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Dialect style, social class and metacultural performance: The pantomime Dame

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Dialect, social class and hegemony

Demonstrating the statistical association between dialect variation and social class was a dominant concern of early variationist Sociolinguistics (see Part 1 of this volume). Dialect, but more typically that part of dialect that is commonly called 'accent', has repeatedly been shown to co-vary with indices of social class in Western Anglophone societies, particularly in urban settings. But what is social class? And how do accent and dialect function in relation to it?

Rampton interprets social class as 'the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes…written into the whole body of practices and expectations experienced by the individual' (2006: 229; see also this volume). This replaces the variationist view of social class as a layered or stratified structure of society with a view of social class as a structuring of experience. It replaces the view of language as a set of indexical forms (such as accent features), whose use might correlate with social class categories, with a view of language as a social practice that might bring experiences of social class into people's lives. In Rampton's view, if social class matters in people's lives (and *without* subscribing to the view that it inevitably and always *does*), it ought to be possible to see and hear 'dominance and subordination' happening in social interaction. This is a very different matter from observing that people assigned to 'middle class' versus 'working class' groups (perhaps on the basis of their jobs, where they live, or how much they earn) have different accents, graded on a scale between 'standard' and 'non-standard'. The fact that class-related distributions of linguistic features exist is an important background consideration. But there is no political 'bite', or much explanatory value, in those patterns themselves. So we also need to work out what particular meanings are made when 'standard' and 'non-standard' accents are part of discursive practice, and there is no reason to believe that such meanings will be the same at different times and places, and in different local contexts of talk.

These are some of the reasons for adopting an interactional, critical and constructionist approach to dialect (and accent) in use, and this perspective has come to be associated with the unassuming label of sociolinguistic *style*. In William Labov's original conception, style or stylistic variation referred to how people speak differently across different social situations – again see Part 1. It was therefore possible to conceive of language varying in two basic dimensions – a 'social' dimension, where speech variants patterned with some sociological dimension such as social class, and a 'stylistic' dimension, where the same variants patterned with different situational factors, such as speaking in 'formal' versus 'informal' situations. But critical stylistic research has collapsed this distinction. A perspective on 'dialect styling' (Coupland 2007) assumes that accent and dialect are a semiotic resource (among many other parallel resources) for constructing personal identities, relational configurations and group-level associations. Analyses trace the different pragmatic and other social effects created through these acts of identity. Stylistic operations around accent and dialect are therefore the basic means by which people express

class-relevant distinctiveness and relations in their talk. From a styling viewpoint, the 'social dimension of language variation' that Labov refers to is merely a statistical abstraction based on observing many instances of stylistic/ discursive practice, rather than anything theoretically distinct from styling in discourse.

Social class has its basis in social realities to do with authority, control, poverty and life chances. But meanings linked to social class are also created in discourse, and discursive action can have material consequences. If we define social class, as Rampton does, as a matter of dominance and subordination at the level of social groups, then class is a matter of hegemony. This is 'the legitimation of the cultural authority of the dominant group, an authority that plays a significant role in social reproduction', and 'the deep saturation of the consciousness of a society' (Woolard 1985: 739). Woolard aligns hegemony with Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of 'symbolic domination', which works not so much by people submitting to dominant norms or, on the other hand, freely adopting them, and more by dominant values and dispositions being tacitly naturalised.

Following this chain of associations, social class can therefore be seen as a fundamentally ideological process through which the cultural authority of dominant groups seeps into people's consciousness, who, under particular circumstances, may accept is as 'the way things are'. The link to dialect is that, in Bourdieu's argument, 'standard' language forms are largely accepted as being 'correct' and 'authoritative'; they have high capital value in the linguistic marketplace, and this services the interests of dominant groups who define what is and what is not 'standard' and 'correct'.

Linguistic usage, performance and stylisation

There is evidence that standard accents of English continue to have high capital value, at least in Britain. In an online survey we conducted in association with the BBC, more than 5,000 people made assessments of the 'prestige' and 'attractiveness' of 34 accent-types that are regularly heard in Britain (Coupland and Bishop 2007). The results very largely confirmed those of smaller-scale research of a similar sort conducted over 30 years earlier, but with some interesting particular trends. The accent labelled 'standard English' was strongly favoured, for both prestige and attractiveness, while some urban vernacular accents, with Birmingham accented English being the most extreme case, were quite heavily downgraded.

Of course, it is difficult to assess what social significance these patterns of decontextualised judgements have beyond the online task itself. The findings are consistent with the idea that, when they are asked to comment explicitly on linguistic variation, British people can draw on sets of internalised assumptions about accents that generate the highly regular patterns of judgement of the sort we found. People can and do recycle ideological discourses about British accents – which, on the evidence of this particular study, do seem to be 'saturated' throughout the population of respondents – working in favour of 'standard' voices. They do suggest that there is a high level of agreement about the market values of British accent varieties. But where, precisely, is the dominance or the subordination?

At the level of speech itself, it would obviously be wrong to suggest that simply using a 'non-standard' accent somehow entails, or lays a speaker open to, subordination. Accent often remains 'below the radar'. Often, and perhaps usually, accent doesn't stand out as salient feature in the constitution of speech events. Within groups of people who broadly share a pattern of pronunciation, accent is just 'how we speak', and it is interesting that in the Coupland and Bishop survey we found that a

voice-type that we labelled 'an accent similar to my own' also attracted an extremely positive profile, even amongst speakers who must have had distinctive regional and social accents, relative to 'standard' speakers. Accent can become salient in social contexts where some sort of contrast is involved, for example when people with different accents interact, or when accent is somehow foregrounded within the speech event. But even when accent is salient, social class meanings are not the only possible meaning that can be constructed, and not all class-related meanings amount to subordination.

If we take a constructionist stance on language and social class, and if we adopt the strong reading of class as cultural hegemony, we need to find evidence of subordination taking place – social class being brought into existence as '*lived* dominance and subordination', as Rampton suggests. And this sort of evidence is much harder to find. Rampton suggests that in his own data, collected among multi-ethnic kids in British schools, he actually sees little evidence of 'damage being done', even though the voicing of social class is fairly common. Care is needed, all the same, partly because it is not obvious what counts as dominance and subordination in practice. If we accept that impositional authority is often disguised as rationality, and that power often masquerades as solidarity, then we might miss the evidence we are seeking.

Also, in the discussion above, we have so far failed to take into account acts of *resistance* to class hegemony, and the concept of hegemony itself underplays the dialectic nature of ideology and the existence of competing discourses. Social class, for example, is unlikely to fully 'saturate' a society, to the extent that it becomes entirely invisible and therefore a matter of dogma. In circumstances where there *is lived* dominance and subordination, and where these processes *are* to some extent visible and objectifiable, there is likely to be an opportunity to challenge hegemonic assumptions, and particular resources for doing this. This sort of objectification and resistance is also within the domain of discourse. When people 'use dialect', including speaking through 'non-standard' and 'standard' accents, there is no reason to believe they do so, always and only, in the service of, or in compliance with, a dominant ideology. The meanings and values that are constructed, and the degrees of compliance or resistance that are achieved, are a function of how speech varieties are *contextualised*.

If we talk of *performing* accents rather than 'using' them, it becomes easier to see their creative potential, which includes their potential to transform and resist dominant social values. The concept of performance has been used in many different ways in sociolinguistics, but I am using it here, broadly following Erving Goffman's (1981) dramaturgical perspective on social interaction, to imply that speakers often maintain a degree of critical distance from their own speech. That in turn means that speaking has a metalinguistic or metapragmatic dimension, because speakers are, to some extent, reflexively aware of their own styling operations can perceive alternatives for themselves. Even though an accent is a deeply coded facet of communicative practice, and part of what Boudieu calls the *habitus* (an ingrained communicative disposition laid down during socialisation), people certainly retain a degree of freedom and control over their own strategic operations through accent. Within limits, a speaker opts to use particular features or styles in preference to alternatives, anticipating that his or her performance will have particular sorts of impact on listeners and on the social situation. Performance is not always a matter of acting counter-normatively. People often opt to perform their speech, and themselves,

in conformity with custom or with normative constraints, but this is not to say that the production format is any less one of performance.

We can then envisage different intensities of performance, from more mundane acts of performance to more spectacular ones. There is a broad category of events that we can call *high performance events*. They are distinguished by involving high levels of *focusing*, in different regards (Bauman 1992, Coupland 2007: 147–148). For example, the performance becomes the focal point of audience attention, and audiences are 'gathered' to witness it. Audiences are particularly attentive to performers' use of language and other meaningful actions and they expect them to have special significance – and often, significance beyond what is most immediately discernible. Reflexivity is heightened, because audiences can assume that a high performance event will have been designed or put on, here and now, with specific targeted values and outcomes. High performance events are typically institutionalised events, involving conventional technologies of performance, such as stages, curtains, a sequence of scenes, publicised *dramatis personae* lists and time schedules. But 'ordinary communication' can sometimes assume qualities of high performance, minus these trappings. Bauman and Briggs (1990; this volume) argue that performances of this sort play a key role in making culture visible, analysable and transportable. Performance is part of culture, but it also exposes culture – it is *metacultural*.

In terms of accent, high performance often involves not only styling but *stylisation*, which, following Bakhtin (1986) and critical commentaries by Rampton and others, I take to be a potentially subversive form of multi-voiced utterance. Accent is a productive resource for stylisation because speakers can perform other people's accents/ voices. In Ben Rampton's concept (this volume) they can *cross* into sociolinguistic practices most commonly associated with others. Stylisation is a metaphorical construction that brings meanings and values from outside the current context of talk into play, and recontextualises them. It tends towards hyperbole, with clear and often 'over-drawn' or cartoon-like representations of characters and social types, selected from known repertoires. But stylisation is also ambiguous and has an 'as if' quality. Even though the immediate social and cultural referents of stylised performances may be easy enough to retrieve, the purpose of the performance and its characterisations may not be so obvious – it will need to be inferred. High performance stylisation can be parodic and destabilising; in extreme forms it defines whole performance genres such as burlesque and carnival, as analysed by Bakhtin (and see Rampton 2006: 346ff. on 'the grotesque').

Pulling these ideas together, we can see that accent stylisation might have a part to play in metacultural performances, reflexively designed and staged in ways that make reference to wider ideological relations and histories. In places where class and cultural hegemony has left a significant social impact, dialect stylisation might have a role to play in highlighting hegemonic relations, opening them up to scrutiny, and implicitly suggesting different social ordering principles. This is what I want to suggest is happening in the pantomime Dame data, below.

South Wales, cultural hegemony and industrialisation

Social inequality takes different forms in different historical and spatial environments. In Wales, the historical experience of social class has been strongest and most bitter in The Valleys, the upland areas between the south Wales coastal belt and rural mid Wales, spreading across most of the breadth of the country between rural south-west Wales and rural Gwent. The Valleys were rapidly industrialized, particularly centring

on deep mining for coal – the steam coal that fuelled the enormous expansion of British, European and other countries' transport and industrial processing from the 1840s, reaching a production peak of 56 million tons in 1913. The Valleys were a zone of extreme exploitation, controlled by mine owners mainly from outside the area. Socialist consciousness gelled in the middle years of the twentieth century in Wales, with the National Union of Mineworkers being formed in 1944 after decades of unrest and conflict, including the Depression, the 1926 general strike and the 1927 hunger march.

The South Wales coalfield fostered a collectivist, radical socialist ideology, galvanised by a series of mining disasters, illness, oppressive working conditions and environmental degradation, and positively expressed through the self-improvement programmes of the Miners' Institutes, choirs, bands, chapel-going and rugby. As Jones (1992: 340) suggests, the association of mining with at least one coherent version of Welshness retains a powerful resonance in post-industrial Wales. Socialist resistance to oppression became part of the national consciousness, and 'Wales versus England' took on a powerful resonance. Social class and, for many, a sense of national identity became closely intertwined, to the extent that it was possible to feel one's Welsh identity as an opposition to privilege and capitalist assertion, whose source was 'naturally' in England.

A programme of pit closures began in the 1950s, leading to the decimation of deep mining communities in the 1980s and the total elimination of deep mining as a commercial venture today. This is widely understood to have been Margaret Thatcher's personal project of retribution against socialist and union-based challenges to her right-wing Conservative government. The de-industrialisation of the Valleys has been one of the most rapid and aggressive social changes ever seen in Britain, generating massive social deprivation which is very much in evidence in the first decade of the 21st century. We therefore have a recent history of social class conflict in the South Wales Valleys that fully lives up to the rubric of 'the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes', but that also foregrounds resistance. The work-based practices and the community and family structures that constituted social class experience in the Valleys have now largely disappeared, impacting particularly strongly on men, and leaving damaging levels of male unemployment, general poverty and acute health problems. How the material and symbolic voids will be filled remains an open question. But what part might language play in the contemporary climate?

The stylisation of Valleys and posh English voices in pantomime

After the rapid influx of workers into the Valleys in the early industrial period, from other parts of Wales and well beyond, Valleys speech settled into being one of the most clearly recognised and, some studies suggest (Garrett, Coupland and Williams 2003), stigmatised English varieties in Wales. More research is needed. But there are undoubtedly strong indexical associations between Valleys voice and a historical sense of place – and a sense of *class* within that history. Lynda Mugglestone (2003) has suggested that, in Britain generally, 'standard' or 'received' English pronunciation has taken on more negative associations, which she sums up as a shift from 'proper' to 'posh'. But in the linguistic ideologies of the Valleys (and of most of Wales), 'posh English speech' has historically defined the axis of political *and national* antagonisms, and Valleys people have never succumbed to the sociolinguistic ideology of 'proper' English. Posh speech is not Welsh speech.

It is in high performance speech events that we most clearly see these symbolic but historically real antagonisms being played out and reworked. *Extract 1*, below, is from a Christmas pantomime, *Aladdin*, performed in late December 2001 at a theatre in a small Valleys town. The show was toured around other theatres across south Wales, although its cultural roots are firmly Valleys. For example, the pantomime is produced by, and stars, a well-known local radio and television performer, Owen Money, who plays the character Wishy Washy. Owen Money is an influential apologist for Valleys speech and cultural values in his radio, TV and live shows in Wales, and he is prominent in the Valleys community in other ways too; he is, for example, director of Merthyr Tydfil football club.

The British phenomenon of pantomime is not easy to explain to people unfamiliar with the genre. Drawing on the traditions of the Italian Commedia dell' Arte, but also on the British Music Hall, it is a generally low budget, burlesque form of music, comedy and drama, performed with a live orchestra, although some productions in major cities can be expensively staged, and the format is on the whole apparently lucrative. 'Pantos' are at present gaining in popularity (Lipton 2007). They run at very many theatres through England and Wales over the winter months, being thought of as Christmas entertainment but not thematically linked to Christmas itself. Pantomimes are often said to be entertainment for children, although family groups make up most audiences. Each pantomime theme is a variation on one of a small number of traditional narratives, with roots in folk tales, often orientalised. Each theme mingles ethnic and temporal dimensions with abandon, and the blurring of social categories in the genre is a key part of its destabilising, carnivalesque potential. The performance of *Aladdin* that I refer to here, like the animated Disney film of that title, builds its plot around an Arabian Nights magic lamp and a magic genie. But the performance also uses stage sets including 'Old Peking', and the Wishy Washy character's name refers to his menial job in a Chinese laundry.

Pantomime plots always involve magic, intrigue, royalty, peasantry and a love-quest. Typically, a noble and honourable prince, the 'Principal Boy', conventionally played by a female, dressed in a tunic and high boots, falls in love with a beautiful girl, the 'Principal Girl', from a poor family. The Principal Girl has either large, ugly, vain sisters or a large, ugly, vain mother, referred to as a Dame – these females are conventionally played by males. The Dame character is named The Widow Twankey in the Aladdin panto. Characters are starkly drawn and heavily stylised. Young love triumphs and royalist grandeur is subverted.

The semiotic constitution of pantomime is bricolage, intermixing light popular songs and comedy routines, exorbitant colours and costumes, and with vernacular, self-consciously 'common' values set against regal pomp and transparently evil figureheads. The interactional format involves a good deal of audience participation and in-group humour. Hackneyed and formulaic plots are interspersed with disrespectful humour on topics of local or contemporary interest. Conventional teases appeal to children (and others) in the audience, who have to shout warnings to the heroine princess, for example when an evil emperor approaches, or to help the audience's friend (in this case Wishy Washy) to develop his quest (for example to find the magic lamp).

The extract below is the pantomime Dame/ Widow Twankey's first entrance in the Valleys performance, close to the beginning of the show after the opening song performed by the full cast and live orchestra. The Dame's entrance is a tone-setting moment for the whole pantomime. She is the mother of Aladdin, the hero, and she returns regularly through the pantomime, mainly to add the most burlesque dimension

of humour on the periphery of the plot. Next to Wishy Washy, she is affectively closest of all the characters to the audience. Pompous, vain and mildly salacious, she is nevertheless funny and warm-hearted. Her transparent personal deficiencies leave her open to be liked, despite them.

***Extract 1:* Aladdin – Widow Twankey's entrance**

(The Dame enters, waving, to the music of '*There is nothing like a dame*')

Line	
1	hello everyone
2	(Audience: hello)
3	hello boys and girls
4	(Audience: hello)
5	hello mums and dads
6	(Audience: hello)
7	grans and grandads brothers and sisters aunts and uncles
8	and all you lovely people back home ooh hoo
9	hey (.) now I've met (.) all of you
10	it's time for you to meet (drum roll) all (.) of (.) (cymbal crashes) me
11	(Audience: small laugh)
12	and there's a lot of me (.) to meet (chuckles)
13	now my name is (.) the Widow T-wanky
14	and do know what (.) I've been a widow now (.) for twenty-five years (sobs)
15	(Audience: o:h)
16	yes (.) ever since my poor husband died
17	oh what a man he was (.) he was gorgeous he was
18	do you know (.) he was the tallest man (.) in all of Peking
19	and he always had (.) a runny nose (chuckles)
20	hey (.) do you know what we called him?
21	'Lanky Twankey with a Manky Hanky'
22	(Audience: laugh)
23	hey (.) and guess what (.) I've still got his manky hanky to this very day
24	look look at that ugh
25	(Audience: o:h laughs)
26	hey (to orchestra) look after that for me will you?
27	you look like a bunch of snobs
28	(Audience: laugh)
29	anyway (.) I can't stand around here gossiping all day
30	I have got a laundry to run
31	ooh (.) and I've got to find my two naughty boys (.) Aladdin (.) and
32	Wishy Washy
32	so (.) I'll see you lot later on is it?
33	(Audience: ye:s)
34	(to camera) I'll see you later on (.) bye for now (.) tarra (.) bye bye

If we start with the assumption that high performance events can have a metacultural function, how might metacultural awareness and critique work through this Valleys pantomime? Thematically, the conventional pantomime narrative – royalist authority being subverted and the ennoblement of the oppressed – has a particular resonance in local Valleys history. It is easy to map South Wales's socialist

past and its recurrent reservations about royalty onto the plot of Aladdin. Nor does this sort of connection have to be inferred for the first time in each context of performance. I noted above that pantomime conventionally intersperses local community themes into its fictional plot-lines. It routinely articulates its own contextualisation, for example when performers break out of their character roles and refer to the theatre setting, the audience and their own performances. Pantomime is always richly framed in the 'meta' dimension, and the issue is not whether there is metacultural reach, but how far that reach extends. The Wishy Washy character in this performance of Aladdin, as I noted above, is fully recognisable as a local media celebrity, and pantomimes generally have only a thin characterological membrane through which audiences see and appreciate (especially in more expensive productions) 'real celebrities', such as popular singers or comedians. Beyond these individual cases, heavy stylisation ensures that pantomime characters fall into easily recognisable types, with the main dichotomy being between a category of 'good, deserving, beautiful, disenfranchised' characters and a category of 'evil, scheming, ugly, oppressive' characters. A further contrast is between characters who are 'authentic' and those who are 'inauthentic', and this last quality opens up the possibility of some characters being 'inauthentic' but not 'evil'.

In the Dame character, we have someone who is conventionally good but scheming, and *both* authentic *and* inauthentic. She is vain and opinionated, but ultimately warm-heated. In fact her character dramatises a politics of authenticity, and it does this, in the Valleys case, partly through visual means and partly through indexicalities of dialect. The most striking socio-phonetic contrast in the extract is between the Dame's aspirationally posh, mock-Received Pronunciation (RP) voice at the opening of the extract, and the broad vernacular Valleys voice which she otherwise uses. The principal variable speech features that carry this contrast are listed in Table 1, where the first-listed variant in square brackets in each case is the 'standard', RP-like variant. Italicised lexical forms are items appearing in the transcript.

Table 1: Phonological variables for Valleys English

(ou) -	[əʊ], [ɔʊ], [o:]	(*hello, home, nose; widow* has only the diphthong options)
(ei) -	[ei], [e:]	(*name, later*, but not *hey, day, anyway*, which again have only the diphthongal variant)
(ʌ) -	[ʌ], [ə]	(*brothers, lovely, bunch*)
(ai) -	[ai], [əɪ]	(*died, time, find, bye*)
(iw) -	[ju:], [jɪw], [ɪw]	(*you*, where the 'local' variant has a prominent first element of the glide, contrasting with the RP-type glide to prominent /u:/)
(ɔ:) -	[ɔ:], [ʊə]	(*poor*)
(a) -	[æ], [a]	(*grans, grandads, back, Twankey, man, had, Lanky, manky, hanky, stand, Aladdin*)
(h) -	[h], [Ø]	(*hello, home, hey, husband, hanky, he*)
(ng) -	[ŋ], [n]	(*gossiping*)

Lines 1–8 show centralised onset of (ou) in all three tokens of *hello* and in *home*, contrasting with monophthongal [o:] which occurs later, for example, in the word *nose*. In fact [əʊ] is more posh than 'standard', since it indexes a 'middle-class'

identity that is not regularly part of the Valleys sociolinguistic ecosystem. We also have fully audible [h] in all cases in these opening lines. The RP voice resonates most strongly at line 8 in the utterance *all you lovely people back home*, where *you*, *lovely*, *back* and *home* have significant RP, non-local tokens. These features apparently out-group the Dame relative to the Valleys context in which the performance is geographically and ideologically situated. The Dame's garish, extravagantly multi-coloured dress, plus of course the transparent trans-gendering of her performance, work together to index her inauthenticity, and her phonetic performance of posh as part of this construction creates the inference (unless it is there already) that posh speech *is* inauthentic.

Aitch-less *hey* at the beginning of line 9 and the Valleys-type schwa realisation of the first syllable of *brothers* (in place of the RP wedge vowel) mark a strong shift from posh into Valleys vernacular. The abrupt stylistic shift indexes a cracked or unsustainable posh self-presentation, a chink in the Dame's dialectal armour of posh, which is thereby confirmed to be as suspect as her dress-sense. After line 8, all tokens of (iw) have the Valleys local form, including *you* in lines 9 and 10 (this second instance said with contrastive stress). Note how the discourse itself signals this stance shift when, despite having done conventional greeting, the Dame says it's time for the audience to meet her – and presumably then, her *real* self. The quip that 'there's a lot of me to meet' (line 12, acknowledging that she is a big 'woman') shifts her self-presentation back into the realm of the authentic, and her accompanying laughter implies that she shares the audience's reaction to her visible persona.

The Dame's self- introduction at line 13 pronounces the word *name* with the local vernacular form [e:], although *Widow T-wanky* (with a prolonged /w/ glide), when she mentions the name itself, reverts to an RP pronunciation ([æ] for short (a) in the first syllable of *Twankey*). This single utterance again achieves a neat splitting of personas, between the introducing voice (*my name is*) and the introduced voice (*Twankey*), once again pointing up the Dame's capacity for inauthentic and more authentic alternative self-presentations. The sequence setting up the *manky hanky* word-play (meaning 'disgusting handkerchief') is performed in a fully formed local vernacular. All three vowels in the stressed syllables of <u>*poor*</u> <u>*hus*</u>*band* <u>*died*</u> (line 16) are local Valleys variants. Aitchless *he* on the three occasions in line 17, and schwa in *runny* and monophthongal *nose* in line 19, are prominent.

The Dame's Valleys vernacular style is realised in the grammar and vocabulary too. We have reduplicative *he was* at the end of line 17, the word *manky* (meaning 'disgusting'), the invariant tag *is it?* at line 31 (which, more usually in its negative form *isn't it?*, is a strong stereotype of Welsh English), and colloquial *tarra* for 'good bye' at line 34. In further referential aspects of the discourse too, we find personal claims being counter-pointed (and confirmed to have been mock) by later claims. The Dame's feigned grief at being widowed (lines 14 and 16) is subverted by the joke at the husband's expense (line 21) and by laughter interspersed into expressions of apparent grief. The disrespectful word play, *bunch of snobs*, (*snobs* evoking 'snot' or nose effluent, visually rendered by the bright green stain on the handkerchief) addressed to the orchestra, builds an allegiance *against* the posh persona she has been affecting. *Snobs* is a direct reference to the politics of both posh and (in)authenticity. The orchestra members are dressed in evening suits and, for present purposes, they embody upper class and hegemonic stances, of the sort that the Dame has herself fleetingly claimed then set aside in acts of self-subversion.

Metacultural performance and cultural practice

It could be argued that pantomimes, and performance events generally, provide data that is irrelevant for sociolinguistics. The identity potential of accent and dialect has sometimes been said to be activated in the 'real' language of 'real' speech communities, which should therefore take priority. Variationist sociolinguistics has usually tried to access the untrammelled vernacular, and Widow Twankey's speech (and the speech of all performers in staged performances) can be said to be 'unnatural', precisely because it is 'staged'.

There are several counter-arguments. One is that the ideal of naturalism has been over-played in sociolinguistics, and that notions of 'natural data' and 'authentic language' are themselves quite fundamentally compromised. Speaking, as I suggested earlier, always entails a 'meta' element and therefore a degree of performativity and the option to self-present strategically. A sense of authenticity is undoubtedly a powerful and important quality of social and personal existence, and to some extent we see that even in the pantomime data. The Widow Twankey's self-*in*validations, in her subversion of posh, also facilitate a contrasting sense of self-validation, indexed through vernacular speech style. Accent and dialect *do* have the potential to evoke a sense of 'who we really are', not least by evoking a contrastive sense of 'who we definitely are not'. But identity is not easily corralled and it is best seen as a work-in-progress – a matter of negotiation or aspiration among shifting considerations and contexts. Identity lies in the domain of social action more than in the domain of social being.

Once we concede that social and cultural identities are projects entertained in discourse, then performance emerges as the 'most natural' place to witness the social construction of identity, and authenticity emerges as one of the qualities of identity that are up for discursive construction. This need not be the cynical perspective that it appears to be, because socially constructed authenticities are experienced as real authenticities. Like social identities, culture itself remains something of an empty set until it is activated, until it is brought into meaningful existence in social action. When that action is organised into specific performance genres that have some acknowledged metacultural focus, then culturally defining meanings can become clearer, but also less dogmatic and less inevitable. They are meanings that, as performers and audiences, we can wither play along with (as we typically do) or withhold from.

When we play along, we can do this in different communicative frames, perhaps in full engaged and celebratory mode or, alternatively, with degrees of agnosticism, irony or even knowing self-deception. How the pantomime audience at the Valleys performance of Aladdin frames its engagement with the Widow Twankey is difficult to assess from the performance data itself. But notice how they *do* play along, and how audience members have a legitimate and indeed a necessary voice as co-performers in panto. There are moments, even in the brief single extract we have considered, when the Dame positively invites very specific responses from the audience. The audience responds audibly to her initial greetings, but not with any great enthusiasm or commitment (see lines 2, 4 and 6). Then the audience has a more pre-figured turn at line 15, when they deliver a formulaic *o:h* in response to the Dame's phoney lament about being a widow; their actions are therefore part of the process of invalidation. Emotional empathy and co-performance happen most obviously at lines 22, 25 and 28. The first two of these are when the audience is suitably disgusted by the *manky hanky* – a glowingly (green) iconic thing – and the second is when the audience aligns with the Dame's *bunch of snobs* insult. The

audience laughs along with the Dame's comment to the orchestra, and to some extent they therefore share her stance on snobbery and are drawn into specific anti-snobbish, dialect-indexed values. The interaction creates a space for joint participation and fills that space with a vernacular Valleys style of speech and an ideological alignment against 'posh'.

So this reflexive and stylised public performance is able to focus and put on display important parts of a local vernacular culture. It can play out and dramatise intergroup social class antagonisms that have had, and are still having, real material consequences for Valleys people. But this is still pantomime – a cultural form that keeps asserting the inauthenticity of its immediate references. The Dame's stylised voices, filtered through the inherent extravagances and dissonances of the pantomime genre, come with that 'as if' framing. Do these performances matter? To the extent that, for some people, they do, we might speculate that audiences coming together to laugh their way through stylised accounts of good and evil, of authentic and inauthentic, of us and them, of vernacular and posh, and of Wales and England invite newer rather than older interpretations of what it means to live in the post-industrial Valleys. The old antagonisms are there, on stage; they can be performed. At least in stylised versions, the Valleys can achieve some symbolic retribution, and begin to move on.

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