

Embodied stereotypes: Coconut Kelz and the parodic performance of coco-nuttiness

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Abstract

In the last decade, sociolinguists explored the notion of deracialisation in varieties of South African English (SAE), especially as spoken by younger people. Mesthrie (2017; also see Da Silva, 2007; Morreira, 2012; Chevalier, 2016) found internal difference among younger Black speakers in relation to social class and gender, with young Black women leading the use of the prestige variety associated with White L1 SAE speakers. My aim is to explore the dynamics and inherent tensions created by these “internal differences” by focusing on young, middle-class Black women in politically charged contexts. Specifically, where previous research examined the social correlates of linguistic variation and change in South African Englishes, my paper focuses on the parodic performance of a social type called “coconuts”. Lesego Tlhabi provides a succinct description of a coconut when talking about her parodic alter ego, Coconut Kelz: Kelz “is a young Caucasian woman trapped in a black woman’s body” (Tlhabi, 2019). I draw on the notion of enregisterment, the process by which linguistic features become metapragmatically linked to social types (Agha, 2003), to explore the linguistic strategies employed by Kelz to create a coconut persona. Data are from Tlhabi’s Coconut Kelz videos on her YouTube channel. *Praat* (Boersma & Weenink, 2021) was used to extract vowel tokens and to measure vowel formants from forced aligned TextGrids. I focus on the short front vowels, considering Chevalier’s (2019) findings on the Reverse Short Vowel Shift, which involves the lowering (and often retraction) of KIT, DRESS, and TRAP in the speech of younger South Africans. The initial results show that Kelz uses lowered and retracted short front vowels. However, I argue that not only do Kelz’s vowels index young, White SAE speakers: her satire should also be read through the bricolage she assembles, drawing on hair styles, facial expression, and gestures to embody a coconut persona through performance and affect.

Keywords: Black South African English; Enregisterment; New Englishes; Parody; Performance; Reverse Short Front Vowel Shift; Social mobility

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