucholtz, Mary

Publication Date
2002

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Play, Identity, and Linguistic Representation in the Performance of Accent

Mary Bucholtz
Texas A&M University

Scholarship on verbal play and performance has demonstrated the importance of the aesthetic realm for the linguistic study of cultural production and social practice. Such research opens up new avenues for the sociolinguistic inquiry into identity. This paper considers one such site of identity making in performance among science fiction and fantasy fans in Texas.

A powerful popular ideology holds that fans lack the basic communicative competence necessary to function socially. Fans are often stigmatized as "nerds" who seek out the alternative realities of speculative fiction to escape social isolation and inadequacy. I focus on a complex verbal performance, a live-action role-playing game, to demonstrate the sociolinguistic competence of fans and to offer an

[1] Acknowledgments: Thanks to Kate Henning and the other editors of this volume for their careful work. The fieldwork for this paper was carried out with the able assistance of Jonathan Himes. I am grateful to him for his indefatigable commitment to this project as well as for the countless insights he has provided. Thanks are also due to members of my Spring 2001 Structure of Discourse graduate seminar and to the many closet gamers in the Department of English at Texas A&M for perceptive observations about these data and about gaming generally. Finally, I wish to thank the game organizers, characters, and players for generously granting us unlimited access and for supplying invaluable information about the game and about fan culture.

Texas Linguistic Forum 44(2): 227-251
Proceedings from the Ninth Annual Symposium about Language and Society—Austin
April 20-22, 2001

account of how identity is linguistically produced on multiple levels.

The focus of the analysis is the performance of a range of accents by players and non-player characters. Accent performance serves several purposes within the game, including bounding the game world, creating characterizations, and displaying interactional stances. In addition, the selection and performance of particular accents ties the game both intertextually to previous enactments of the fantastic and ideologically to specific racial and ethnic categories. Through these multilayered functions, language effects identity at several levels. The performance of accent is therefore part of the broader phenomenon of linguistic representation, a set of processes whereby linguistic forms are assigned social meanings.

1. Introduction

Within linguistic anthropology, scholarship on verbal art, language play, and performance has demonstrated the crucial importance of the aesthetic realm for the study of linguistically achieved cultural production and social practice. A number of scholars-including Richard Bauman, Charles Briggs, Dell Hymes, and Joel Sherzer (Bauman, 1996; Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Briggs, 1988; Hymes, 1981; Sherzer, 1990)-have advanced an approach to verbal art that is concerned not only with formal features of the text as a linguistic object but also with the cultural contexts that aesthetic discourse displays and enacts in performance. Through careful ethnographic work, researchers have shown that verbal art and language play are separate but overlapping realms of language use in which linguistic structures are manipulated for expressive or aesthetic purposes. When art and play come together in performance, they may be used to achieve humorous effects that can create, enforce, or subvert social organization. As Bauman and Briggs note, "Play frames not only alter the performative force of utterances but provide settings in which speech and society can be questioned and transformed" (1990:63).

In juxtaposing power and pleasure, individual and community, and agency and ideology, such research opens up new avenues for the sociolinguistic inquiry into identity, which, like ethnopoetics, has

found theoretical inspiration in the twin tropes of performance and performativity. This paper considers one such site of identity making in performance among science-fiction and fantasy fans in Texas. Performances both display and create identities, and many levels of identity may be operative in a single performance. The performance analyzed here involves verbal art, play, improvisation, and humor. The multiple identities that participants forge in this interaction are achieved through the nuanced manipulation of socially indexical language forms, especially accents. The performance thus attests to the participants' sophisticated sociolinguistic competence, but it also reveals language ideologies that nostalgically privilege some linguistic varieties over others, with potentially racialized consequences.

The use of stylized language discussed here is part of the phenomenon of linguistic representation, in which various elements of language-from particular practices to entire varieties-become reified and linked to social meanings. In these transforming processes, enacted in discourse, language is not only the medium of social production but also its object. In recent years, linguistic representation has provided a great deal of theoretical impetus for research within linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics. This work considers such varied and interrelated phenomena as contextualization and recontextualization, language crossing, mock languages, language ideologies, natural histories of discourse, and intertextuality. What unifies these various approaches as linguistic representation is that each investigates how language, recontextualized and reframed, becomes invested with social meanings. Linguistic representation thus tightly links language-as-object with identity, ideology, and social practice. These links are especially evident in the representational practices that form the cultural arenas of play and performance, in which identities and ideologies are worked out in particularly vivid ways.

2. Fans, Geeks, and Nerds

Science-fiction and fantasy fandom has a long history in the United States, dating back to the 1940s and earlier (Warner, 1969). Although largely populated by white male middle-class teenagers and young adults, fan culture encompasses all ages, races, ethnicities, and social classes, and both genders, and extends far beyond the United States; fandom is a global phenomenon. What unifies this disparate group is a set of practices related to science fiction and fantasy: reading novels and

comic books, watching films and television shows, and playing games in a range of formats. While these practices are tied to the consumption of commodities, they serve more importantly as the basis for subcultural formation. Fans do not simply consume these products of popular culture but engage with them and with one another in ways that highlight agency and local cultural production. Indeed, many fans are themselves cultural producers, who appropriate and rework elements of popular culture in innovative ways, such as writing homoerotic stories featuring Star Trek's Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock or other combinations of fictional characters (a genre known as "slash fiction") or composing new, fan-oriented lyrics set to the tunes of familiar songs ("filksinging" or "filking"). Henry Jenkins (1992), drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau (1984), terms this process of cultural bricolage "textual poaching" and identifies such participatory practice as the quintessential activity of fandom.

Despite this rich creativity, however, popular views of fandom tend to pathologize those who participate in it. In the United States, a powerful ideology holds that science-fiction and fantasy fans lack the basic communicative competence necessary to function successfully in society. Fans, both adolescents and adults, are often stigmatized as "nerds" who seek out the alternative realities of speculative fiction to escape social isolation and inadequacy but thereby further isolate themselves from social interaction. This ideology overlooks the inconvenient fact that throughout its history numerous elements of fan culture, from comic books to computer games, have entered the youth-cultural mainstream. While these practices too have inspired their share of lamentations and moral panics, other practices that retain their links to a distinctive fan identity are far more stigmatized. Yet fan practices belie the ideology of fans as socially inept, for being a fan requires a high degree of social interaction. This is particularly true of participation in role-playing games. The ideological connection between nerds and fans is an oversimplification and a distortion-not all fans are nerds, and vice versa-but it does capture, albeit unwittingly, the fact that many participants in fan culture may exploit nerdiness in constructing their identities.

As I use the term, nerds are not socially marginalized loners but creative social actors who participate in cultural practices, including linguistic practices that index intelligence, humor, and nonconformity. The nonconformist stance associated with nerdiness can include refusal to accommodate normative regimes of the body, a rejection of

trendiness and hipness as governing cultural values, and a strong preference for individuality and eccentricity. Elsewhere (Bucholtz, 1996, 1999, forthcoming 2001), I have described some of the linguistic practices that nerdy speakers may adopt in order to promote their subcultural values. Among these practices are the interactional use of superstandard English as a style that signals intelligence as well as opposition to dominant colloquial styles, and wordplay, including punning, which achieves both of these ends while displaying an orientation to humor. This highly developed set of sociolinguistic skills refutes the mainstream position that nerds are social misfits who are unable to communicate effectively. It also challenges the perspective that nerdiness is solely a stigma, for many people openly and willingly adopt the nerd label (and/or other supposedly stigmatized synonymous labels) for themselves. Thus elements of a nerdy style may be powerful social resources for many participants in fan culture, especially in the display of identity. I focus here not on everyday interaction but on a complex collaborative improvisational verbal performance, a live-action role-playing game involving 75 participants, to demonstrate the sociolinguistic competence of fans and to offer an account of how, through the details of language, identity is produced on multiple levels.

3. Role-Playing Games

While computer games and, increasingly, comic books (at least under the euphemism *graphic novels*) have sufficiently widespread appeal to avoid attaching stigma to their users, role-playing games are viewed askance by many in the mainstream. The most well-known and popular role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, remains a subcultural phenomenon despite over 25 years in the cultural landscape. In the early 1980s, teenagers' interest in *Dungeons & Dragons* generated a wave of hysteria due to a perception that the game promoted Satanism because of its setting in a medieval world of magic and monsters.

Dungeons & Dragons is a tabletop role-playing game; although players take on the roles of particular characters, they perform these roles only in limited ways. Much of the action is determined by rolling dice and is restricted to the game grid (a map drawn on graph paper). Instead of performing actions, players narrate their actions, often including speech. Some players choose to perform their characters through special language use, but such performances may be fleeting and marked in comparison to ongoing discourse. Gary Alan Fine sug-

gests in his ethnography of gaming communities that the relative absence of performance in tabletop role-playing games is due to the limited theatrical abilities of the players:

> While groups differ in the emphasis they place on natural conversation, . . . very few conversations consist of characters "directly" talking to each other. That involves greater role-playing skills than most players, even experienced ones, possess. Rather than conceiving of gaming as improvisational acting, a better metaphor might be storytelling-with each storyteller having authority over one character-producing a collective fantasy. (1983:213-214)

However, some role-playing games-known as live-action role-playing games or LARPs-are much closer to improvisational performance than the tabletop gaming that Fine describes. In light of the fact that many people play both tabletop and live-action games, the varying extent of performance found in each is better attributed to generic convention than to lack of talent. To be sure, some participants are more adept than others at creating and sustaining a character for long stretches of time, but acting ability, though appreciated, is not required for successful participation in live-action role playing.

As with tabletop games, LARPs require a gamemaster who designs a particular game plot for a group of players, often with the aid of various manuals, modules, and other detailed printed (and now online) material produced by the game company as well as by other gamemasters. The most popular LARP is Vampire, or VLARP, which, as its name suggests, involves characters and plots associated with vampires. Vampire has to some extent revolutionized fan culture by attracting large numbers of teenagers who participate in the youth subculture of goth, a situation that has been greeted with some ambivalence by many gamers who consider fan culture remote from the trendiness and coolness (and sometimes pretentiousness) that goth represents (see also Bacon-Smith, 2000). The style of VLARP, like goth culture more generally, is frequently dark, nostalgic, and melancholic. The game under analysis here can be viewed in many ways as a parody of VLARP-and, indeed, of fan culture itself. Based on a much less widely known tabletop role-playing game called Paranoia, which bills itself as "the role-playing game of a darkly humorous future," the live-action version was dubbed PLARP by its designer in a conscious echo of the common acronym for Vampire.

As a development from earlier tabletop role-playing games, LARPs combine elements of play and improvisational performance. Player characters, or PCs, physically move through the game world, and the action is furthered through encounters with non-player characters, or NPCs, who populate the game setting. The purpose of the game is not only to win, but also, and just as importantly, to interact in a rich and consistent game world through the use of props, sets, costumes, and dialogue appropriate to one's role. Although both PCs and NPCs are provided with character profiles that guide their action, the details of performance are left to each individual. Thus, unlike the more traditional kinds of performance that Bauman (1977) terms "cultural performances," in which performers and audience members are sharply differentiated, the performers and the audience in live-action role playing largely overlap. This dual role of participants can be seen in the fact that in the game analyzed here, at the end of the evening prizes were awarded to the best Player Character, as selected by the NPCs, and to the best NPC, as selected by the players.

4. The Game

The analysis focuses on a live-action role-playing game that was played at a Texas science-fiction and fantasy convention on March 27, 1999. Conventions, or cons, have long been a crucial gathering place for science-fiction and fantasy fans to meet, attend question-and-answer sessions with famous genre authors and actors, dress up in costumes, buy fan-related merchandise, and participate in role-playing games and tournaments.

PLARP was adapted from the tabletop version expressly for this convention; the development of the game took over a year and resulted in a 50-page manual that documented every detail of the game, from costumes to character profiles to plot. NPCs were required to read the manual carefully before the game in order to be able to handle any eventuality that might arise. Players received a much shorter (11-page) version of the manual, which they read just before the game began. The game, which lasted for approximately four hours, was preceded by half an hour of briefing, in which the basic premise and rules were described both orally and via the player manual, and was followed by 15 minutes of debriefing, in which the plot and puzzles of the game were explained and prizes were awarded.

Forty-eight players participated in the PLARP game in teams of up to six members. A five-dollar registration fee enabled the organizers to provide supplies for each player (a dart gun, a packet of information about the game and his or her character, and a red T-shirt, which identified them as players). Approximately 27 additional people participated as non-players, serving as NPCs, judges of combat, makeup artists, and members of the "stage crew." Most non-players filled multiple roles during the game as necessity required. About ninety percent of the participants were white males ranging in age from early adolescence to early adulthood.

The game was played on three floors of the building in which the convention was held; participants moved from floor to floor via elevators. The game was set in the futuristic world of Paranoia, an amalgam and parody of the worlds imagined by George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and other dystopian authors. Paranoia is set in an underground warren called Alpha Complex run by a communist-fearing computer and populated by clones and mutants. In the plot of the game described here, Drac-U-LAH, a high programmer, has taken over the computer and is transforming Alpha Complex into his nostalgic ideal, a world of monsters from B-movies; as the game designer puts it, "It's sort of a bad forties Hollywood vintage horror thing." The players are troubleshooters, a special force sent on a false mission to give Drac-U-LAH a present (actually a bomb). The purpose of the game is to discover Drac-U-LAH's plot and destroy him.

Unlike some other games, such as Vampire, character development in PLARP is less important than plot and humor, in part because the participants were playing assigned roles for a single evening, rather than creating and developing a character throughout a series of games. Much of the humor in PLARP, as in everyday nerdy interaction, comes from language play. One of the richest examples of language play within PLARP is found in the practices used for naming characters. In keeping with the conventions of the tabletop version of the game, each character name is structured as first name, middle initial, and a one-syllable last name in capital letters; the elements of the name are connected by hyphens to suggest the futuristic world of Paranoia, in which all characters are clones. The designers of Paranoia identify characters' status within the game hierarchy through the use of a middle initial that represents their level of "security clearance": R

for red, a low level; B for blue, a high level; and so on. These initials may in turn be reinterpreted as words so that a character's full name can be read as a phrase: Johnny-B-GUD, Smurf-R-HPY. In addition, character names are designed to invoke the nature of the character or the theme of the game. Thus many player characters in PLARP were given names associated with monsters, horror films, Halloween, or popular culture. Finally, some characters' initials, when read as acronyms, create puns, allusions, and additional layers of meaning: the initials of mad scientist Ivan-B-MAD form the name of computer company IBM, a joke not lost on the many technically proficient participants in the game; and Drac-U-LAH, the game's archvillain who overcompensates for his failure to be scary, has initials that spell DUL. The multiple levels of language play evident in the game's naming practices suggest the attention to detail that makes the game world rich and pleasurable for players.

5. Boundaries of the Game World

A crucial tension of live-action role-playing games is that between the game world and the real world. Effective role playing requires maintaining one's orientation to the game world, but effective game playing often requires stepping out of the game world to negotiate and further the action of the game. In ongoing play, players continuously shift between two different interactional states which they call *in character* and *out of character*. This distinction is so central to role playing that players may metapragmatically announce their interactional style at the beginning of a turn at talk in order to signal to others how to appropriately interpret and respond to their turn. In Example (1), a troubleshooter offers one such metapragmatic label and then reiterates it when a non-player character nonetheless maintains a game orientation. (Hot Fun is a snack provided as part of the game; it is a random assortment of treats mixed together: chocolate, oatmeal, Malt-O-Meal, fruit-flavored marshmallows, and peppermint extract.)[2]

(1) 11:03:22
A troubleshooter eating Hot Fun approaches Sarge-G-ROK.
1. TS: Out of character,
2. what the hell is in this.

[2] Transcription conventions appear at the end of the paper.

3. (SGR): <off camera> It's Hot Fun.
4. NPC: <off camera> Well:,
5. TS: Out of character.
6. What the hell is in this.

Explicit appeal to the metapragmatic level is often not necessary, however, because one's interactional orientation may be signaled wholly at the pragmatic level through linguistic adjustments that indicate shifts in footing. Many players display whether they are in character by performing a recognizable character style. Character styles draw on pitch and volume modulation, lexical choice and syntax, phonology, and extralinguistic contextualization cues such as gesture. In their most elaborate form, character styles may be associated with consistently maintained character-appropriate accents; more often, PCs and NPCs display a character orientation through more selective use of linguistic resources that diverge less dramatically, though still noticeably, from their out-of-character style.

In Example (2), an NPC, Johnny-B-GUD, and a PC shift in and out of character as they negotiate the ongoing interaction.[3]

(2) 11:13:37
Johnny-B-GUD interrogates a troubleshooter about why she didn't eat the Hot Fun.

1. JBG: Your lack of cooperation in this matter (.) only proves to me: (.)
2. that it is time:
3. (2.2) <turns to item cards, holds item card out to troubleshooter>
4. Eat this pill. (3.8)
5. <cocks gun, points it at troubleshooter's forehead> Now.
6. <troubleshooter takes hold of card; JBG pulls it away>
7. JBG: <out of character> You ate the pill?
8. TS: <out of character> Yes I ate the pill.
9. JBG: <out of character, pulls away gun> It's truth serum.

[3] The troubleshooter in Example (2) also appears in Examples (5) and (8) as Troubleshooter 2.

10. For the next ten minutes, you have to tell me the truth.
11. <troubleshooter nods>
12. JBG: <in character, points gun at troubleshooter's forehead>
13. Are you a member of a secret society?
14. TS: <in character> No citizen.
15. JBG: <out of character, pulls gun away>
16. You have to actually tell me the truth.
17. TS: <out of character> Seriously [I'm not.]
18. JBG: [Seriously.]
19. <Two troubleshooters approach.>
20. JBG: <in character, points gun at first troubleshooter's fore head>
21. Did you know that the Hot Fun was poisoned?
22. TS: <in character> No citizen.
23. <JBG moves the gun away.>
24. TS: <out of character> Seriously I didn't, I …

Both Johnny-B-GUD and the troubleshooter speak more quietly and with a lesser range of suprasegmental features when out of character; posture and gesture also contribute to the signaling of stance: hence Johnny-B pulls his gun away when out of character, a gesture that so consistently indexes his stance that in line 23 he does not even need to speak in order to elicit an out-of-character response from the troubleshooter.

Although the distinction between being in and out of character is clear in this example, speakers may choose not to maximize the difference between these idealized states and instead adopt a style that hovers ambiguously between the two orientations. This form of creative hybridity is exemplified in (3), in which, near the end of the game, an NPC speaks to other NPCs in a style that combines in-character and out-of-character elements.

(3) 11:39:10
Ivan-B-MAD has just heard that Drac-U-LAH is dead; he enters the room where his henchmen are.

1. IBM: It's over folks.
2. We lost.
3. Pack it up!
4. We're leaving.
5. Oh: man:.

Ivan-B-MAD adopts a very colloquial style here that contrasts with his fully in-character style. Yet he is still in character, as shown by his orientation to the game plot and the other characters. Here he orders his henchmen to prepare to escape after their defeat. Such complete merging of real-world and game-world perspectives is not unusual, and although Fine understands this stylistic blending as a weakness in role playing, its effect is in fact to enhance the role-playing dimension by naturalizing and normalizing the game-world perspective as the player's own.

6. Styles of Discourse

A great deal of out-of-character talk can be tolerated even in live-action role playing because most such talk continues to orient to the game world. Very rarely do speakers introduce or pursue topics that are entirely unconnected to the game, a truly remarkable achievement in the case of PLARP, given the long duration of the game and its many participants. But while most out-of-character talk is unofficial discourse in which characters step out of the performance, several discourse genres within the game require out-of-character talk of a performed and on-record nature. One of the most important of these is the narration of ongoing events. The narrative genre is a staple of tabletop role-playing games, where physical actions in the game world are not literally enacted by players. Even in live-action role playing, however, some events must be narrated rather than enacted because of real-world limitations. In Example (4), which took place at the end of the game, Drac-U-LAH, who has already been killed, steps out of character to narrate the situation to a newly arrived troubleshooter.

(4) 11:34:56
Drac-U-LAH narrates the end of the game, out of character; his character has just been killed and a troubleshooter, unaware of this fact, tries to enter the room in order to kill Drac-U-LAH and win the game.

1.	DUL:	This guy comes running out,
2.		and then y- and and and the only thing you <u>see</u>
		basically
3.		in the pile of rubble, is this <u>boot</u>,
4.		from his unconscious buddy that he left behind.
5.		<laughter>
6.	DUL:	and what's left of two- of maybe of maybe of one l-

7.		one one one of the vampbots, that's k-
8.		you know toppled over, and you see <raises arm>
9.		you know Drac-U's arm: [extending out]
10.	TS:	[His arm is extending-]
11.		Oh his arm is extending out?
12.	DUL:	Yeah.
13.	TS:	Okay.
14.		I climb up the rubble pile,
15.		<Drac-U-LAH falls>
16.		<laughter>
17.	?1:	<off camera> Alan!
18.	TS:	You watching?
19.	?1:	<off camera> You're in the rubble!
20.		<troubleshooter holds up item card>
21.	Vampbot:	<off camera> Oh,
22.		wrapped pre(h)sent.
23.	TS:	Wrapped present.
24.		<laughter>
25.		<TS places item card in Drac-U's extended hand>
26.		<laughter>
27.	TS:	In the hand.
28.		<laughter>
29.	DUL:	<takes card> The hand convulses closed.
30.		<laughter>
31.	?2:	Boom!
32.	?3:	I admire your dedication.
33.		<laughter>
34.	DUL:	<sits up>
35.		Report to Johnny-B.
36.		Tell him you delivered the present,
37.		the vamp- that Drac-U is dead.

The first part of the narration (lines 1-12) serves to set the scene for the troubleshooter so that he can determine his next action. Beyond this practical concern, however, the initial narration also provides embellishments and background details (lines 2-4) that enrich the game-world experience. In short, it is a performance. Drac-U-LAH is not in character, and indeed he refers to himself in the third person, but the narration bridges rather than interrupts in-character play. Moreover, as the troubleshooter takes up the narration, he blends ele-

ments of in-character and out-of-character performance. Some of his narration reports actions that he does not physically enact (line 14), while other portions highlight key dramatic moments that he does perform (lines 23, 27). Drac-U-LAH enters into this dramatic enactment of the ongoing narrative by narrating his own enacted action in line 29. Together the speakers collaborate to create a humorous epilogue that satisfyingly closes off the game by (redundantly) completing the troubleshooter's original mission to deliver the wrapped bomb to Drac-U-LAH. The fact that the speakers are watched by an appreciative audience is no doubt part of the reason for this elaborated narrative performance that combines in-character and out-of-character stances, but such narration is aimed primarily at the other participants and only incidentally to any observers that may be present.

7. The Performance of Accent

As noted above, the most vivid way in which game participants can create a character style is by adopting a distinctive accent. Like other character styles, accent performance serves several purposes within the game, including bounding the game world, creating characterizations, and displaying interactional stances. Accent is particularly crucial for certain NPCs, because it can serve as a kind of shorthand for characterization in the rapidly moving action of the game. In Example (5), Drac-U-LAH interacts in-character with an NPC and two PCs, using a distinctive pseudo-Transylvanian accent borrowed from popular film. The troubleshooters are trying to complete a game-related task that requires Drac-U-LAH's signature.

(5) 8:54:12
Two troubleshooters try to get Drac-U-LAH's signature in order to obtain a higher security clearance level. Gyps-Y-ROM looks on.

1. TS1:	Here you go sir.
2. DUL:	Ah, a pen. <[pĩn]>.
3.	All right,
4.	I need a piece of paper.
5.	[What am I signing for you.]
6. TS2:	[Oh, I actually have a] piece of paper.
7. DUL:	[[What am I signing for you.]]
8. TS1:	<extends hand, palm up>

9.	[[(Actually) you can just]] autograph my hand.
10. GYR:	<off camera, out of character> Here I have a
11.	[piece of paper.]
12. DUL:	[No no no.]
13.	(You should) wash it off.
14.	Cleanliness [clean]liness cleanliness. <[klĩnlinɨs klĩnlinɨs klĩnlinɨs]>
15. GYR:	<off camera, out of character> [Here.]
16.	Here's a piece of paper.
17. TS2:	<takes paper from pocket and offers it>
18.	There's nothing written on this.
19.	Would you please (could you) autograph it?
20. DUL:	<takes paper> Certainly certainly.
21. TS2:	Why thank you.
22. DUL:	Who am I making this out (.) to:?
23. TS2:	You would be making it out to: <checks name badge>
24.	King-R-KNG.
25. DUL:	King-R-KNG?
26. TS2:	Yes.
27. DUL:	You're awfully short [for (be a)] King-R-KNG.
28. TS2:	[Well of course.]
29.	Well friend citizen- the computer made me like this
30.	and I'm very happy being short.
31. DUL:	<writing> {Yes yes yes. <[yɨs yɨs yɨs]>
32.	Fro:m (2.4) Dra:c (1.3) U: (.) <creaky voice> {LA:H}.} (1.3)
33.	<hands paper and pen to TS2> There you are.
34. TS2:	Why thank you friend citizen.
35. DUL:	Now go.
36.	<taking gun from coat rack> {I have things to do.}
37. GYR:	<off camera> Would you like your fortune read?
38. DUL:	I know my fortune.
39.	<leaving the room> {I am high programmer.}

Drac-U-LAH uses a number of phonological strategies to produce his accent. Some of these, like the flapping of /r/ and the use of nonreduced vowels, are stereotypical of this accent, while others, such as the raising and tensing of [ɛ] next to nasals, as in lines 2 and 14, seem

to be an attempt to produce a "non-native" style (see also Rampton, 1995), as well as a reflection of the speaker's own Texas accent, in which prenasal vowel raising occurs; that is, Drac-U-LAH uses vowel tensing to "foreignize" his native pronunciations, [pɪn] and [klɪlinɨs]. This "non-native" style is also created syntactically through the deletion of the determiner in line 39 (*I am high programmer*). It is worth noting that while Drac-U-LAH maintains his character accent, Gyps-Y-ROM shifts from an out-of-character accent when talking about the mechanics of the game (lines 10, 15-16) to her in-character accent when addressing Drac-U as a fellow character (line 37).

Accent may be used not only to signal orientation to the game world or to create a character but also to further the plot. In (6) Friend Computer is reading a script that he repeats throughout the game. At first he reads the script without a performance accent (although he does draw on other aspects of performance in his reading), and then he initiates an abrupt self-repair and reads the script with a pseudo-Transylvanian accent. The computer's accent is a crucial plot point: it serves as a hint to the troubleshooters that the computer has been taken over by Drac-U-LAH and that what they are hearing is in fact a pre-recorded message made by Drac-U.

(6) 8:15:33

1. FC: <reading> {Hello citizen.
2. This is Friend Compu-}
3. Oh.
4. Sorry.
5. <reading, with pseudo-Transylvanian accent>
6. Hello: citizen.
7. This is Friend Computer.
8. How may I help you?

Not all uses of accents, however, are directly tied to the game world. In Example (7), my research assistant Jonathan approaches Gyps-Y-ROM, who is taking a snack break and has been speaking out of character for several minutes.

(7) 10:45:10
Gyps-Y-ROM eats a bowl of food at the table where she tells fortunes.

1. JH: Can we interrupt you (.) for a minute?
2. GYR: <eating> {Hm. Mhm.}
3. (Well I've been) out of character for-
4. JH: That's okay.
5. GYR: <quietly> {Okay.}
6. JH: So (.) what can they find out from you.
7. GYR: <cups hand around mouth; pseudo-East European accent> {To tell you
8. the truth,
9. nothing.} <smiles, nods, gives thumbs-up>
10. JH: hhh

Gyps-Y-ROM's response to Jonathan's first question is out of character (and indeed is a metapragmatic comment on the fact that she has not been in character), but her response to his second question is in character, as signaled by her use of an accent somewhat similar to Drac-U-LAH's and likewise more stereotypical than "real." Here Gyps-Y-ROM reframes the interaction as a performance for the camera; there are no player characters in the room, and out of camera range she occasionally interacts out of character with both PCs and NPCs. Gyps-Y-ROM's frequent shifts between her game-world voice and her real-world voice suggest that many factors may influence a choice not to maintain an orientation to the game world, primary among them the absence of the player characters for whom ostensibly the world exists.

In contrast with Drac-U-LAH, Friend Computer, and Gyps-Y-ROM, a fourth NPC who used a recognizable accent in the game was not required to do so based on either his character or the game plot. This character, Creature-B-BLK, is a former research scientist who was turned into a mutant by Ivan-B-MAD; he consistently uses a British accent. In Example (8) he offers advice to two troubleshooters.

(8) 9:07:10
Creature-B-BLK talks to two troubleshooters in his lair.

1. CBB: I do believe that there's only uh (1.2) the <u>two</u> robots,
2. there's only the vampbots, which guard-

3. well, they used to be f- Drac-U-LAH's quarters but he s- he
4. calls it his castle now,
5. part of the ambience (you see).
6. But um uh: I do believe Frank <[frɑŋk]>-Y-STN's
7. part robot.
8. Perhaps that's who he's (interested in.)
9. TS1: Perhaps.
10. CBB: [xxxx]
11. TS2: [Then we'll just try and find] Frank-Y-STN.
12. CBB: Not a wi(h)se idea!
13. [[<unintelligible>]]
14. TS1: [[I don't think that sounds]] very good.
15. CBB: Frank <[frɑŋk]>-Y-STN is a (.) rather (.) .h: unstable
16. individual shall we say?
17. [I would say that.]
18. TS1: Then [he is treason-]
19. Then he- It sounds as though he is treasonous if he
20. is unstable,
21. for being unstable is not happy.
22. CBB: Oh he's quite ha(h)ppy with the way he is, trust me.
23. TS1: Oh!
24. CBB: Smashing things,
25. breaking things,
26. drooling,
27. that's- he he likes that sort of bit.
28. It's his bag,
29. I believe.
30. TS1: Oh.
31. It sounds like a happy bag.
32. CBB: He loves it.

Creature-B-BLK's RP British accent is not of the broad stereotypical type found in the other characters' accents. While no one would mistake Drac-U-LAH's or Gyps-Y-ROM's accents for anything other than performance styles, it is possible to mistake Creature-B-BLK's British accent for his out-of-character language variety. In fact, I myself made this mistake, because he maintained his accent even when Jonathan and I interviewed him during the game when no

player characters were in the area.[4] But it was clear from our second interview with him after the game, in which he consistently used a Midwestern American accent, that Creature-B-BLK's British accent is indeed performed as part of his character.

Creature-B-BLK creates this dramatic shift between styles through relatively minor linguistic adjustments. An analysis of his vowel formants in both styles yielded no major differences in his vowel space. Instead, Creature-B-BLK uses sociolinguistic stereotypes of British English such as post-vocalic /r/ deletion and palatalization of obstruents, as well as some syntactic structures and lexical items stereotypically associated with upper-class British English (e.g., *I do believe*; *that sort of bit*). These small adjustments, however, have a considerable effect. Creature-B-BLK's ability to role-play his character almost completely consistently throughout the game must be regarded as an achievement, given the many reasons to switch out of character, as already discussed.[5] Nor were we the only ones to recognize Creature-B-BLK's virtuoso performance; at the end of the evening he was selected by the players as the best NPC and received an award. Given the high-quality role playing exhibited by all the NPCs, this public acknowledgment of skilled performance indicates how highly in-character accents are prized for the effect they have in preserving a consistent and believable game world.

8. PC Performance

Thus far I have only discussed performances of accent by NPCs, who, unsurprisingly given their greater prominence in the game and their opportunity to pre-plan their performance, used a wider range of accents than the PCs. But although PCs did not use recognizable accents, they drew on other linguistic resources to produce what we might think of as a special "gaming" variety.

Each player was assigned a unique character with a name, a written description of his or her history and goals in the game, and special

[4] Nor was my error simply due to the naïve hearing of a non-native speaker of the variety. A British sociophonetician who viewed the videotape of Creature-B-BLK's performance likewise believed him to be British until she heard the recording of him in his out-of-character style.

[5] In fact, Creature-B-BLK did occasionally switch out of character in order to judge combat between player characters.

powers and useful "items" such as weapons that he or she had available. Although the PCs were thus individuated from one another, they were also visibly uniform in their identical red T-shirts, and they were interchangeable in that unlike many of the NPCs, no particular PC was crucial to the plot of the game. Yet PCs did take on performed roles in the game that exceeded the requirements of their character profiles. One primary way they did so was by adopting a special style of speaking to demarcate the game world.

The examples in (9) illustrate some of the components of this style, including careful articulation, especially of medial and final /t/ (e.g., 9a: *Where is it*?), resistance to assimilation processes, nonreduction of unstressed syllables, and avoidance of contractions. In addition, the style often features a distinctive flat intonation and syllable-based stress pattern that might be described-somewhat misleadingly-as "stilted." This phonological formality is matched by equally formal syntactic and lexical choices (e.g., *Do so* in 9a; *shall* in 9b).

(9a) 8:39:35
A team of troubleshooters discusses a plan to poison the Bouncy Bubble Beverage.

1. TS1: I say (.) we storm the food vat room.
2. TS2: Where is it?
3. Do you know?=
4. TS1: =I can lead us to there.
5. TS2: Good!
6. Do so.
7. TS1: Whoo-hoo!

(9b) 8:10:00
A team confronts a locked door.

1. TS1: Hm,
2. we need keys.
3. We must find keys.
4. Where will keys be?
5. TS2: Wherever Friend Computer says they shall be.

(9c) 8:16:44
A team seeks assistance from Friend Computer.

1. TS1: We saw someone who claimed to be Citizen Drac-U-LAH
2. but he said he did not want his present.
3. TS2: <off camera> [No!]
4. TS3: There]fore he is an im[poster.]
5. ?: <off camera> [poster.]
6. TS2: <off camera> No!
7. TS4: [Who] would
8. refuse a gift from Friend Computer?

These practices clearly signal an in-character stance; however, they are very similar to everyday nerdy linguistic practices which collectively I call superstandard English. What a non-fan or non-nerd might hear as formality is instead a display of identity. Thus for players who use this style, role playing may be an opportunity not only to take on a new, performance-based identity, but also to publicly celebrate a nerdy identity that is stigmatized in many other contexts.

This gaming speech style has other sources as well. Perhaps even more important than nerdy style is the gaming style associated with *Dungeons & Dragons* and other role-playing games with medieval or archaic settings. Since medieval-theme games continue to dominate the market, they are the most familiar example players may draw on in a new gaming environment such as PLARP. Sometimes this prior context penetrates the game world overtly, as in example (10), in which a troubleshooter uses a term, *patrons*, associated with medieval fantasy rather than with the science-fiction world of PLARP.

(10) 10:51:12
Mum-Y-RAP aids a team of troubleshooters.

1. MYR: Good luck to you troubleshooter.
2. TS: Thank you very much sir. <smiles; nods once>
3. (4.0)
4. MYR: Although I will say I do you nothing but disservice by giving you this.
5. <spreads arms>
6. TS: We are unworthy f- patrons,
7. thank you very much.

Finally, there is a third available source for the gaming speech style: British English, or at least an imagined version of it. Not only is British English the preferred variety for medieval role playing, but among science-fiction and fantasy fans it is also richly endowed with language ideologies that associate the variety with intelligence, humor, and fantasy, in part because of the role of British English in popular fan culture, from Monty Python to Dr. Who and beyond. The influence of British English on players is evident in numerous fleeting and emblematic uses of Britishisms even when out of character. Examples of such linguistic appropriation appear in (11): *bugger off, cocked-up, and lever* [livəɹ]. Here the colloquial quality of the first two examples (11a, 11b) suggests that just as formal varieties of British English shape the linguistic practices of science-fiction and fantasy fans in play, so too do informal varieties influence fans' language use in everyday life.[6]

(11a) 8:58:33
A team approaches a judge, who is with another troubleshooter.

1. TS: I'm I'm (improvising) the judge's time here.
2. Bugger off [y'all.]
3. TS2: [Hur]ry up.
4. Judge: No:,
5. You're monopolizing me.

(11b) 11:46:05
Johnny-B-GUD, out of character, explains to the troubleshooters why Friend Computer sent them on a false mission.

1. JBG: So um: he sent them in with this cocked-up mission about …

(11c) 9:45:33
Hall-Y-WUD, out of character, explains an aspect of the game plot to me, Jonathan, and a group of non-player characters.

1. HYW: There's poison,
2. which is being put in the Hot Fun,

[6] The interaction in (11a) also illustrates another characteristic of everyday nerdy style: the tendency for speakers to initiate and perform repairs of others' utterances (see also Bucholtz 1999).

3. and there's a lever <[livəɹ]> which controls
4. whether or not the poison will be added or not.

Thus, the selection and performance of particular accents ties the game intertextually to previous enactments of the fantastic. At the same time, however, it also forges ideological ties to specific ethnicized categories. The pseudo-East European accents of Drac-U-LAH and Gyps-Y-ROM both rely on broad linguistic and cultural stereotypes found in previous cultural texts for their socially indexical meanings. Such ethnically marked accents contrast with the privileged status of British styles of speaking both within the game and within fan culture more generally. This hierarchical ranking is not politically neutral, insofar as some accents, broadly exaggerated, are relegated to comedy or kitsch horror and others can be put to much wider use. These imagined accents, moreover, are linked both to ethnicized and to racialized subject positions. All these accents are, generally speaking, European, and all of them are associated both historically and ideologically with whiteness, but while the pseudo-East European accents are ethnically marked, British-influenced speech is so unmarked that it can even be imported into everyday speech. On the other hand, British English is not entirely an unmarked linguistic variety in this context. I have argued elsewhere (Bucholtz, forthcoming 2001) that superstandard English is associated with a racially marked form of extreme whiteness; the appropriation of British English by American science-fiction and fantasy fans in some ways reinforces this marking by promoting a "best" form of English that is not American but instead invokes a nostalgia for a medieval past, a nostalgia enacted through an accent traditionally associated with the white upper class. And although PLARP is a sharp and witty parody of many of the conventions of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, this ethnicized and racialized linguistic nostalgia is immune from parody.

9. Conclusion

The various ways that science-fiction and fantasy fans put accents to use in performance, along with other sociolinguistic strategies they employ, such as language play, make clear that fans are not merely competent but adept users of language. Not content to be passive consumers of science-fiction- and fantasy-oriented commodities, fans have a strong sense of agency as manifested in practices of local cul-

tural production, including those that appropriate or parody corporate products. Through these multilayered functions, language effects identity at several levels: interactional, game-based, (sub)cultural, and ethnicized/racialized.

The performance of accent is therefore part of the broader phenomenon of linguistic representation, a set of transformative processes whereby linguistic forms become social indexes. The textual poaching that Jenkins identifies as the defining practice of fandom is a kind of linguistic representation; the accents I discuss in this paper are another kind. As previous scholarship in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology has shown, the study of linguistic representation enables a rich examination of the constitutive practices and ideologies of culture-which may be highlighted or foregrounded in moments of play and performance. Equally importantly, linguistic representation allows us to examine how such practices and ideologies work together to forge multiple kinds of identity within discourse.

Transcription Conventions

Each line represents a single intonation unit.

.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
,	end of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
!	raised pitch throughout the intonation unit
-	self-interruption; break in the intonational unit
-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
:	length
underline	emphatic stress; increased amplitude; careful articulation of a segment
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds or less
(n.n)	pause of greater than 0.5 seconds, measured by a stopwatch
h	exhalation (e.g., laughter, sigh); each token marks one pulse
.h	inhalation
( )	uncertain transcription
< >	transcriber comment; nonvocal noise

References

Bacon-Smith, Camille. 2000. *Science Fiction Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bauman, Richard. 1977. *Verbal Art as Performance.* Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Bauman, Richard. 1996. Transformations of the word in the production of Mexican festival drama. In *Natural Histories of Discourse*, Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (eds.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 301-327.

Bauman, Richard and Charles L. Briggs. 1990. Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19: 59-88.

Briggs, Charles L. 1988. *Competence in Performance: The Creativity of Tradition in Mexicano Verbal Art*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bucholtz, Mary. 1996. Geek the girl: Language, femininity, and female nerds. In *Gender and Belief Systems: Proceedings of the Fourth Berkeley Women and Language Conference*, Natasha Warner et al. (eds.). Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group. 119-131.

Bucholtz, Mary. 1999. "Why be normal?": Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. *Language in Society* 28, 2. 203-223.

Bucholtz, Mary. Forthcoming 2001. The whiteness of nerds: Superstandard English and racial markedness. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, 1.

Certeau, Michel de. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fine, Gary Alan. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hymes, Dell. 1981. *"In Vain I Tried to Tell You": Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture.* New York: Routledge.

Pustz, Matthew J. 1999. *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Sherzer, Joel. 1990. *Verbal Art in San Blas: Kuna Culture through Its Discourse*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Warner, Harry. 1969. *All Our Yesterdays: An Informal History of Science Fiction Fandom in the Forties*. Chicago: Advent.

Department of English
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843-4227
bucholtz@tamu.edu