

Representations of ethnicity in stand-up comedy:

A study of the comedy of Dave Chappelle

University of Gothenburg
Department of languages and literature

Abstract

Title: Representations of ethnicity in stand-up comedy:
A study of the comedy of Dave Chappelle

Author: Oskar Falk

Supervisor: Joe Trotta

Keywords: Stand up comedy, ethnicity, race, AAVE, Standard English, whiteness, popular culture

Abstract: This study has two main aims: (1) to look at, and analyze, how language is used in stand-up comedy in order to portray characters of different ethnicity, and (2) to look at how these characters are portrayed and what images of these ethnic groups are conveyed to the audience. The main results are that the linguistic features typically associated with the ethnic group in question are strengthened and exaggerated in order for the viewers to determine the characters' ethnic origin more easily, and that the characters are often displayed as racial stereotypes. In this particular essay two stand-up shows by comedian Dave Chappelle are examined.

Table of contents

1. Introduction	3
1.1 Background	5
1.2 Selected aspects of the phonology of AAVE	5
1.3 Selected aspects of the grammar of AAVE	6
1.4 Linguistic portrayal of European Americans in stand up comedy	8
2 Methods and material	10
2.1 Dave Chappelle	10
2.2 Chappelle himself about his language use	11
3 Results and discussion	11
3.1 Overview of Dave Chappelle's speech	11
3.2 Representations of white and black characters	12
4 Concluding remarks	19
References	20

1. Introduction

Stand-up comedy and language are closely connected, speech and words (i.e. language) being some of the very few means to which a stand-up comedian has access. Many, if not all, comedians are elaborate linguists, probably, without even being aware of it themselves. Perhaps one could say that it comes with the craft; they have to be aware of language and its peculiarities in order to be able to portray their different characters, situations, and emotions.

One of the many functions of stand-up comedy, apart from entertaining, is dealing with, and bringing forth, be it explicitly or implicitly, current issues and topics with which many people in society are concerned. Some frequently seen topics are, for instance: class, gender, ethnicity or other social differences, many of which are, to some extent, taboo or at least subjects that require being handled with caution. These topics are very important to discuss and have probably been around for as long as there have been social differences between people. This is where humor comes in. Humor, when performed in the right way, efficiently disarms these tabooed topics in a way that makes them easier to handle and talk about.

Dave Chappell has an intriguing way of portraying his characters linguistically; especially when he changes his speech depending on a character's ethnic background, which he often does. These portrayals are obviously racial stereotypes, and very exaggerated versions of such stereotypes, which, of course, is a very delicate matter. One can, quite easily, imagine that many people may be offended by this way of portraying ethnic stereotypes. However, since he leaves out no one from these racial caricatures, one could argue that he is not being unfair towards anyone.

Another intriguing thing about these portrayals is that they give us different perspectives on race and ethnicity. How are these portrayals constructed, linguistically speaking? What is it that makes the audience interpret these linguistic features as “white” or “black” respectively? And why? These questions might lead one to think about the effects of sounding “black” or “white”. Considering this background, the specific aims of this study are:

- to look at, and analyze, how language is used by comedian Dave Chappelle in order to portray characters from different ethnic groups.

- to analyze the portrayals in terms of what images of these ethnic groups are conveyed to the audience.

Some of the questions asked are a little too extensive to be answered in this essay, and they might also border a bit too much to the field of sociology rather than linguistics or even sociolinguistics. This study, however, attempts to answer the questions concerning linguistics.

Before going any further into this essay, definitions of the words *race* and *ethnicity* are appropriate in order to clarify what is actually meant by these words in this essay, even though people use them daily they have proven quite difficult to define.

According to Fought (2006:4) and Trechter and Bucholtz (2001:1) scholars across all disciplines agree that the concept of ethnicity is a socially constructed category. The category of race used to be the biological counterpart of the category of ethnicity, but since scientists have failed to find any biological differences between different “races” this term has now become obsolete in that sense. However, the fact that everyone seems to agree that race and ethnicity are socially constructed does not make them less real and less present in people’s minds (Fought 2006:5).

There are two variables that have to be taken into account when establishing an ethnic identity, the self-identification and the perception and views of others. Looking a certain way is sometimes not enough to “qualify” as membership in a certain ethnic group; one sometimes also has to fulfill certain social criteria, such as language and language use for instance (Fought 2006:7,8).

Here follow some definitions of ethnicity or ethnic groups and race made by prominent scholars:

“[Ethnic groups are] human groups that entertain a subject belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration... it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists” (Weber, cited in Fought, 2006:9).

“Common usage tends to associate “race” with biologically based differences between human groups, differences typically observable in skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and other physical attributes. “Ethnicity” tends to be associated with

culture, pertaining to such factors as language, religion, and nationality” (Bobo, cited in Fought, 2006:10).

One could perhaps say that, whereas ethnicity, or ethnic group, tends to be related to cultural factors, race seems more often related to physical appearance, although it should be noted that not all scholars agree that there is a real difference between the two words.

One thing that caught my interest about Chappelle’s stand up shows was the perspective he offers on European Americans, “whiteness” and middle class. What does he say about white middle class European Americans? Whether this image is correct or not is irrelevant, but it does say something about a general perception in society.

In the field of whiteness studies, “whiteness” is often represented as an absence, or lack of culture and color (Trechter and Bucholtz 2001:5). This is likely to be due to the fact that being white middle class is in some way the “norm” in a society such as that of the U.S, since the dominant culture is “white”. Furthermore, to someone being part of the norm, i.e. a member of the dominant culture, one’s own “whiteness” might seem “invisibly normal”. However, to someone outside the “norm” it is likely to be much more clear and visible (Fought 2006:113). This is interesting because if something is a “set-standard” it easily becomes invisible, which is why I consider it worthy of investigating.

1.1 Background: Linguistic features of African American Vernacular English — Phonology and Grammar

There are several differences between Standard English (which will be referred to as SE) and African American Vernacular English (which will be referred to as AAVE) both in terms of phonology and grammar. In this section I present an overview of the linguistic features of AAVE that are either most commonly discussed in the reference material or most relevant for this study.

1.2 Selected aspects of the phonology of AAVE

First of all, AAVE has a very characteristic intonation and speech rhythm. There are also differences from SE in the vowel system. For instance, when the vowel [e] is

situated in front of a nasal, such as a [n], it is often pronounced the same way as an [ɪ], making the words *pin* and *pen* sound the same. What is more, the diphthong [aɪ], in words such as *side*, *time* and *I*, is often realized as the monophthong [a]. Note that this does not usually apply to words like *kite* and *bright* where the vowel is succeeded by a voiceless consonant.

Another feature of AAVE is that it is non-rhotic, just as many other variants of English. But what is peculiar about the non-rhoticity of AAVE is that it does not make use of linking *r* like other non-rhotic variations, thus four o'clock is pronounced [fɔ: ə klɒk] (Green 2002:121, Tottie 2002:220).

Consonant clusters in word-final position tend to be reduced, e.g. *child* and *test* are pronounced [tʃaɪl] or [tʃal] and [tes] respectively (Green 2002:107).

Depending on which position they are in, i.e. initial, medial or final, the dental fricatives [ð] and [θ] may be pronounced differently. In initial position they are often realized as [d] and [t] respectively, so that *this* becomes [dɪz] and *think* becomes [tɪnk]. In medial position, these phonemes are sometimes pronounced as [v] and [f] e.g. *brother* sounds like ['brʌvə] and *author* like ['ɔfə] (Green 2002:117, Tottie 2002:221).

Another peculiarity of the consonant system is that [l] is sometimes vocalized, which affects the pronunciation of contracted verb forms of the verb *will*. The “grammatical” effect of this is that contractions such as *I'll*, *you'll*, *he'll* etc. are pronounced as [a], [ju], and [hi], i.e. as though the verb were absent (Tottie 2002:221).

The [ŋ] sound in words like *singing* and *dancing* is pronounced [n], as in many variations of white speech (Trudgill 1974:84, Tottie 2002:221).

Sometimes, the order of consonants may be reversed, a phenomenon called metathesis (Tottie 2002:221), in words containing a [s] making the words *ask* and *grasp* sound as though they were written *aks* and *graps*. Finally, word stress may be altered in words like *police*, *hotel* and *defense* by putting the emphasis on the first syllable of the word (Green 2002:131, Tottie 2002:221).

1.3 Selected aspects of the grammar of AAVE

There is a lot to be said about the grammatical system of AAVE. The most striking difference, in terms of grammar, between SE and AAVE is situated in the verb phrase

and in particular the much more developed aspect system. It is hence possible to express if an action is ongoing, habitual, recently finished or finished in the remote past. These different aspects are expressed by using the verb *be* in certain ways (Tottie 2002:221).

For instance, there is the form that is often referred to as invariant or habitual *be*, this usage indicates that the action or event is performed frequently or habitually e.g. *The coffee be cold* or *John be mad* (Tottie 2002:222).

Omission of the copula verb when SE would use a contraction is another frequent feature in AAVE (Sidnell [online] n.d:11). However, it should be noted that omission of the verb is not possible in the first person singular. So, the sentences: *He Ø a man*, *She Ø singing*, and *The coffee Ø cold* are possible, whereas the sentence: *I Ø a man* is not, since omission of the copula is not allowed in the first person, and would have to be *I'm a man*, as in SE (Tottie 2002:222).

Another common feature is the completive *done*, which has a similar meaning to the “perfect of result” *have* in SE. Hence, the sentence “Look, I done cooked a turkey!” would mean, “Look, I’ve just cooked a turkey!” (Green 2002:60, Tottie 2002:222).

One grammatical feature, often misunderstood by non-AAVE speakers, is that there is a difference between stressed and non-stressed past participle *been*, which, when stressed is often spelled *BIN*. There is also a difference in meaning depending on whether the accompanying verb is stative or dynamic. If it is dynamic it means that the action took place in a remote time: *She been tell me that* meaning *She told me that a long time ago*. Moreover, *BIN* with a stative verb indicates that the action took place in a distant past but is still ongoing e.g. *He BIN married* means that he has been married for a long time and still is. This, of course, can lead to misunderstandings if the listener is not familiar with AAVE (Sidnell [online] n.d:4, Green 2002:54).

The third-person singular *-s* does not exist in AAVE, the same thing applies to irregular verbs such as *be* and *have*. Hence, sentences like *He talk*, *They is here* and *She have a car* are correct in AAVE (Tottie 2002:223).

In AAVE there are many different ways of expressing negation compared to SE. First, there is the use of *ain't*, which, although occurring in many white non-standard varieties, has a broader usage in AAVE, where it can be used to replace the verbs *be*

not, have not and *do not*, not only in the present but also in the past tense. Some examples are: *He ain't do it* and *Ain't got the time* (Sidnell [online] n.d:20).

Double or multiple negation is also a common feature, it is also referred to as negative concord. An SE sentence such as *I don't know anything about anybody* would be translated into AAVE as *I don't know nothing about nobody*. What happens is that when SE uses *any* and *anything*, AAVE uses *no* and *nothing* (Tottie 2002:224). This usage, although very common in many non-standard varieties of English, is highly stigmatized (Sidnell [online] n.d:16).

Another feature of AAVE is what is called negative inversion. The negative auxiliary is placed in the beginning of the sentence, in front of the subject resulting in sentences like: *Don't nobody say nothing after that* and *Wasn't nobody in there but me an' him*. This feature can also be found in some white non-standard varieties such as Southern White English and Ozark English (Sidnell [online] n.d:21, Green 2002:78).

The existential construction, for instance where SE uses *there is* is often constructed by using *it is* in AAVE. Thus, instead of saying *Is there a Main street in this town?* as in SE, an AAVE speaker would say, *Is it a Main street in this town?* (Tottie 2002:224).

Concerning the noun phrase and the indefinite article there is a tendency to use *a* instead of *an* at all times, even in front of a vowel, e.g. *a apple, a egg* and *a attitude* (Tottie 2002:224). However, this tendency is not clearly grammatical, one could argue that it has to do more with phonology rather than grammar.

Left dislocation is another common feature of AAVE. The subject of the noun phrase is stated twice as in *the teacher, she yell at them kids*.

The genitive *-s* is sometimes omitted, resulting in constructions like *the boy hat* and *John house*.

1.4 Linguistic portrayal of European Americans in stand up comedy

Here follows a list of the most prominent characteristics of European American characters according to previous research by Fought (2006:124-131).

- Use of standard grammar, often in contrast with AAVE grammatical features.

- Standard phonology, for instance exaggerating the pronunciation of postvocalic *r*'s, a more careful pronunciation of the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, and the diphthong /aɪ/ in contrast with the corresponding AAVE equivalents (/d/, /a/).
- Formal or literary language, technical terms and overuse of standard grammar, e.g. *Does anyone care for an orange?*
- Characters with “bland” or “conservative” names such as *Bob, Tom, Becky* and *Amy*. Also, frequent use of names when addressing other people.
- Use of corny/old-fashioned slang and interjections, e.g. *Oh goodness* and *golly gee*.
- Religious interjections, e.g. *Oh father God!* and *Jesus Christ!*
- Politeness formulas such as *Oh I love your outfit!* and *Excuse me, sir*.
- Nasal voice.
- Change in pitch of voicing, either significantly higher or lower.
- Animated or happy affects, e.g. *This is great!*

One way of summarizing the portrayal of European American characters could be that they are strongly associated with standard or superstandard grammatical forms, literary language, education, intellectuality and science. They are also often portrayed as somewhat corny and feminine or “unmasculine”, hence the often-used higher pitched voice. In cases where a lower pitched voice is used, the character often represents some sort of authority, e.g. a doctor or of some other authoritative position (Fought 2006:124-131). What is more (Rahman 2007:66,67), some other characteristics associated with “whiteness” are that they are extremely conservative; naïve; dispassionate; impersonal; blindly loyal toward societal institutions; and rely heavily on logic without any concern for emotion.

This tends to be contrasted with the portrayal of African Americans “as humanly and culturally rich survivors” endowed with what is referred to as “soul”, which is defined by Smitherman (1994; 2000, 266) as “the essence of life; passion, emotional depth—all of which are believed to be derived from struggle, suffering, and having participated in the Black Experience. Having risen above the suffering, the person gains soul.”

2. Methods and Material

The aim of this study is to see how and what linguistic tools comedian Dave Chappelle uses to represent characters of different ethnic origin in two of his stand-up shows, namely *Killin' Them Softly* (2000) and *For What It's Worth* (2004). The reason why I chose to look at these and not, for instance, his TV series "Chappelle's show" is because I wanted to look into the stand-up comedy format, as opposed to the kind of sketches found in "Chappelle's show" (which contain several actors). I believe that the scarcity of resources offered by the stand up comedy format lets the linguistic features stand out more in comparison to other formats.

The transcriptions from the shows have been made by me personally, although with some help from the subtitles from the show, which had been somewhat altered, probably in order to be understood more easily.

Although there are characters from many different ethnic groups, the two most salient are African Americans and European Americans, which is why these representations are the focus of this study. I also look at Dave Chappelle's own speech when he is not acting, in order to see what differences there are between his characters' and his own speech.

As a reference for "white" linguistic features, the list compiled from Fought presented above is used. And, as for "black" linguistic features, the most common and most particular ones for AAVE, as presented in section 1.2 and 1.3, are the ones employed in this essay.

In picking out sketches for this essay I had a number of criteria. I wanted them to be of appropriate length, i.e. not too short; many of the occurrences of exaggerated "black" or "white" speech were just one-liners or very short monologues, and were therefore not included in the material. The sketches also had to contain characters having either monologues or dialogs showing clear examples of the linguistic features that help the audience perceive the characters as either black or white.

2.1 Dave Chappelle

Stand-up Comedian Dave Chappelle was born in Washington, D.C. on August 24, 1973. He is the youngest of three children. Both of his parents were professors, his father, William David Chappelle III, at Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio and his mother Yvonne Chappelle at Howard University. Chappelle grew up in Silver

Spring, Maryland, but after his parents separated, he lived with his mother in Washington, spending the summers in Ohio with his father. His mother used to take him to local comedy clubs around Washington and he began working in the entertainment industry at the young age of 14. In high school he studied theatre at Duke Ellington School of the Arts, Washington, from which he graduated in 1991. After that he moved to New York City to concentrate on his career as a stand-up comedian (*Meet Dave Chappelle* n.d. [online]). Some of Chappelle's early influences were the comedians Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor and the cartoon character Bugs Bunny (Lipton, 2006).

2.2 Chappelle himself about his language use

When Chappelle is asked by James Lipton in *Inside the Actors Studio* (Lipton 2006), why he does not use standard English all the time, he answers that every black American is bilingual and speaks both "Street Vernacular" and, as he puts it, "Job interview". Furthermore, he adds that there is a time and place for both varieties, in formal and in informal situations, and when performing in front of an audience he feels comfortable using an informal variety since he sees "the crowd as [his] friends".

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Overview of Dave Chappelle's speech

In order to be able to say anything about the language used in Chappelle's stand-up acts, as a kind of reference, I have included a sort of sketch of his own speech derived from his stand-up performances, although not while he is portraying a character. Hence, in this section follows a list of the linguistic features, including some examples, used by Dave Chappelle:

- Existential it e.g. *It's a lot of white people walkin' around, isn't it?*
- Standard existential construction e.g. *there was one other black dude.*
- Non-rhoticity e.g. *I'm scared /skeəd/ as shit.*
- Rhoticity e.g. *Chip was not scared /skɛrd/ at all.*
- Final consonant cluster reduction e.g. *How do they expect /ɪk'spek/ you to sound?*

- Double negation e.g. *We can't have no coke head president.*
- Use of ain't e.g. *Ain't that right, Santiago?*
- Irregular concord e.g. *That guy sniff cocaine.*
- Irregular use of the indefinite article e.g. *I have just bought weed from a infant.*
- Copula omission e.g. *They terrorists.*
- Habitual or invariant be e.g. *My lawyers be white.*
- No /θ/ - /f/ distinction e.g. *That's the truth /tru:f/.*

It should be noted, as can also be seen in the list, that some of these features only occur occasionally, and that Chappelle's speech, although mostly AAVE, does contain many features from Standard English as well.

3.2 Representations of white and black characters

In the remainder of this section, the examples picked out from the two shows are presented. Each of the examples is followed by its corresponding analysis and discussion.

- (1) [A]- "He's still here!"
 [B]- "Oh my God! Open and shut case, Johnson. I saw this once before, when I was a rookie. Apparently this nigger broke in and hung up pictures of his family everywhere. Well, let's sprinkle some crack on him and get out of here."

In (1), first of all, we see the use of a religious interjection in *Oh my God!*, as well as the use of the other character's name in addressing him. Furthermore, as for phonology, standard pronunciation is used, e.g. the speech is clearly rhotic in words such as *before*, *nigger*, *everywhere*, and *here*, /bə'fɔːr/, /'nɪgə/, /'ɛvriweɪ/, and /hɪr/. The use of the derogatory term *nigger* here illustrates the racism of the two policemen.

- (2) “Oh my god! Honey, did you see this? Apparently the police have been beating up negroes like hot-cakes. It’s in the main issue.”

Here in (2), again, the religious interjection *Oh my god!* is used, giving an “uncool” image of the character. Pronunciation is standard, e.g. the vowel in *like* is pronounced /aɪ/ rather than /ɑ/ as in AAVE. Also, the pronunciation of the word *police* is standard, i.e. with emphasis on the last syllable, as opposed to as it is heard on other occasions in the show, emphasizing the first syllable. The use of the term *negro*, which apart from being rather archaic, is also derogatory, gives an image of the character as being very old-fashioned, and possibly unknowingly so, even racist.

- (3) [Anchorman]-“We have Reg Chapman on the scene. Reg, what’s going on out there?”

[Reporter]-“Hi Bob! Hi, yes, we just got hold of a copy of Dave Chappelle’s frantic 911 emergency call. Remember viewers; some of this language is disturbing.”

[Operator]- “Hello, emergency...”

[Dave]- “Help! Help, mothafucka, they’re comin’ to get me!”

[Operator]- “Just calm down, sir. Where are you?”

[Dave]- “Oh... I shit on myself. I can’t stop cryin’.”

In this dialogue (3), featuring Dave Chappell himself as a character, the difference in variety of speech is quite evident. First, the pronunciation of the anchorman, the reporter and the operator is standard, e.g. the post-vocalic *r*’s are clearly pronounced. Second, although it is difficult to illustrate in this essay, the intonation notably changes as well, into a more standard GA kind as opposed to AAVE. Moreover, in the speech of the character “Dave”, which Dave Chappelle plays of himself, the word *motherfucker* is pronounced non-rhotically, and the diphthong /aɪ/ in *I* is monophthongized into /ɑ/, which is characteristic of AAVE.

- (4) [Limo driver] – “Oh, where you from, dog? D.C? Word. That’s a rough city, man.

[Cell phone rings]

[Limo driver] – Hold on one second. Hello. Oh, what’s up, nigga? Whatta fuck, slow down, whatta fuck! No! No! No! Fuck that, nigga! Fuck it, I’m on my way! “

– “Hey, I gotta make a stop real quick.”

In (4) there is just one character, an African American limousine driver. First of all, this AAVE speaker has a high pitch voice (even initially, and it rises even more as he gets angry), intonation is clearly AAVE, and pronunciation is non-rhotic in *where* /wɛ/ and *nigga*, /nɪgə/. However, *word* is pronounced /wɔːr/ e.i with an *r* but without the *d* at the end. What is more, *I* is pronounced in the AAVE way, /ɑ/. As for grammar, in the question *where you from, dog?* the copula has been omitted, as is common in AAVE.

(5) [Lawyer] – “Alright we’re gonna close the deal, is that fine with you, Dave?”

[Dave] – “Yeah, sounds good to me.”

[Lawyer] – “Great! You have a good weekend, Dave!”

[Dave] – “Alright, buddy. Zip it up, and zip it out!”

[Lawyer] – “Ah... ah.. Alright, zipididuda! Bye bye!”

In (5) the character “Dave” speaks on the phone with his white lawyer, who does not understand “Dave’s” slang and hence makes up his own slang in order to confuse his lawyer even more to see how he handles it. The line *Zip it up, and zip it out!* is the made up slang to which the lawyer answers with a hesitation and the exclamation *zipididuda* which is seen as odd and quite corny. Moreover, whereas the lawyer character uses the other character’s name to address him twice in this short dialog, which might be considered very formal and stiff, the character “Dave” uses the more informal and relaxed word *buddy*. What is more, the “lawyer” has a slightly lower pitched voice and a rhotic accent. The lower pitched voice might indicate that the character has some sort of authority, him being a lawyer and part of the “system”.

(6) – “They is treatin’ us good. We are chillin’ an’ shit. I’d like to give a shout-out to Ray-Ray and Big Steven, [unintelligible], Newport.”

In (6) the character is a black man reading a hostage letter on the news. His accent is a quite heavily exaggerated AAVE one. For instance, it contains non-standard grammar such as *they is*, no post-vocalic *r*'s in the words *are* and *Newport* which are pronounced /ɑ:/ and /nu:pɔ:t/ respectively. Furthermore, even though the character is a hostage, the vocabulary is informal and relaxed, e.g. *chillin' an' shit* and *give a shout-out*. This portrays the character as being cool and calm even in dangerous situations. Concerning the character's voice, it is high-pitched and slightly nasal, which according to Fought's list often is used to portray white characters. However, here, breaking this tradition, it is used by Chappelle to portray a black character. Finally, it could be noted that this character's friends, to whom he sends his regards, have untraditional and cool names as opposed to the more conservative and traditional names that white characters often have.

(7) [A]-“Bye, thanks for coming to San Francisco. Come back in April, we're having a sale on Birkenstocks.”

[B]- “Welcome to Oakland, bitch.”

In example (7), speaker [A]'s standard pronunciation is heavily exaggerated. Firstly, there is even a heavily emphasized /ŋ/ sound in *coming* and *having*, which most of the other white characters do not have. Secondly, *San Francisco* is pronounced /'sæn fran'sɪskəʊ/, which is more like British pronunciation than standard GA, with an /əʊ/ diphthong as opposed to an /oʊ/ at the end. What is more, the post-vocalic *r*'s also have a strong emphasis in *for* and *Birkenstocks*, pronounced /fər/ and /'bɜrkən'stək/ respectively. The intonation also differs from Chappelle's ordinary one and is clearly more standard.

What could perhaps be said about the mentioning of the *sale on Birkenstocks* is that it gives an impression of white people who have few things to worry about, such as comfortable and expensive sandals. This mentioning might also suggest that the people of San Francisco are hippies and that they are slightly excentric. Moreover, the line *Welcome to Oakland, bitch* might give an impression of black people, as being rough, and that life is a struggle for them.

- (8) [A] –“Hey, dog, we gonna go to the club, pick up some girls, you tryin’ to roll?”
- [B] –“No, man, I’m cool. I’m gonna stay home, dog, chill with my monkey. You know how long it took me to train this monkey... to suck my dick... without peelin’ it? Last night, Chimp-chimp jerked me off with his feet. Nigger, only a monkey can show you that kind of love and tenderness. So you all keep fucking these people if you want, niggers. More monkey pussy for me. I’m hookin’ up with an orangutan next week. Cause all I fuck is chimps and orangutans.”

In (8) there are two black characters. The speech shows many of the typical characteristics of AAVE, such as zero copula in *we Ø gonna* and *you Ø tryin’*; most of the speech non-rhotic e.g. *nigger*, *tenderness* and *more*, pronounced /'nɪgə/, /'tendənəs/ and /moʊ/ respectively. However, on two occasions, in *girls* and *jerked* the postvocalic *r*'s are pronounced, although only barely perceptibly. What is more, the already informal but quite widespread form *I'm gonna* is shortened to *I'm a*, which is an AAVE variation of the form. Another common characteristic of AAVE, shown here, is the vocalization of word-final *l*, for instance, in the words *cool* and *chill* where the *l* is realized as /ʊ/, hence these are pronounced /cu:ʊ/ and /tʃɪʊ/.

- (9) - “Get away from my cart, nigger. What're you looking at? Chicken and giblets are over there. You must be lost. These are vegetables.”

Example (9) is said by a middle class white character doing grocery shopping. What can be observed here, apart from standard grammar, is a heavily exaggerated standard pronunciation, most notably the postvocalic *r*'s and standard intonation. Moreover, there is also a change in voice, to a slightly darker pitched voiced. This could be interpreted as a sign of authority. Also, the way in which the term *nigger* is used, here by a white character, implies that the character considers himself superior to the recipient. What is more, the speaker's insinuation that blacks only eat chicken and do not even recognize vegetables could be seen as quite a racist character trait.

- (10) [A] –“Todd, would you care for a glass of grape juice?”
 [B] –“What? Nigger, what the fuck is juice? I want some grape drink, baby. It's purple.”
 [A] – “I don't think I know what grape drink is.”
 [B] –“What?”
 [A] –“I have some apple juice, if you want.”
 [B] –“What the fuck is juice? I want some apple drink. It's green.”

Example (10) is a conversation between [A], a white, and [B], a black character. It shows many of the characteristics of both black and white speech, and to make these clearer they are exaggerated. First, [A] uses [B]’s name *Todd* to address him, which is quite formal. [B] uses first *nigger* and then *baby* to address [A] back, which is a very informal and perhaps even irreverent way of addressing someone. Also, the way the offer of grape juice is formulated, *would you care for*, is very formal and much more than the situation requires. There is also a difference in voice, [A]’s is deeper than [B]’s whose is more high pitched. Furthermore, [A]’s speech is rhotic all the way through, whereas [B]’s shows a bit of inconsistency, by pronouncing *nigger* as /'nɪgə/ but *purple* as /pɜ:pəl/. The differences between [A]’s and [B]’s speech are also accentuated by different intonation patterns, GA and AAVE respectively.

In this dialog the white character is portrayed as very stiff and “uncool”, whereas the black character is portrayed as cool though somewhat irritated. The whole situation illustrates the two characters’ different cultural environments, and thus their difficulty understanding each other.

- (11) “Officer, Dave Chappelle couldn't have done that. I saw him in his window masturbating from 2:35 to 2:37. I'm certain of it. He was standing on a clock and holding a calendar and today's paper.”

In (11), a white character gives a testimony of Dave Chappelle’s innocence to a police officer. The speech is a careful caricature of standard grammar and pronunciation, e.g. all postvocalic *r*’s are pronounced clearly. What is more, the pitch is deeper and the choice of words is very formal e.g. *masturbating* and *certain*. The character also gives a very precise testimony with many specified details such as the exact time and place,

which illustrates a familiarity of what is required to be credible. This, again, adds to the image of stiffness and inflexibility of his white characters.

- (12) – “Dude, remember at Frank's last week, I was fucking smashed, man. I had two shots of Jaeger... 'tequila, four bong hits, man... beer, cheeseburger.”
– “Frank fell asleep so we, like, stuck a carrot in his ass... and put shaving cream on his balls.”

Example (12) shows a different kind of white character, not the same stiff and formal character seen in most of the other portrayals, but a more informal version including cursing and words such as *dude* and *man* to address his interlocutor. What is more, this character is portrayed as a sort of “party dude” or “burn out” talking a kind of laid back west coast surf slang that emerged in the 1950’s and 60’s (Hill 1994:324).

- (13) [A] – “How did you know I was gonna get some chicken?”
[B] – “Come on buddy, come on, buddy. Everybody knew, as soon as you walked through the goddamn door, you’re gonna get some chicken. It is no secret down here that blacks, and chickens, are quite fond of one another.”

This excerpt in (13) also gives an image of white people different from the traditional one. The character [B] speaks in a strong southern accent with heavily pronounced post-vocalic *r*'s, although not traditionally associated with the southern accent it is more so with white speech in general.

- (14) – “Michael, thank you for coming. As you know, the war has not been going as well as we expected. There's been a lot of hiccups, and the public is asking us... a lot of questions, of course... and well, Michael, there's no nice way to say this... and all I know how to do is be direct, so let me just be direct. We're gonna need you to jerk off another child, Mike. I'm sorry. I am sorry. But, it would really help out.”

In (14) there is just one white character; he is some sort of government official. First, the voice is noticeably low-pitched, as an indication of authority. Second, intonation

and pronunciation are formal and standard, although exaggeratedly so. This is the typical portrayal of a white person of authority given in the two shows.

4. Concluding remarks

In this essay I have looked at how comedian Dave Chappelle uses language, in terms of grammar, phonology and lexicon, to portray characters of different ethnicity, in two of his stand-up shows. I have also looked at what image of the ethnic group in question these portrayals may convey to the audience. These depictions have been compared to a list of similar previous studies found in Fought's book *Language and Ethnicity* and another list of the most frequent AAVE linguistic features.

In general, the observations in this study follow the same pattern as the previous ones with some minor exceptions. For instance, none of Chappelle's white characters had a perceptibly higher pitched voice, which was often the case in the previous studies, but either lower pitch or no significant change at all. What is more, I failed to detect anything that would suggest that the white characters were portrayed as "unmasculine". I did, however find that the white characters were often portrayed as stiff, old fashioned, racist and "uncool", as opposed to the black characters, who were often portrayed as relaxed or "cool" and in control of the situation. Moreover, other examples, although not as common, of white characters were southerners and a sort of "party dude" or "burn out" who spoke slang.

As for language, the most prominent features of the white characters were: standard or superstandard grammar, exaggerated standard pronunciation with clearly pronounced post-vocalic r's, non-AAVE intonation, and the use of other characters' name when addressing them. Furthermore, as for the black characters, the most salient linguistic features were: AAVE pronunciation such as e.g. non-rhoticity, AAVE intonation, and non-standard or AAVE grammar, such as e.g. subject verb non-agreement.

It should also be said that since the scope of this essay has been intentionally limited, much more could be said and investigated about this topic in further studies. Having said that, this study serves a good introduction to this area of investigation and could work as an indicator of what the results might be expected from such further studies.

References

Primary sources:

Chappell, Dave. 2004. *For what it's worth*. San Fransisco. Pilot Boy Productions

Chappell, Dave. 2000. *Killin' them softly*. Washington, D.C. Urban Works

Secondary sources:

Fought, Carmen. 2006. *Language and Ethnicity: Key Topics in Sociolinguistics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Green, Lisa J. 2002. *African American English: a linguistic introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hill, Richard A. 1994. 'You've Come a Long Way, Dude: A History'. *American Speech*, 69 (3). Duke University Press. Retrieved June 07, 2001, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/455525>

Lipton, James, & Wurtz, Jeff. 2006. Dave Chappelle. Wurtz, Jeff, *Inside the actors studio*. New York City: CABLEready.

Meet Dave Chappelle. n.d. Retrieved June 04, 2010, from

http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/chappelles_show/bio/index.jhtml.

Powell, Kevin. 2006. Heaven Hell Dave Chappelle: The agonizing return of the funniest man in America. *Esquire*. Retrieved June 04, 2010, from http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0506CHAPPELLE_92.

Rahman, Jacquelyn. 2007. 'An Ay for an Ah: Language of Survival in African American Narrative Comedy'. *American Speech* 82: 65-96.

Smitherman, Geneva. 1977. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Sidnell, Jack. n.d. *Outline of AAVE grammar*. Retrieved June 04, 2010, from

<http://individual.utoronto.ca/jsidnell/SidnellAAVEGrammar.pdf>.

Tottie, Gunnel. 2002. *An introduction to American English*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Trechter, Sara and Mary Bucholtz. 2001. *White Noise: Bringing Language into Whiteness Studies*. *Journal of linguistic Anthropology* 11(1):3-21.

Trudgill, Peter. 1974. *The social differentiation of English in Norwich*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.