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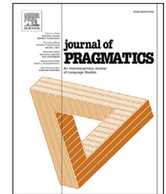

Linguistic and ethnic media stereotypes in everyday talk: Humor and identity construction among friends

Sylvia Sierra

Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies, College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, 100 Sims Hall, Building V, Syracuse, NY 13244-1230, USA

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores humorous intertextual media references in the audio-recorded everyday talk of a European American friend group. Focusing on stereotypes of ethnically-marked varieties of American English in media references, I analyze talk where white speakers perform African American English appropriated from an Internet meme and "Hollywood Injun English" as portrayed in TV tropes. I also examine post-recording playback interviews in which speakers acknowledge and comment on the problematic source texts and their performances. I illustrate how speakers construct their individual humorous identities and their shared cultural and ethnic identities through the "others" they voice, while simultaneously activating and reinforcing the social stereotypes represented in the media they reference. While these speakers do not immediately critique these stereotypes, in playback interviews they resist the identities formerly performed, with their statements ranging from ambiguous evaluation to deconstruction of the media and the references. This study contributes to understanding how and why speakers invoke media-embedded linguistic and cultural stereotypes for humorous individual and group identity construction, and how humorous media references serve as a site for activating, reinforcing, and deconstructing media stereotypes about linguistic and cultural identities in everyday interaction.

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1. Introduction

Researchers recognize media as a site for the (re)production of linguistic and cultural stereotypes (Bucholtz, 2011a,b Bucholtz and Lopez, 2011; Dragojevic et al., 2016; Lippi-Green, 2012), and scholars have examined how media is appropriated in everyday talk (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Duff, 2002; Sierra, 2016a,b; Tovares, 2006, 2007, 2012), yet no research has shown how specific media stereotypes circulate in everyday interaction. Stereotypes are reproduced in everyday talk for various interactive functions, such as resisting participation in stereotypical activities (Robles and Kurylo, 2017), justifying stereoytpical behavior, solving interactional problems, scapegoating (Kurylo, 2013), bullying, shocking, claiming the floor, keying the informal tone of social encounters, creating intimacy and solidarity, amusing, and managing a variety of personal and social identities (Condor 2006). Since accusing someone of stereotyping is a face-threatening move (Van Dijk, 1992) with moral consequences (Stokoe, 2003; Stokoe and Edwards, 2014), stereotyping in everyday talk usually goes unchallenged. This paper explores humorous intertextual media references which reproduce media stereotypes in the audio-recorded everyday

E-mail address: ssierra@syr.edu.

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talk of a friend group, advancing studies of media intertextuality in everyday conversation (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Sierra, 2016a,b; Tovares, 2006, 2007, 2012) and research on humor as a resource for identity construction (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Fine and De Soucey, 2005; Schnurr, 2010; Wolfers et al., 2017). I analyze unscripted talk where white friends who generally speak Standardized American English perform ethnically-marked, Non-standardized American accents from media. I show how they use an African American English (AAE) grammatical feature appropriated from an Internet meme, and "Hollywood Injun English" (HIE) (Meek, 2006) as portrayed in TV tropes.

Kotthoff (2006) observes stereotypes in joke content can also bring sensitive issues to the fore – in affirmative or subversive ways. My findings illustrate how speakers activate and reinforce stereotypes represented in the media they reference, while simultaneously constructing their humorous individual identities and their shared cultural and ethnic identities via the "others" they voice. I also examine post-recording playback interviews and conversations that show metapragmatic awareness when speakers are asked to explicitly comment on their own performances. In these contexts, they resist the identities previously performed, with reactions ranging from ambiguous acknowledgement of problematic performances to critical accusations of racism. This study adds to existing research by focusing on the everyday interactional reproduction of media stereotypes and speakers' metapragmatic awareness of this practice.

In this article, I first review literature on media texts in everyday conversation, stereotypes in American media, identity construction, ethnic identity, and racial and ethnic stereotype-based humor. I then provide an overview of my Interactional Sociolinguistic methods of conversational data collection and quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis. Then I provide background information on the "Strong black woman" meme along with the linguistic and cultural stereotypes it contains about black women and AAE, before analyzing how it is referenced in conversation, reflected upon in playback, and referenced again in a later conversation. Next, I present background information on HIE, before analyzing a conversation where HIE is invoked, followed by analysis of playback on this conversation. Lastly, I discuss the implications of using linguistic and cultural stereotypes lifted from media texts in everyday conversation, and how humorous conversational media references serve as a site for activating, reinforcing, and perhaps even dismantling media stereotypes about linguistic and cultural identity.

2. Media texts, stereotypes, humor, and identity

In this section, I first synthesize literature on the appropriation of media texts in conversation. I describe how studies of media texts in interaction have various functions, one of the most salient across these studies being different forms of identity construction. I then review literature on stereotypes in American media, which has shown that American mass media underrepresents marginalized groups and their speech, and portrays Latinxs, African Americans, Native Americans, and foreigners in negative roles. I conclude by reviewing how our understanding of identity in interaction has evolved, and how humor can play an important role in facilitating self-other identity construction. The literature discussed here lays the foundation for my study on how media-embedded stereotypes are appropriated in everyday talk for humor and identity construction.

2.1. Media texts in everyday conversation

Becker observes that "conversation is a replay of remembered texts – from T.V. news, radio talk, The New York Times …" (cited in Tannen, 1989/2007: 55). The majority of the work examining media texts in conversation focuses on how radio (Spitulnik, 1997), film, and television texts surface in interaction (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Duff, 2002; Tovares, 2006, 2007, 2012). These studies demonstrate that appropriating media in conversation can be multi-functional; creating and integrating communities (Spitulnik, 1997), managing alignments, discussing private issues, entertaining others, reaffirming relationships, values, and beliefs (Tovares, 2006), creating involvement, socializing children (Tovares, 2012), and constructing in-group identities (Beers Fägersten, 2012; Duff, 2002; Sierra, 2016a,b) and knowledgeable identities (Tovares, 2012; Sierra, 2016a,b).

While most studies on media texts in interaction focus on television and film, Sierra (2016a) examines the conversational appropriation of video game texts to resolve knowledge imbalances and awkward interactional dilemmas in friend interactions, finding this is conducive to group identity construction. Sierra (2016b) examines how friends reference a variety of media both 'old' and 'new' in their interactions; not only TV shows, movies, and popular songs, but also video games, YouTube videos, and Internet memes. She demonstrates how speakers signal media references in speech using contextualization cues and how listeners display recognition of the references. She also shows how speakers use the references for 'epistemic frame shifts', changing the activity of talk while simultaneously shifting the source of knowledge required to engage in the new activity, which ultimately contribute to group identity construction. The work on media texts in everyday conversation lays the groundwork for my analysis of humorous conversational media texts, identity, and stereotypes.

2.2. Linguistic and cultural stereotypes in American media

Stereotypes represent shared knowledge about some social group, including beliefs and theories about the group's attributes (Hilton and von Hippel, 1996). The study of stereotypes and representation in American mass media serves as an important foundation for my study on how stereotypes in scripted media texts are taken up in unscripted everyday talk. Like the work on media texts in talk, most research in this area focuses on film and television. Dragojevic et al. (2016) find that SAE

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and Foreign-Anglo accented speakers are over-represented on American primetime television, while Non-Standardized American and Foreign-Other accented speakers are largely under-represented. Dobrow and Gidney (1998) analyze children's cable and network television cartoons, finding that gender and ethnicity are marked by dialect stereotypes. Lippi-Green (2012) examines accent portrayals in Disney movies, revealing that villains and characters with negative roles, traits, and physical appearances are more likely to be portrayed speaking with foreign accents than characters who speak SAE.

Other studies on stereotypes and linguistic representation in American media focus more specifically on specific linguistic and cultural stereotypes. In her influential work on "Mock Spanish," Hill (1995, 1998) posits that linguistic representations of underrepresented languages and language varieties in American media usually function as "mock language" (see also Ronkin and Karn, 1999; Chun, 2004) because only the most prominent stereotypical features of the varieties are invoked. She argues that Mock Spanish, as seen in advertisements, greeting cards, political speeches, and newscasts, draws on popular representations of Spanish speakers that construct them stereotypically as "lazy," "stupid," "dirty," and "sexually loose" (Hill, 1998:683). Hill considers Mock Spanish to serve as covert (or 'off the record') racism in public spaces. Bucholtz and Lopez (2011) similarly find that linguistic performances of black English by European American characters in Hollywood films are "linguistic minstrelsy" (681): mock language that "reinscribes stereotypes about African Americans and their language". Like Mock Spanish, linguistic minstrelsy is used to caricaturize and to parody black speech and culture, and can also be considered covert racism (see also Lopez and Hinrichs, 2017).

Mock language is also examined in stand-up comedy (Chun, 2004; Furukawa, 2015; Pérez, 2013), and in these humorous contexts, researchers find that comedians' mock language use can be interpreted as subversive, rather than racist. This interpretation relies on the comedians being perceived as authentic members of marginalized communities. However, Labrador (2004) examines how local Hawai'ian comedians use Mock Filipino to position immigrant Filipinos as outsiders, reinforcing their subordinate position in the social hierarchy of Hawai'i. Thus even in humorous contexts, mock language can be interpreted as a form of covert racism. This point is crucial to my own analysis of mock language and humor.

My study builds on the research on mock language in scripted performances, to analyze how mock language is appropriated in *unscripted* humorous everyday performances. While the studies reviewed in this section assume stereotypes in media have a direct effect on consumers, the stereotypical media or performance itself is the focus, rather than the everyday uptake of media stereotypes. I take the next step in this paper by analyzing how media stereotypes are appropriated in everyday interaction for humor and identity construction.

2.3. Identity construction, ethnic identity, and racial and ethnic stereotype-based humor

Previous work on how identity is socially constructed in interaction provides a framework for my analysis of how speakers reference stereotypical media texts for identity construction. Studies of identity in interaction have evolved to view identity as actively constructed through discourse, instead of an a priori, internal phenomenon (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; De Fina, 2011; Edwards, 2009). Such work demonstrates that identity is actively constructed through everyday practices. Integrating and building on previous research on identity, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) propose a model for examining identity construction in discourse. The "heart of the model" (587) is the relationality principle, which describes how identities are "intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations" (598). This principle describes how identities can never be isolated on their own because they are always related to other identities. Under the relationality principle, similarity/difference is one of the identity relations named by Bucholtz and Hall, which they also call adequation/distinction. Bamberg (2011) describes this identity relation as a "dilemma" (10) involving "the establishment of a synchronic connection between sameness and difference (between self and other)" (1). An understanding of these self-other relations is crucial to the analysis of identity that I undertake here.

While studies of identity in interaction have evolved to focus on identity as an emergent phenomenon (see Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), De Fina (2011) argues for a balanced, integrated approach which acknowledges that identity categorization rests on pre-existing social and mental knowledge, beliefs, ideologies, presuppositions, roles, etc., and is at the same time emergent, creative, and locally contextualized in discourse. She notes that many interactional sociolinguists examine which categories people use for identification, how these are negotiated, and what they mean to people, without rejecting a cognitive basis for such categories. Following in this line of work, I build on prior research to show how cognitive identity categories are in part, based in media representations and stereotypes. In the conversational data I analyze, these categories are humorously referenced in everyday interaction and used for locally emergent identity construction.

Also relevant to ethnic categories used in identity construction, De Fina (2006) examines categories as they relate to ethnic group identity. She analyzes narratives of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States, showing how narrators' local identity displays relate to more global categories about group membership. Also addressing ethnic group membership, Schilling-Estes (2004) emphasizes how ethnic identity is dynamic and a product of unfolding talk. While two speakers whose sociolinguistic interviews she analyzes generally retain features correlated with relatively fixed ethnic categories (Lumbee and African American) in their speech, they also adjust these features when talking about race relations. Examining interpersonal connection and ethnic identity, Sweetland (2002) demonstrates how a white student uses an ethnically-marked dialect, AAE, as a resource in shaping an unexpected but authentic identity which allows her to align with her African American classmates and community.

In-group identity construction and solidarity can additionally be facilitated through humor (Schnurr, 2009), but at the same time, humor can be weaponized as a social boundary device which excludes others (Holmes and Hay, 1997; Holmes and

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Marra, 2002). Studies thus point to the difficulty in analyzing humor, as a complex discourse strategy which is simultaneously ambiguous and polysemous (like many linguistic strategies, cf. Tannen, 1993), often serving contradictory functions (Schnurr and Plester, 2017). These contradictory elements of humor are particularly relevant in examining racial humor and identity. For example, Shifman and Katz (2005:856) find ethnic jokes about Jewish immigrants by Israelis can be interpreted as "both hostile and benign". Additionally, Wolfers et al. (2017) find that members of a German male football team make humorous comments about specific racial, ethnic, and national identities to construct team membership while negotiating their own and others' identities within the team. They conclude that while team members express appreciation of cultural diversity within their team, they often use racial humor to assign and create distinct subgroups which fragment the team by foregrounding racial identities. Humor then, including racial humor, contributes to ethnic identity construction in various ways. In this study, I build on the prior work on identity and racial and ethnic stereotype-based humor to analyze a new topic: media stereotypes about language and ethnicity embedded in humorous everyday talk among friends, and the identity construction that emerges in this context.

By drawing from and expanding on the work reviewed in this section on media texts in talk, media stereotypes, and identity construction and humor, I further explore humorous intertextual media references which reproduce media stereotypes in audio-recorded everyday talk among friends. I show how speakers activate and reinforce stereotypes represented in the media they reference, while simultaneously constructing their individual and their shared cultural and ethnic identities through the "others" they voice.

3. Methodology and data

3.1. Data collection

For my data collection and methods of analysis, I follow in the tradition of Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS), "an approach to discourse analysis that has its origin in the search for replicable methods of qualitative analysis that account for our ability to interpret what participants intend to convey in everyday communicative practice" (Gumperz, 2015:309). Importantly, there is a focus in the IS approach on situated interpretation and inference of communicative intent, which relies on background knowledge about communicative events, gleaned from prior communicative experience (Gumperz, 2015; see also Erickson and Shultz, 1982).

The data for this study are from a larger corpus of 45 h, 24 min of 40 digital audio recordings of everyday conversations over one year (August 2014–August 2015) among friends. I obtained IRB approval to conduct the study, recording about once a week, and all participants consented to being recorded and have pseudonyms here. The conversations I analyze here are among European American friends who were in their mid to late twenties. They were recorded at Thom's house, where he lived during that year with three friends: Jeff, a roommate from college who worked as a software developer; Nate, Jeff's coworker; and Ruth, a graduate student in linguistics in the same program as Thom and his partner, Carmen, who did not live at the house but was also present during the recordings.

As Tannen (1984/2005:43–44) observes, "recording a conversation among friends that would have taken place anyway makes available for study patterns of language use that do not emerge among strangers, such as playful routines, irony and allusion, reference to familiar jokes, and unstated assumptions". These patterns of interaction are my primary analytical focus. Tovares' (2012) work on how a television show served as an intertextual resource in family conversations inspired my noticing how the friends in this data frequently and playfully used newer media as intertextual resources in their conversations. The speakers made references in their talk to books, films, TV shows, songs, video games, and Internet memes. The speakers' shared media knowledge is reflected in their unstated assumptions, and these ultimately contribute to their group identity construction based on their similarity in knowing the media references. Furthermore, since these friends were a relatively homogenous group, who shared similar media consumption practices and similar media reference knowledge, their discourse makes for a rich study of intertextual media references in talk and how these communicative resources contribute to humor and identity construction.

If I had questions about the references or my own interpretations, I asked the participants for their insights, in a form of "playback" interviews (as conducted by Labov and Fanshel, 1977 and Tannen, 1984/2005) or through follow up emails, text messages, and Facebook chat messages throughout the analysis process. As Tannen (1984/2005) explains, "Playback is the litmus test of interpretation" (49); this method is an indicative check of the researcher's interpretations. It also aids in the IS goal of discovering participant expectations and presuppositions. Furthermore, playback interviews are another form of data in themselves. In this study, I also analyze the participants' statements during playback to examine their metapragmatic awareness about their own linguistic behaviors. In following Tannen's methodology, I recorded, transcribed, studied, and made interpretations about the data, and then did playback and follow-up with participants, thereby checking, revising, and expanding my analysis.

3.2. Identifying instances of linguistic and ethnic media stereotypes

For analysis I coded 121 utterances containing media references across a subcorpus of five conversations among friends. Initially interested in epistemic frame shifts as facilitated through intertextual media references (Sierra, 2016a,b), for the present study I turned my attention to the fact that linguistic stereotypes sometimes were present in these media references,

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and were usually directly lifted from identifiable media texts. I coded 24.8% of the references as containing some accent performance marked by diverging from the speakers' typical language variety (SAE) (although there is some American regional variation among the speakers). The fact that the majority (75%) of the references were performed with SAE or were unmarked, generally in accordance with the media text being referenced, aligns with other studies (Dragojevic et al., 2016; Lippi-Green, 2012) revealing the prevalent use of SAE in American films and TV media.

The vast majority (63.3%) of the 24.8% of examples that were coded for marked accent were made by one speaker: Nate (see Table 1). Nate is the most prolific media reference-maker across the five conversations, contributing almost a third (32%) of all media references in the conversations, and almost half (48%) his references included a marked accent. Ruth, in comparison, made 23.3% of the media references with a marked accent, Carmen made 10%, and Holly, not featured in this study since her performance of a marked accent is that of a single individual rather than a broader linguistic stereotype, made 1 of these references. Thom and Jeff do not perform any accents, and also performed fewer media references generally. In playback, Nate told me he realized at an early age that performing accents made others laugh, and this became an incentive for performing various accents in conversation. Ruth had been in an improv comedy group and had performed stand-up comedy in the past. I show that for Nate and Ruth, who both had histories of performative comedy, marked accents construct humorous identities.

Table 1
Speakers that performed marked accents in their media references.

Speaker	Marked accent performances
Nate	19 (63.3%)
Ruth	7 (23.3%)
Carmen	3 (10%)
Holly	1 (3.3%)
TOTAL:	30

For the present study, I turned my attention to the 30 references across the five conversations containing accent performances. I coded 11 of these as idiolectal, when an individual film or TV character's speaking style can be identified as the source text (e.g., Emperor Palpatine from the Star Wars films, or Timmy from the TV show South Park); this leaves 19 utterances containing broader linguistic stereotypes. I coded these utterances following the coding scheme developed by Dragojevic et al. (2016) for coding accent portrayals on American primetime television (see Table 2).

Table 2
Accents in the media references.

Accented media references	Number of accents out of 121	Percentage of accents
Idiolectal	11	9.1%
Foreign-Anglo (FA)	9	7.4%
Foreign-Other (FO)	7	5.8%
Non-Standardized American (NSA)	3	2.5%
TOTAL MARKED ACCENTS	30	24.8%
TOTAL STANDARDIZED AMERICAN ACCENTS	91	75.2%

The plurality of the references containing marked accents were coded as portraying Foreign-Anglo (FA) accents (non-American, Anglo accents); British and Scottish English were the two accents performed in this category. Dragojevic et al. (2016) find FA speakers are over-represented in American TV, occurring in 5.4% of 1252 TV characters; my data reflects this over-representation (in a variety of media), with 7.4% of the entire corpus consisting of FA accents. Foreign-Other (FO) (non-Anglo, foreign) accents made up 5.8% of the utterances, and consisted of Spanish, French, Russian, and Indian accented English. In Dragojevic et al. (2016) only 3.8% of American TV characters are portrayed with FO accents. The slightly higher rate in my subcorpus might be due to the fact that a variety of media, beyond primetime television, is referenced, thus increasing the likelihood of FO accent portrayal: the Spanish and French accents are from films, the Russian accent is from a videogame, and the Indian accent is from stand-up comedy, viewed on YouTube. Additionally, the rate might be higher because these accents are marked to the American speakers, and therefore more salient as humorous to perform in conversation.

Only 2.5% of the accent performances in my media reference data portray Non-standardized American (NSA) varieties, consisting of two ethnically-marked varieties: HIE and AAE (or perhaps more accurately, linguistic minstrelsy). This rate is much lower than the NSA rate (6.5%) in Dragojevic et al. (2016). One possible explanation is that on the one hand, these SAE speakers might not engage in much media featuring NSA accents. On the other hand, they might have some metalinguistic awareness that performing NSA accents in the American context could be interpreted as problematic in terms of stereotyping, especially considering three of the speakers were graduate students in linguistics. It seems any hesitance to perform such accents is justified, considering it is precisely the conversational excerpts containing the potentially offensive performances of an AAE grammatical feature and HIE that are the focus of the discourse analysis presented here.

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4. Analysis

4.1. Strong Independent Black Woman meme

Here I provide background information on an Internet meme to examine how it was produced online, circulated, and made its way to internet users around the world, gaining such currency that it can be appropriated in face-to-face conversation among friends. Shifman (2012), in a study on YouTube memes, points to Dawkins (1976) for introducing the concept of "memes", making an analogy with genes as "small cultural units of transmission (…) which are spread by copying or imitation" (Dawkins, 1976:188). Memes have re-emerged in recent years as a topic of study in digital culture. Varis and Blommaert (2015:1,8) state that memes are "signs that have gone viral on the Internet" and define 'memes' as "often multimodal signs in which images and texts are combined" exploring their virality and how they allow for conviviality in new social structures. Memes have been further conceptualized as a participatory new language online (Milner, 2013, 2016; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins and Bowers, 2015). They have also been analyzed as tools for playful political identity expression online (Adegoju and Oyebode, 2015; Al Zidjaly, 2017). Indeed, play, humor, amusement, ambiguity, and in-group expressive experimentation have been analyzed as key functions of memes (Lankshear and Knobel, 2007; Shifman, 2014). As Phillips and Milner (2017:9) summarize, online behaviors (including memeing) are inherently ambivalent: they are "simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed." While these studies situate their focus on the creation, spread, and use of memes online, few studies have yet analyzed how Internet memes can be appropriated by speakers in everyday face-to-face conversations offline (cf. Sierra, 2016b), which is the phenomenon I present here.

The meme that speakers reference in the first conversation I analyze relates to the limiting stereotype of the "sassy black woman" stock character frequently portrayed in films and television shows. According to knowyourmeme.com, a Facebook page called "Being an independent black woman who don't need no man" was launched on 11 June 2011, gaining over 47,000 likes in the following three years. This phrase then spread to websites like Reddit and YouTube. On 25 May 2012, a Quickmeme page titled "Strong Independent Black Woman" was created with an image of a black woman wagging her finger and the text "I am a strong independent black woman who don't need no man" (Fig. 1). It is likely that this is the image Ruth has in mind (based on a playback interview) when she references the meme in the example analyzed below.

Fig. 1. "Strong independent black woman" meme, from quickmeme.com.

The humor of the meme related to it being repeated in an ironic manner by white (often male) internet users. Along with the restrictive cultural stereotypes presented in this meme, where black women are "independent" and "sassy", the meme also makes use of a linguistic stereotype. As Bucholtz and Lopez (2011:699) observe in Hollywood films featuring stereotypical usage of AAE, "the full grammatical range of the variety is restricted to the emblematic use of a few features". In this meme, AAE is emblematized with the grammatical feature of negative concord (Labov, 1972:699) in "don't need no man". Despite slight variations on this meme, negative concord persists throughout all versions. This linguistic stereotype reinforces a language ideology that all black women, and thereby possibly all black people, speak AAE.

4.2. The Strong Independent Black Woman meme in conversation

Elsewhere, I have analyzed the following example as a brief epistemic play frame shift (Sierra, 2016b), where speakers use this meme to shift the epistemic territory of talk while simultaneously shifting into a play frame. In doing so, this talk serves for "phatic communion" (Malinowski, 1923/1936), social bonding and interpersonal involvement (Tannen, 1984/2005), and solidarity (Tannen, 1979/1993), and overall constructs a group identity based on adequation, or similarity (Bucholtz and Hall,

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2005). This similarity is defined in part by being fluent Internet users who can reference the same Internet meme due to their Internet savvy, and also as people who can playfully draw on the meme to bond through mocking their pets, as we will see. Here, however, my focus in this example is less on the bonding mechanism, and more on how the SAE speakers' reference to this meme requires their use of an AAE feature as present in the meme itself. I am interested in exploring the spoken repetition of the media-embedded linguistic and cultural stereotypes here, and what this accomplishes regarding identity construction.

This excerpt is from a Friday night conversation in the dining room at Thom's house. Previous to this excerpt, Nate had told a story about Ruth's kitten, Nola, leaping onto him and knocking him over. This led to Nate and Ruth joking about hypothetical scenarios where Nola and Noah (Ruth's other kitten), would kill the housemates. Thom had then switched to a more serious frame by commenting on how the kittens needed to keep the housemates alive to get into their basement, which is continued in this excerpt where speakers repeat the Strong Independent Black Woman meme.

1 Nate As long as we're useful to them, they let us live.
2 Carmen Yeah.
3 Thom Yep. Well, Noah needs lovin'.
4 Ruth He [does. ((high pitch))
5 Thom [Nola on the other hand don't give a shit.
6 Nate [Nola knows only-
7 Ruth→[Sh- hey, she's a stro:ng independent..African woman.
8 Carmen mh! ((laughter sound))
9 Thom [Damn right she is.
10 Ruth→[(She don't need no man)
11 Nate→[(Who don't need no man)
12 Ruth ((inhale))[(??)
13 Nate [(She u:h..
14 She knows only sarcasm and loathing.

In line 3, Thom begins to speak using indexical markers of toughness and masculinity, saying "Yep. Well, Noah needs lovin'" (3), using the alveolar pronunciation of "-ing", which is a classic non-standardized indexical marker of tough masculinity (Fischer, 1958; Kiesling, 1998; Trudgill, 1972). He continues, "Nola on the other hand don't give a shit" (5), using "don't" in place of "doesn't", another non-standardized syntactic construction which might also carry connotations of toughness. His swear "shit" is also associated with masculinity (de Klerk, 1997; Kiesling, 2005:724) and aggressiveness (Coates, 1993; de Klerk, 1992, 1997). These subtle phonetic and syntactic choices are likely what trigger Ruth to reference the Strong Independent Black Woman meme in connection to describing her kitten, especially considering the widespread language ideology that equates AAE with being cool, tough, and masculine (Bucholtz, 2011a,b; Morgan, 1999).

As Nate begins to talk about Nola (6), Ruth overlaps him with "Sh- hey, she's a stro:ng independent..African woman" (7), haltingly referencing the Strong Independent Black Woman meme in relation to Nola, but replacing the meme's typical use of "black" with "African." Initially, I thought the use of "African" might be due to some discomfort in saying the word "black," or in an attempt to be "politically correct" and reach instead for "African-American." When I presented Ruth with this interpretation, however, she stated that at the time, she thought the kittens were an African breed. In response to Ruth's reference (7), Thom uses the emphatic affirmative "Damn right" (9), associated with male language (Edelsky, 1976) and for the speakers, possibly with AAE, while Ruth and Nate complete the meme's template, repeating the meme's negative concord with "don't need no" (10,11).

In appropriating this meme and its AAE features, these speakers playfully bond over mocking their cat, but they also activate and reinforce a meme's linguistic and social stereotypes, while also "giving off" their own identities as white SAE speakers. Mannell (1977) suggests "humor activates a "playful judgment set" in which one's usual attitudes towards socially unacceptable actions or sentiments are temporarily suspended" (273); similarly, Husband (1977) argues that humor "blunts" the audience's "critical sensitivity" to events one would normally find socially unacceptable (268). Additionally, Kotthoff (2006) has discussed how stereotypes in jokes can bring forth sensitive issues – in affirmative or subversive ways. Here, stereotypes of AAE and African American women are activated and reinforced through referencing this meme, which itself contains two related stereotypes: 1) all black women speak AAE and 2) African American women are ubiquitously 'strong' and "independent". There is present a superficially "positive" but nonetheless essentializing language ideology about AAE, and black women who speak it, as indexical of toughness and coolness. The joke's irony could be interpreted as a subtle dismissal of the linguistic stereotype and possibly also stereotypes about black women's toughness, but the very repetition of these stereotypes reinforces them.

If one part of this excerpt is understanding how it reinforces stereotypes about AAE and black women, another part which must be simultaneously understood is how this talk also showcases the speakers' own typical use of standardized language and their accompanying whiteness. Bucholtz and Lopez (2011) describe how through linguistic minstrelsy, white European American male protagonists in Hollywood films:

> exercise white privilege by utilizing linguistic features indexical of blackness without being affected by the stigma that usually accompanies the use of such language. Once they have no further need for their black-influenced personas, the

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> white protagonists return to their standard language variety with a newfound racial and gender authentication conferred by their experience, while leaving hegemonic racial arrangements intact.
>
> Bucholtz and Lopez (2011: 701–702)

While the example presented here is from unscripted everyday conversation rather than a film script, this observation can be considered in relation to this data. Those who use linguistic features lifted from a meme associated with being black do so without any risk of stigma or negative consequences in this private white space. Once the meme reference has been made and recognized, the friends return to speaking SAE, and this reference does little to challenge hegemonic racial arrangements.

However, discussing this example with the participants in playback interviews has led to some reflection among them, revealing their metapragmatic awareness. In discussing this meme reference and other examples from the data set, Thom stated in playback, “Your data is white people being racist. I've come to terms with that. I've come to terms with the fact that that meme is racist…when I first participated in it, I didn't think it was, but now that I look at it in retrospect, it's unequivocally the case”. This observation critiques the prior linguistic behavior, serving to distance Thom from the behavior and association with “white people being racist”, by using past-tense constructions like “I've come to terms”, “I didn't think it was” and “now that I look at it in retrospect.” Ruth also acknowledged in informal discussion around this example that accent portrayal for humor's sake can be interpreted as offensive or racist.

In sum, I consider this example “casual” linguistic and cultural stereotyping, or a “covert racist” practice in Jane Hill's (1998) terms, recalling mock Spanish. In this case, a covert racist practice consists of referencing a racist Internet meme in everyday conversation. The friends piece is important—as Ruth pointed out in playback, the closeness of the relationship between the speakers is what conditions using potentially offensive humor, and this has also been studied in the context of a German football team (Wolfers et al., 2017). Furthermore, the fact that this meme reference takes place in a white space without any African Americans present is relevant to its occurrence.

Despite the apparent prioritization of humor and the construction of shared in-group identity over critical sensitivity, the analysis of this talk and bringing it to the speakers' attention shows the potential for metapragmatic reflection and reconsideration of linguistic and cultural stereotyping in everyday talk. Still, this example of a conversational meme reference containing AAE and a stereotype about black femininity ultimately demonstrates how white speakers foreground their whiteness and typical SAE use, while simultaneously activating and reinforcing the linguistic and social stereotypes represented in the meme.

Interestingly, a spontaneous conversational reference to this data excerpt and metacommentary about it occurred about a year and a half after the initial recording, with different friends. I do not have an audio-recording of this conversation, but I took notes after it happened, which I reproduce here. This example shows how a different group of speakers repeat the prior reference to the “Strong Black Woman” meme, again activating and reinforcing the stereotypes of the meme. However, here the speakers' heightened metapragmatic awareness about the stereotypical nature of this meme produces immediate criticism of the reference.

This second example occurred after I had presented the above excerpt containing the reference to the Strong Independent Black Woman meme at an international conference. Throughout the conference, I had spoken with two colleagues, Erin and Hannah, about my ethical concerns regarding analyzing my participants as engaging in racist linguistic practices. After the conference, Erin, Hannah, and I had just arrived in a different country for some post-conference travel, and were walking through a park when I said, “I love traveling because I feel like I can do stuff” Erin responded, “Because you feel independent?” The word ‘independent’ triggered Hannah to jokingly reference my data, saying, “You're a strong black woman!” Erin then said, “Oh no, don't say that or we'll be in her data as racist.” I echoed Erin, dismissively joking, “Yeah, you'll be my racist friends”. Then we all laughed and continued our walk.

This interaction contains an intertextual reference to the Strong Independent Black Woman meme, as experienced through my analysis at a conference of the prior conversational reference to the meme. Hannah's fleeting reference, “You're a strong black woman!” again activates and reinforces the cultural stereotype present in the meme that black women are ‘strong’. It also reinforces the non-black identities of the speaker (Hannah is Korean) and of myself, the addressee. But, unlike the original example analyzed, this one contains spontaneous criticism about the meme reference itself, when Erin says, “Oh no, don't say that or we'll be in her data as racist.” This instance, along with the playback data I have already described, shows that in general, some metapragmatic awareness about cultural and linguistic stereotypes can result in reflective commentary after having made media references containing stereotypes. However, this specific instance shows something new—that elevated metapragmatic awareness (due to our former discussion and my presentation of the original example at a conference) can result in metacommentary *immediately* following a stereotyping media reference. In this case, Erin immediately and explicitly labeled this stereotyping media reference and people who reference it as being perceived as “racist”, admoniting “Oh no, don't say that” with the implication that this kind of linguistic behavior is to be avoided. This example provides one other instance of how a reference like this might spread, while more importantly demonstrating that with elevated metapragmatic awareness of the stereotyping nature of such a reference, speakers are capable of immediately reflecting on this kind of linguistic behavior as problematic and unacceptable.

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4.3. Hollywood Injun English in conversation

The second excerpt is from a conversation with the primary participants, again in the dining room at Thom's house, about one month after the first conversation I analyzed. Prior to this excerpt, there had been a lapse in the conversation. Ruth was trying to get her cat, Noah, to sit with her. Here Ruth performs American science-fiction television series “Star Trek” character Worf's idiolect, followed by the focus of the analysis below: Nate portraying fictional American Indian speech, or “Hollywood Injun English” (HIE), defined by Meek (2006:95) as “a composite of grammatical 'abnormalities' that marks the way Indians speak and differentiates their speech from Standard American English”. Meek (2006) finds there are specific linguistic features used in performing HIE in film, TV, and some literature. She shows that this speech style functions in tandem with stereotypical characteristics typically assigned to American Indians, and argues that both the speech forms and pejorative aspects of Indian characters reproduce Native American otherness in contemporary popular American culture. Below Nate uses HIE in unscripted talk, lifted from popular media depictions.

1	Ruth	Come he:re ((high pitch; talking to cat))
2		Be snuggles ((high pitch))
3		…
4		“I have no desire to be snuggled.” ((Worf voice; low pitch))
5	Nate→	“Again the humans drive us from our ancestral la:nds.” ((HIE; low pitch))
6	Ruth	Hahahahahaha!
7		((inhale))
8		Hello sweetie.
9	Nate→	[“There is no place in this ho:me for our people.” ((HIE; low pitch))
10	Ruth	[Come he:re! ((high pitch))

In line 4 Ruth performs the voice of the science fiction TV show “Star Trek: The Next Generation” character, Worf. Her performance utilizes a lowered pitch and a formal or ceremonious style when she voices the cat, saying “I have no desire to be snuggled”. Note that the actor who plays Worf, Michael Dorn, is African American, although this is not a racial category that explicitly plays a role in the fictional Star Trek universe. Yet Mirzoeff (1999:206–207) observes that in this show, “The culture of the Klingons began to resemble revised western stereotypes of civilizations such as the Zulu, the Vikings, and various Native American nations — as a proud, warlike, and principled race”. This connection between the fictional Klingon culture and western stereotypes of civilizations including Native American nations, along with Ruth's use of lowered pitch and a formal style, might be part of what triggers Nate to make an entirely different kind of cultural media reference in his next utterances—one drawing on HIE.

There was no indication in the conversation nor in playback that Nate recognized the Worf reference. He said that Ruth's utterance “gave [the cat] dignity or ferocity” and that her depiction was like an “honorable warrior”. Indeed, Nate seems to pick up on the lowered pitch and ceremonious style Ruth performs, when he says, “Again the hu:mans drive us from our ancestral la:nds” (line 5). Here he uses a similar lowered pitch to voice the cat, and a “formalized, ornate” and “slow, ponderous delivery”, all of which Meek (2006) states characterizes HIE. HIE intonation and use of pauses are distinct from SAE, as pauses are longer and occur more frequently. Meek observes (2006:98,99) “the atypical use of pauses has a leveling effect on intonational contours, which creates a ponderous, monotonic pace suggestive of a lack of fluency (or a type of ungrammaticality)” and “this ponderous style may be used to represent an eloquent speaker performing oratory”. Meek also notes lack of tense marking is the most prevalent morphosyntactic feature of HIE available due to deletion of auxiliary or modal verbs. This can be seen in Nate's construction, “Again the humans drive us” instead of something like “Again the humans have driven us”. Ruth laughs in line 6, and goes back to talking to Noah, while in line 9 Nate continues this HIE performance with “There is no place in this home for our people” (line 9), with lowered pitch and slow delivery. Meek states HIE is phonologically identical to SAE; however the scholarly commentary on the International Dialects of English archive makes note of “hard” and “lengthened” [r] in some samples of older Native American male English speakers—this is present here when Nate says “our” in “our people” (line 9).

Similar to how the reference to the Strong Independent Black Woman meme highlighted the speakers' identities as white SAE speakers, Nate's use of HIE in this example again gives off his and his friends' national and ethnic identities as European Americans who are not Native Americans, and who speak SAE. Meek (2006) writes that conventionalized imagery depicts Indians as “wild, savage, heathen, childlike, uncivilized, premodern, immature, ignorant, and historical or timeless” in juxtaposition with the “white, modern, (usually) Christian American man” (2006). Perhaps then, Nate's marked use of HIE in this example also fleetingly highlights Nate's individual identity as juxtaposed with the voiced identity he performs in this moment. To summarize, in this example of an unscripted HIE performance, Nate highlights his and his friends' whiteness and their typical use of SAE against the backdrop of linguistic and ethnic stereotyping, lifted from media tropes, while simultaneously activating and reinforcing western stereotypes about Native Americans.

As for the reason Nate might use this accent to portray a cat, specifically, Meek (2006:120) writes “By speaking Hollywood Injun English (when pretending to be Indian), the performer…imbues his Indian character with a weak mind and a childlike persona”—this might align with how the speakers view the cats. Indeed, the finding that speakers often address pets in registers like those used in addressing infants is well documented (Burnham et al., 2002, Hirsh-Pasek and Treiman, 1982, Roberts, 2004, Schieffelin, 1990, see Mitchell, 2001 for a comprehensive overview), most often taking the form of baby talk

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register. Tannen (2004) claims that this research provides evidence of an organic relationship between the voicing of infants and addressing animals.

In playback with the group, I asked Nate what he was referencing in this example, anticipating it was some media reference I simply did not know. Jeff offered, "Indian trope?" showing metapragmatic awareness that a media trope exists about American Indians. Then Nate smilingly said, "That's me doing a Native American thing…whenever people are driven out of a place, I kind of do that? It's kind of terrible?" There was uncomfortable laughter from all present after he said this. Nate demonstrates he has the metapragmatic awareness to identify what he was doing. Furthermore, he is aware that this is problematic, when he says "it's kind of terrible?" This playback response provides evidence of an ambiguous ("it's kind of") negative evaluative stance ("terrible") towards this instance of linguistic and ethnic stereotyping. By acknowledging that this performance is "kind of terrible", Nate also resists the identity of being someone who unknowingly reproduces stereotypes. However, as the speaker in my corpus who made the most media references and performed the most accents, it seems Nate had put aside his metapragmatic awareness of the problem to be comedic and construct a humorous identity in this white space. Nate's playback responses surprised me because it seemed that this was the only time in all 121 utterances containing media references where there was not an identifiable media text for the reference—instead, there seemed to be evidence of broad and ubiquitous linguistic and ethnic stereotypes about Native Americans presented in various American media. Indeed, in Meek's (2006) HIE study, she analyzes this variety as it appears in American films, popular TV shows, and in greeting cards.

The playback interview continued with Nate further explaining, "I do the whole like..sad Indian chief talking about being- him and his people being driven off their ancestral lands…I was doing that because the cats were being inconvenienced by Ruth's attempt to snuggle them and they would- and then they would run away". Nate's historical awareness and acknowledgement about "people being driven off their ancestral lands" is interesting, because it conveys that not only does he have metapragmatic awareness about the problematic nature of his performance, but he has some historical awareness of the very group that he is stereotyping. When I played back Nate's utterance "Again the humans drive us from our ancestral la:nds" (line 9), he explained, "I'm continuing the sad Indian chief thing".

Nate's repeated mention of the "sad Indian chief" is reminiscent of the televised 1971 environmental pollution Public Service Announcement (PSA) later dubbed "The Crying Indian", which features Italian American actor Iron Eyes Cody portraying a Native American. As he stands aside a highway, car-flung trash lands at his feet, and the camera zooms in as he sheds a single tear. In further playback via email, when I asked Nate if he was familiar with this PSA (without actually reminding him of the specific conversation I was analyzing), he wrote, "I was dimly aware that the material was sourced from some kind of nature advocacy video, but I couldn't have told you the date, title, or that it was a PSA." He continued, "In fact, I think (not sure) I may have got it from the Simpsons" and sent me a link to a scene from the TV show "The Simpsons". The scene is from season 9, episode 22 of "The Simpsons". Titled, "Trash of the Titans" (1998), it is clearly referencing the 1971 PSA. It features an empty potato chips bag fluttering from a truck on a road to the base of some moccasined feet. These feet are revealed to belong to a stereotypical Native American character with long braids and a feather in his hair (also featured in the PSA), and the camera zooms in on him as one tear pours out of his eye (Fig. 2). Nate's later identification of this media text provides one clue as to where part of his HIE stereotype performance of a "sad Indian chief" might have come from.

Fig. 2. Screenshot from The Simpsons, season 9, episode 22: "Trash of the Titans" (1998).

In addition to this clue about one of the potential source texts of his performance, Nate expanded on his use of HIE, further distancing himself from the problematic implications of such a performance. He wrote in the response email, "I probably intended to evoke a feeling of facetiously tragic/comic helplessness…" Here, Nate defends his use of HIE as being produced 'facetiously'. He continued, "Obviously, I would have used it in the context of something comparatively

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trivial and banal, as opposed to the more serious despoilment of nature/all the loaded implications of Native American oppression." Nate dismisses the context as 'trivial' and 'banal', and again makes it clear that he is aware of "Native American oppression."

Reflecting further, Nate wrote, "I think I intended a sort of transgressive/black humor." Here he cites 'transgressive/black humor' as conditioning this kind of stereotyping as allowable, similar to his 'facetious' use of the trope. He concluded with, "In other peoples' usage, perhaps there could also be a subtle swipe against the PSA…a kind of gentle mockery of the intent of the PSA, rather than a more mean-spirit mockery of Native Americans themselves (although admittedly I could see either motivation being possible)." Here Nate seems to imply that "The Simpsons" episode, which in turn might have influenced his own performance, is a "gentle mockery of the intent of the PSA" rather than "a more mean-spirit mockery of Native Americans themselves." He parenthetically adds that he "could see either motivation being possible", and is thus aware of the complex double-sided nature of stereotyping humor, its motivations, and its effects.

To summarize, in the initial conversation analyzed in this section, Nate highlights his and his friends' whiteness and their typical use of SAE against the backdrop of linguistic and ethnic stereotyping, lifted from media tropes, while simultaneously activating and reinforcing stereotypes about Native Americans. In the initial playback session, Jeff and Nate both demonstrate metapragmatic awareness that this performance entails a stereotyping media trope, but in that session and in follow-up email discussion, Nate pushes back against assuming an identity that uncritically reproduces such a stereotype, and suggests that the humorous use of stereotypes can be 'transgressive'.

5. Discussion and conclusion

As Chun (2004) observes, decontextualization of texts containing racist stereotypes does not necessarily entail a critique of them. Furthermore, Chun (2004:286) recognizes that the recontextualization of such texts can function to construct a speaker as having a humorous persona without deconstructing the ideologies to which these texts are linked. In the examples presented here, speakers do not immediately engage in metapragmatic commentary or critique their unscripted stereotypical performances. Rather, these accented media text references function to construct the speakers as having humorous identities in the interactional moment, and this identity construction, along with the group identity constructed via the references, trumps any immediate cultural sensitivity or reflection on the source texts being referenced. However, in the playback interviews I conducted with speakers, they did acknowledge and reflect on the problematic aspects of these media texts and their stereotypical performances, resisting the identities performed in interaction and demonstrating their metapragmatic awareness. The use of the IS method of recording, transcribing, analyzing, engaging in playback, and incorporating playback data into the analysis allows us to further understand the participants' metapragmatic awareness and their interpretations of their own behavior.

As with previous research, the findings I present here reveal a complex interaction between humor and identity in everyday conversation. I have explored how media stereotypes in humorous unscripted contexts function to construct identities of the speaker doing the voicing, the other interlocutors present, and the "other" being voiced. Such instances of stereotypical media-based performances activate and reinforce linguistic and cultural stereotypes. The speakers' own identities as white, SAE speaking individuals are clearly apparent in juxtaposition with the NSA linguistic features and associated cultural stereotypes invoked in their media references.

One of the problematic aspects regarding media stereotypes about minoritized groups in the examples I have presented here is that they are used when speaking about pet cats or for them; this makes relevant an association between animals with racial/ethnic "others". Relatedly, Lippi-Green (2012) found all AAE-speaking characters and all Southern accented characters in Disney films appear in animal rather than humanoid form. However, she concludes that the overall number of these characters is so low that it is hard to draw any inferences from that fact; along with the finding that the vast majority of animal characters (81.4%) are presented as showing unambiguously positive actions and motivations.

While the two examples analyzed in my study illustrate animals being talked for or about with linguistic minstrelsy and HIE, in my subcorpus of 121 media references, there are 16 media reference utterances in total pertaining to cats, and more than half (69%; 11/16) of these are actually spoken in SAE. There are only five examples where animals are talked for or about in varieties other than SAE. Of these five, one is performed with a British Accent, and one with the idiolectal Worf performance. This leaves only 3 instances (19%; 3/16), analyzed in this paper, of talking for or about the cats with linguistic minstrelsy and HIE. Overall, the fact that there are only 3 utterances containing NSA accents reflects the lack of representation of marginalized linguistic and ethnic groups in the media these speaker consume. Moreover, the media texts referenced that do contain representations of such marginalized speakers portray them in a stereotypical manner, and this is what is picked up on and inserted into conversation.

To summarize, when we humorously perform recognizable media accents, we often construct both humorous individual identities and shared group identities. In addition to humorous identity, another aspect of identity I have focused on is speakers' individual ethnic and national identities via the "others" they voice, which also indicate ideologies about the "other", as picked up from media texts and reproduced in conversation. We have seen how speakers sometimes prioritize humor, humorous identities, and group bonding in the moment over cultural sensitivity or critical engagement when performing various accents from the media texts they reference. In referencing problematic media texts in white space, speakers unthinkingly reproduce certain linguistic and cultural stereotypes in their humorous conversational media referencing practices. As Meek (2006:121) reminds us, "language in all of its subconscious, habitual, unreflective

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glory can be a prime site for the perpetuation of negative, racist and racializing sentiments – even when people intend to act otherwise".

However, as I demonstrated via the analysis of playback interviews, there is the potential for having critical discussions about stereotyping in media references after the fact. My analysis has shown that when performances of ethnically-marked language varieties reproduced from racist media texts are brought to speakers' attention, they at the very least express some ambiguous acknowledgements of the problematic nature of their performances, and sometimes engage in deeper reflection, criticism, and deconstruction of these performances. It is my hope that in drawing attention to stereotyping media referencing practices in conversation, we can all expand our metapragmatic awareness regarding this problematic issue. In conclusion, this study contributes to understanding how and why speakers invoke media-embedded linguistic and ethnic stereotypes for humorous individual and group identity construction in conversation, and how media references serve as a site for activating, reinforcing, and becoming aware of and deconstructing stereotypes in everyday interaction.

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Appendix. Transcription conventions

Punctuation reflects intonation, not grammar.
. falling intonation
.. a noticeable pause
… a significant pause
[overlap (two voices heard at the same time)
(h) laughter during a word
(words) uncertain transcription
((sound)) details about speech or nonspeech sounds
: elongated vowel sound following a vowel
- abrupt stop in speech; truncated

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.09.007.

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Sylvia Sierra is assistant professor at Syracuse University, in the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies. She is a discourse analyst researching everyday interaction in online and offline contexts. Her research interests include identity, epistemics, and intertextuality. She is writing a book on millennials' media referencing practices. Recent publications include: “Buffy sings to Cody”: A multimodal analysis of mother and pre-lingual-infant question–response sequences. Journal of Pragmatics, 110, 2017, 50–62, and ‘Playing out loud: Videogame texts as resources in friend interaction for managing frames, epistemics, and group identity,’ Language in Society 45 (2), 2016, 217–245.

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