Sociolinguistic Resources, Individual Identities, and Public Speech Styles of Texas Women

Four Texas public speakers claim that region and ethnicity affect their speech but are uncomfortable talking about the influences of gender. They see their styles as expressive of self rather than social identity and as the result of very particular facts about their own predispositions, families, and circumstances. These shapers of public discourse are at least as motivated by the need to express unique, differentiated selves as by the need to replicate social ideologies.

Together with two colleagues, I am studying the speech and writing of women from Texas to see how they draw on linguistic resources provided by history, culture, and society in constructing public voices that display personal and regional identity. (See Johnstone et al. 1993 for an overview of the project. See McLeod-Porter 1992; Bean 1993; and Johnstone 1993 for preliminary reports of some findings.)

Our study explores the relationship between individual identity and shared sociolinguistic resources in the description of linguistic variation. It takes a perspective on sociolinguistic variation that supplements the results of studies of language use in relatively tight, focused, homogeneous communities. Using the particularistic techniques of ethnography and discourse analysis, it asks and answers questions about how speakers draw on regional and social models of phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics as they construct and express individual identities in a mobile, multiethnic, linguistically heterogeneous context. Our approach to socio-
linguistic variation expands on work by LePage and Tabouret-Keller (1985) and others on linguistic “acts of identity.” LePage and Tabouret-Keller point out that people in a given area can be expected to speak alike only if they interact regularly and exclusively with the same people and are trying to express an identity similar to the identities projected by the people they interact with. Their examples of the linguistic heterogeneity possible in a relatively nonfocused speech community come from the Caribbean, where societies are racially and ethnically diverse and where various forms of English, French, and Spanish are available as resources. The heterogeneity that they find leads them to suggest that each individual creates his or her own ways of talking, ways that overlap more or less with the ways others talk; they call into question the idea that languages and varieties are widely shared and that people necessarily form speech communities with joint orientation toward group norms.

Sociolinguistic research in the United States and Great Britain has until recently typically taken place in relatively tightly knit communities in which everyone is more or less focused on the same models for talk and makes use of the same sets of linguistic variants. Beginning with the Linguistic Atlas projects, research on language in the American South has likewise sought to describe the speech of relatively closed, stable populations such as small rural towns and urban ghettos, with the assumption that sociolinguistic models that accounted for the relatively stable patterns of variation found there would also account for patterns of variation in other settings. Southern states may indeed at one time have consisted of homogeneous speech communities. For most of the region’s history, people could be said to talk the way they did because of where they came from, since people stayed where they were born and interacted with the same people in their community, and few from outside it, all their lives. But does it still make sense, in view of current demographic and economic facts about the South, to suppose that Southerners, or even lower Southerners, or inhabitants of the Appalachians, or Texans, form speech communities analogous to those of Harlem or Detroit or inner-city Belfast? Outsiders and Texans alike tend to think that there is a single linguistic model toward which all Texans either aim or decide not to aim. But clearly all Texans do not speak alike or share the same norms for speech.

It is our view that contemporary Texas is more like the Caribbean than like a neighborhood in Belfast. There are many very different resources available here for the creation and display of idiosyncratic ways of being and sounding, and the many Texans who interact with people outside their immediate communities, either privately or in more public media, have access to varying sets of these resources. Texas is a particularly suitable locale for a study of the linguistic effects of multiple cultural models. It is the quintessentially southwestern state, culturally (and geographically) both southern and western, and it is ethnically diverse, with large Hispanic, Anglo, and African American populations that influence one another. To varying degrees, people in Texas speak English like Southerners, like Californians, like Midwesterners; they speak Spanish, Tex-Mex, Vietnamese, German, Czech; they use features of Black English Vernacular and
traditions of African American oratory; they project colorful, direct western personalities or genteel, indirect southern ones (both are stereotypes that they can describe); they try to sound like the people on Dallas, the people on The Cosby Show, or the people on Beverly Hills 90210. Texans shape languages to use as they shape individual identities in the “multidimensional social space” (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985:180–186 et passim) suggested by these and other possibilities.

Not all linguistic possibilities are open to all Texans: not all speak Spanish equally well, for example, and some are only able to make small symbolic stab at sounding southern. Some Texans do continue to live in tightly focused communities in which linguistic resources are limited and homogeneity is accordingly high. We are not trying to undo the results of dialectology based in such communities, but rather to extend the study of linguistic variation so that it provides a model of the language of people in other, more public contexts as well.

Our research population consists of women who live in Texas. The methodology combines two techniques. (1) Interviews are conducted with women of a variety of demographic backgrounds to elicit attitudes about place, personal identity, and language use. An understanding of generally shared sociolinguistic models on which Texas women draw is thus allowed to emerge from their own senses of who they are and how they show it. (2) Detailed case studies of the language of ten women who have occasion to speak or write in public settings have also been conducted. Our case-study subjects are women who use language in public in a variety of ways: they are teachers, politicians, journalists, storytellers, singers, and orators. These case studies are based on two things. First, we conduct with each woman an interview that is designed to elicit speech in a variety of styles, as well as information about the subjects’ histories as speakers and writers and their attitudes about language and speech. As part of the interview, we ask each woman to tell us about what she sees as the main influences on the ways she talks, how she learned to use language as she does, and who and what her models are. Second, we examine other examples of the subjects’ writing and speaking in a variety of genres. Subjects of case studies include politician and professor Barbara Jordan, writer and entertainer Sunny Nash, editorialist Molly Ivins, and county spokeswoman Eliza Bishop, as well as other writers and politicians, teachers, an attorney, a labor leader, and a country-western singer and lyricist. Each case study shows how one particular woman draws on shared models for Texas speech, as well as on particular models of speech from family and acquaintance as she creates and expresses a personal identity. The overall project is both sociolinguistic and ethnographic in nature, as we are interested both in how Texans talk and why they talk as they do and in Texans’ own understandings of their ways of speaking.1

In this article I explore how some of these successful professional women conceive of themselves as language users and why; I also illustrate some ways in which their choices of how to say things serve as a metalinguistic display of the things that they say about who they are. Some of the cultural and linguistic resources that our subjects draw on are easy for them to talk
about: they are glad, for example, to discuss how they feel about being
Texans and how features associated with Texan speech fit into their linguis-
tic repertoires, and they readily acknowledge the influence of speech styles
associated with ethnicity and with vocation. But when we ask about being
and sounding like women, they hesitate. These accomplished, visible
women—many from the generation that grew up struggling for equal
rights and influenced by feminism—do not attribute very much about the
way they act and speak to female role models or models of women’s speech.
This article examines why this should be and looks at how these women
define themselves as language-users. What will emerge is that the sources
of identity expressed in talk and other action are idiosyncratic and particu-
lar. Although all of the women whom we have studied draw on gender
expectations and stereotypes as they construct public voices, each does so
differently, all draw equally or more on other linguistic and cultural
resources, and all attribute the largest part of their identity to very particu-
lar facts about their own lives and families. Ideologies about region, gender,
and ethnicity do not appear to serve, for these influential women, primarily
as constraints on what they can do; rather, models of speech and action that
express linguistic ideologies are sources of creativity, selected from and
combined in the expression of unique selves.

I look in this article at what four women had to say to us about the sources
of their linguistic abilities and styles. All four are middle-aged, between 40
and 60; all are natives of Texas, and all are successful and visible in
professions that require them to speak in public, to audiences of people
whom they do not and probably never will know and who do not know
them, as representatives of their vocations. Linda Chavez-Thompson is
Executive Director of the San Antonio Local of the American Federation of
State, County, and Municipal Employees. She has been involved in union
organizing and administration for most of her adult life. She grew up in a
Spanish-speaking family in various small towns near Lubbock, Texas.
Barbara Jordan, from Houston, is a former U.S. Representative, the first
African American woman from the South to be elected to the House. She
is especially well known for speeches to the House Judiciary Committee
concerning the Nixon impeachment and for two keynote addresses to
Democratic conventions. She is now a professor at the University of Texas.
Sunny Nash, also African American, is a freelance writer of newspaper
columns, screenplays, short stories, and novels, as well as a musician,
photographer, and art teacher. She is from Bryan, a medium-sized city in
central Texas. Bettye Springer is an attorney in Fort Worth who presents
workshops about issues in labor law such as sexual harassment. She is a
West Texan (from Lamesa) of European origin. I examine how these four
women talked, in interviews with us, about linguistic models and resources
associated with gender, region, ethnicity, and vocation.

My methodology for this aspect of the study is simply to listen carefully
and critically to what our research subjects told us about who they are and
how they talk. My analysis is of course informed by my understanding that
people are not accurate reporters of the finer details about their speech and
of the fact that texts, be they literary works or the conversations that I am
working with here, do not completely speak for themselves. These women may well be unaware of some of the real sources of their styles, or they may have reason to conceal them. What I am interested in here is how they understand what motivates their choices and how their own understandings of their linguistic images are reflected in their speech.

Resisting Gender Identification

There are vivid traditional models for female speech behavior in Texas. (See Carrington 1975, Crawford and Ragadale 1992, Exley 1985, Fernea and Duncan 1977, Furman 1980, and Marshall 1983, for example.) As is Texas in general, Texas women tend to be treated in the state's popular media with a fair amount of positive hyperbole, as tougher and stronger, more glamorous, more neighborly, and "friendlier" than other people are. For white Texans, many of whom are of southern U.S. ancestry, one powerful image is that of the courtly but indirectly powerful "southern belle," with her "iron fist in a velvet glove," as it is often put. There are also popular images (propagated in magazines like the Texas Monthly, on TV shows like The Eyes of Texas, and in local and national advertising campaigns) of rugged pioneer women working ranches in the southern and western parts of the state. Rural African Americans preserve memories of fiercely independent former slaves farming and raising families by themselves while their menfolk went to the cities to find work. (Some of Sunny Nash's work has in fact involved documenting this history in central Texas.) Contemporary church life provides African American women with other models that involve public speech and action. Traditional models for Hispanic women, perhaps the most restrictive with respect to public action and speech, allow for considerable power within the family. Texas women can also draw on models of womanly speech and behavior from elsewhere. Thus a woman wishing or needing to express a particularly female identity has many resources to draw on, and except perhaps for Hispanic women, such an identity need not imply powerlessness or the lack of a public voice.

But all four research subjects resisted or rejected explanations of their linguistic behavior based on gender. They insisted that they do not, and have never, made or oriented to gender distinctions, and all except labor leader Chavez-Thompson denied that gender discrimination had figured much in their lives. When we asked them whether they had been aware as children of different linguistic or social expectations for girls and boys, they said that such distinctions had not applied to them. Here, for example, Chavez-Thompson talks about noticing different expectations for interaction among men and women when she was a child:

Chavez-Thompson: When [my parents] moved to town, the biggest shock for my mother is that three or four couples could sit and visit in the living room together. The standard for them was that they would visit, eat; the men would go to one place and the women would go to the kitchen and, and, and do the gossip in the kitchen. We approached it differently. In fact, when I was very young, I wondered, "Why did they do that?" you know, because I wanted in and listening in to what the men were saying, because I found that very interesting. And, and
they said, "Get away from here," you know, you’re sort of like, you’re bothering us." Well, I, I was little, so maybe I was bothering them. [Laughs.]

Johnstone: [They were] attributing it to being a child, yeah.

Chavez-Thompson: Yeah, because I was a child at the time. But I never, I, I really never separated that which women are supposed to do and that which men are supposed to do. My first marriage didn’t set any barriers; uh, certainly my second marriage did not. And, and so, I’ve really perhaps not, been there for, obstacles many many other women have had placed before them. Although some obstacles are, you know, have always been there.

Chavez-Thompson describes how females in her family were expected not to participate in the men’s conversation, but when the men would ask her to leave, she attributes it to her having been a nuisance, not to her having been a girl. The same reluctance to identify herself with other women characterizes her descriptions of interactions as an adult. She brings up the topic of “obstacles many other women have had placed before them” but denies having faced such obstacles in her marriages.

Chavez-Thompson did describe how being a woman made her job difficult at times. Here she tells about first coming to work for the government employees’ union:

I came to work for the organization in June of 1971. But it was basically just, you know, having to battle the fact that I am a woman . . . and that I am at the same level as business agents of plumbers and pipe fitters and, and whatever organization; it was difficult. Even, even my own—even here within this organization, it was difficult, because a HISPANIC woman, in the union business, is a bigger, a, a, a more rare thing. . . . I signed up the first 13 people in this union. And I had bottles thrown at me, when, when I was out there. . . . It was a long time before, uh, people of that mentality treated me differently than, than a secretary.

When she was asked, however, whether being in this position required her to learn to talk or act in more traditionally male ways, Chavez-Thompson hesitated, first appearing to say yes and then firmly saying no:

Johnstone: Do you think that, when women, including yourself, get into, get into positions like yours, they have to learn to talk like men or to act more like men or would you just, would you describe it some other way, how you managed to do that?

Chavez-Thompson: There are times when you have to, to be just like a man, I guess, if that’s, that’s, talking is, is—

Johnstone: —Yeah, that’s part of it.—

Chavez-Thompson: —is part of that. But I’ve, I’ve had a few of, quite a few of those moments, but I’ve never acted like anything but what you’d describe as a lady. Or a woman, you know, I just, I do things, as I think they are. The biggest respect that I get from someone is that they look at me as their union representative, not as a woman. Not as a woman acting like a man, but just because of the talent that I may have, to resolve their problems.

Chavez-Thompson does not want others to identify her with her gender; she wants the people whom she works with to “look at me as their union representative, not as a woman.” Nor does she want to attribute to gender
any influence her own speech or behavior ("not as a woman acting like a man"). Yet she described situations in which it is clear that others do identify her with her gender and in which it would be easy to describe Chavez-Thompson's behavior as "acting like a man." The following excerpt illustrates both (she was describing a recent conversation with a group of sheriff's deputies):

Chavez-Thompson: But, but, in fact, in fact, in fact, they st- they call me "Mom."
Johnstone: Oh yeah?
Chavez-Thompson: Yeah. Now they call me "Mom," but every once in a se-in a,
in a while, I ask them, "What kind of mother are you calling me?" Uh, because [laughing] honest! They're bad sometimes! But the question here for them—and, and for me—is that occasionally a city manager or occasionally a department head, ah, that because I'm a woman they're going to be able to walk all over me, or because I'm a woman I don't know how to take them on. And every once in a while, ah, I have to show them, that they're getting to deal with me at the same level as they would a man. And, uh, I don't often have to use the strong language that I, I, I am sometimes prone to do. Ah, I know some words, but I, and, and, and I am prone to do that.

Both in turning "Mom" into a joke about a familiar profanity ("What kind of mother are you calling me?") and in describing her "proneness" to use "strong language," Chavez-Thompson is, by standards that she herself is aware of, "acting like a man"; and in calling her "Mom," others are, at least superficially, treating her like a woman (though the playfully aggressive tenor of the whole interaction could be described as more typically male than female; Tannen 1993a). Yet Chavez-Thompson continues throughout to be very reluctant to acknowledge either. She does not want to describe herself in these ways and does so only when pressed, interestingly often becoming less articulate—hesitating and stuttering—when she does.

Barbara Jordan also denied having noticed gender distinctions in expected linguistic behavior as a child:

Johnstone: Were there other contexts in which you noticed, uh, that girls were supposed to speak differently than boys, or less, or more, or
[more carefully?]
Jordan: [I really can't, I really have no recollection of that being a distinction.

Jordan rejected an explicit question about gender differences in public oratory and denied speaking differently to women than to men:

Porter: I have a couple of questions for you about, about what I'd call women's style of, of speech making. Do you, have any sense of whether or not your style is different from say some of the men counterparts that you've uh encountered in your career?
Jordan: I, uh, I just, I & I have, I have no sense of that because I don't know how a man does his speeches or gets them and, and, um, presentation. I, I have no idea.
Porter: Well, whenever you're preparing a speech and you know that you're speaking to an audience predominantly of men as opposed to an audience predominantly of women, do you make adjustments to meet the needs of that
particular, those particular groups?

Jordan: [Laugh.] I don't. I really don't. I, uh, and I have, I will of course think of the group, and, uh, for instance it was late December when I went to Dallas to speak to a group of, uh, the women's foundation or whatever, and when in preparing that speech I thought, "This is a, a women—this is a woman's group and they will want something specifically about women and so after I do the rest of the stuff that I want to say here I better throw in something like that," and I'll try to find a good quote that may be appropriate for the occasion, that sort of thing.

Under Porter's repeated questioning, Jordan did eventually acknowledge that an audience of women might "want something specifically about women" and that as a result she "throws in" something like "a good quote" "after I do the rest of the stuff that I want to say." This acknowledgment of an effect of audience gender on Jordan's speech is about as minimal as possible, and its phrasing reflects its intent, as Jordan departs from her normally very formal style to use expressions like "stuff" and "throw in." When we pressed her about what a women's group might want to hear about, Jordan appeared very deliberately to frustrate our expectations:

Porter: Now would you move towards something that was more story-oriented, anecdotal for women, as opposed to—

Jordan: No, more theoretical, philosophical in general.

Porter: For, for?

Jordan: For women, right.

Porter was finally forced to back off the issue, and Jordan had the last word:

Porter: Interesting. Um, so then you're not conscious of any kinds of adaptations that speakers make when they're addressing different [audiences.]

Jordan: [I'm not.] I am not.

Attorney Bettye Springer also resisted suggestions that her linguistic style might be related to her gender or that of her audiences. Here, asked whether her "participatory" style in the workshop that we observed could be a style typical of women, she began to agree, but immediately backed down, ending by suggesting that a person's style is a matter of "who you go around with."

Johnstone: Some, uh, some people would want to claim that that kind of more participatory style was more more likely to be a woman's style, and the more kind of lecture style was more of a man's style. How do you, how do you feel about that? Big generalization, of course, but—

Springer: Let me think. That very well could be; now the fellow that's in there for my law firm right now that's participating in the mock trial, uh, M__ F__, I've worked with him a lot on programs and I've seen him take questions and do participatory, but maybe not quite to the extent I do. But I have seen him do that some, uh, but—and I will say that the woman who works with me, uh, who but you didn't meet, but her name is S__ G__—she's a fifth-year lawyer. I guess you'd say I've trained her, and I, we still work together in doing training, and I
see that she's adopted the style that I have, because she's seen me the most. So maybe it's who you go around with.

Springer brought up the topic of role models (she called them "protegés") in the interview, partly in order, it seemed, to make the point that hers had been men:

_Springer_: You didn't—One thing that you didn't ask me about, that I thought you might, was did I have a protegé.
_Bean_: Do tell.
_Springer_: And, and I really did have a protegé that, that might be of interest to you. In fact, he was from Michigan. . . .

Chavez-Thompson agreed that she had not had many female role models:

_Bean_: So you've had role models, Hispanic role models, but not too many women.
_Chavez-Thompson_: No, not too many women. Just very few and far between.

Writer Sunny Nash also repeatedly denied having had role models of either gender:

_Johnstone_: When you, when you do your writing now, are you influenced by some authors more than others, or?
_Nash_: No . . . Generally, generally, the things just kind of pour out of my own experience.

More specifically, she said that she had not learned how to be a public speaker from either of the women in her family:

_Johnstone_: How did you learn to be a public speaker, for example?
_Nash_: Oh.
_Johnstone_: From your parents, from your grandmother?
_Nash_: No, no, my mother is probably the shiest person in the world [laughing]: she doesn't even talk to me. [Laughs.] She's very, very shy . . . . And my grandmother talked to herself a lot and, uh, and prayed out loud s- but I think, see I had all kinds of uh projects of my own when I was a kid.

Although a closer linguistic analysis would indubitably show that the linguistic interaction of the interviews, and the speech of our subjects, was in some ways clearly affected by our and their gender, the subjects appeared to be making little _strategic_ use of "sex-class-linked" linguistic features (Tannen, in press) in their talk. Like that of Chavez-Thompson, Springer, and Jordan, Nash's speech in the interview reflects her rejection of traditionally female models for Texas speech and of stereotypical models of women's speech in general. None, for example, displays the indirectness or the positive politeness associated with southern female speech style; none makes a display of linguistic hesitancy; all speak with fairly low-pitched voices.
Manipulating Regional Identity

The women's reluctance to talk about their speech styles in terms of
gender contrasts strikingly with their willingness to talk about themselves
in terms of region. All but Nash claim to orient their style to models of
Texanhood, and all including Nash talk about using their Texanness stra-
tegically, especially with outsiders. Models for speech and other action
identified as particularly Texan are ubiquitous: Texans have for several
generations been encouraged to think of their state as unique and superior,
and Texas's size and population now makes it a target for specialized
advertising that plays on traditional images such as the state flag and the
shape of the state, as well as on ways of dressing, acting, and talking which
are seen as especially Texan. (See Duffer and Sewell n.d.)

People can "talk Texan" in varying degrees. Some use speech and
discourse features that seem to them and their audiences to be charac-
teristically Texan only occasionally, mainly with non-Texans, for strategic
purposes such as getting attention or seeming exotic. Many Texas speakers
symbolize their regional identification on a more regular basis, making
more consistent use of a few features that have become linguistic badges
of Texan identity. These include the use of y'all, at least in the nominative
and oblique cases and often also in the possessive (y'all's), the mon-
ophthongization of /ay/ preceding voiceless obstruents (in words like night
and like), and discourse-level displays of extreme "positive politeness"
(Brown and Levinson 1987) such as extended, elaborate greetings. There
are, of course, still many small-town or rural Texans, many older, who "talk
Texan" because, living in small, homogeneous communities and interact-
ing mainly in a dense, multiplex social network, they have limited linguistic
resources from which to choose. These are the speakers favored as inform-
ants in traditional dialectology and modeled best by much current socio-
linguistic theory, but none of our research subjects are in this category.

Since the traditional stereotypical Texan—the relaxed, neighborly,
south-midland-accented cowboy in roper boots and hat—is a white man,
state imagery is more easily available to white women than to others. Bettye
Springer talked at length about the role of Texanness in her presentation of
self to outsiders:

Bean: We do seem to have some sort of attitude about the state. Do you have any
particular feeling about the state?
Springer: [Emphatically.] Oh, I do, um and I can tell you, I can—with an anecdote.
When I lived in Chicago, particularly in Chicago and everyone was from somewhere,
and they were either Irish or they were Polish or they were this or they were
that and my best friend in law school was Hungarian, but everybody was
something.
Johnstone: That's real important in Chicago.
Springer: And, and people would always ask me, "Well, what are you?" and I'd
always tell them, "I'm a Texan." [Bean laughing.] Because I can remember growing
up, I never was a German, which is what my Daddy was, or anything else; you
were a Texan. . . . So I always had that identity and I'm still—there's things that
that we have in the state that I'm not particularly proud of, like guns and stuff, but uh . . . but I'm proud of where I'm from.

Springer talked at length about what she felt characterizes the interactive style of Texans—a combination of independence and friendliness—which she illustrated with the example of Texas drivers who sometimes make their own rules on the road but still wave at one another.

When we asked Barbara Jordan if she felt that Southerness was part of what shaped her style, she hesitated, saying that she hadn't always been proud of the region. But her identification with Texas was clearer.

Well, I, uh, uh, I'm proud of the South too. I wasn't always but, uh, I grew to become, uh, fond of the South and of course it's the race question that, uh, made the South a negative for me for so long, but when I was a member of Congress, uh, the Southerners would y-sorts of get together: there was an affinity among the Southern contingent in the United States House of Representatives which you could not count on in any other region of the country. . . . When when I was there, uh, Texas was was sort of a a thing apart, and we at least we considered ourselves a thing apart [laughing] and just a little bit superior, eh, to tell the truth of the matter. And that's a function of Texas braggadocio, that's what that is.

Linda Chavez-Thompson told us an anecdote of a genre that one hears repeatedly in Texas: a story about surprising outsiders with what is called Texas "friendliness." ("Friendliness," in this context, usually means active courtesy to strangers. For example, "driving friendly," as motorists are encouraged to do with road signs, means pulling onto the shoulder to let others pass. The most commonly adduced contrast with this mode of behavior is the behavior, experienced or imagined, of people from "the East" or "the North."

Johnstone: You think of yourself as a Texan, then, in addition to—
Chavez-Thompson: —Yeah. Yeah. Very much a Texan. . . . We had a convention here in 1988. The people from California came. I do not know what they expected. And I got more compliments from, "Ohh, ya'll are just WONDERFUL; the people HERE they're so friendly!" I wondered what they had ever heard about Texas for them to think that we wouldn't be. And, I think that this image of Texans, you know, as, uh, guns, you know, the the saloon, the the twang. I, I have no idea what other people think of us—
Johnstone: The kind of Wild West,
[do you think? That's what they were expecting?]
Chavez-Thompson: I think so, sort of like the Wild West, yeah. And, and so they were absolutely floored by how friendly—"We even asked somebody on the street for directions, and they were so nice! They gave us directions." [Laughter.] Well, aren't you supposed to?

Springer told a similar story, about surprising an airport bus full of dentists attending a convention by being a "friendly Texan." Both Chavez-Thompson and Nash talked about using their Texanness strategically. Chavez-Thompson spoke of "the showmanship issue":


I'm very guilty, ever since [former governor] Ann Richards came into the picture in Texas, of using her phrases, her Texas twang. I find myself doing that when I am somewhere else. I twang it, you know, I actually do! . . . I can talk like Ann Richards, and I do it deliberately. Again, the showmanship issue.

Nash also employs her Texanness for professional reasons ("I capitalize on the Texas aspect"), although she denied feeling the need for a real regional identity. For example, she used being a Texan (an exotic identity in the context, especially for an African American) to get bookings in the East Coast jazz-club scene that she tried to break into for a time.

All four women, then, claimed that the ways they speak are sometimes influenced by their being from Texas. Some illustrated this in their speech to us during the interviews, too. Both Springer and Chavez-Thompson use monophthongal /ay/, Chavez-Thompson variably and Springer fairly invariably, before voiceless obstruents, and both used y'all occasionally, even in the fairly formal context of an interview with two or three professors.

**Orientations to Ethnicity**

Except in occasional, often commercial displays such as German Oktoberfests and Czech kolache-baking contests, the Anglo Texans whom we have studied make reference to their national origins less often than do many other European Americans. (This is attested, for example, in Springer's comments quoted above about how much more important being "from somewhere" was in Chicago than at home.) White ethnicity in Texas is to a considerable extent conflated with regional identity. But if regional identity can be most easily drawn on and exploited by white Texans, ethnic identity is most easily available as a model for action and talk to Hispanic and African American Texans. Jordan, Nash, and Chavez-Thompson all talked about ethnic identity. Each orients to ethnicity in two ways: she draws on ethnic models in some respects, and she actively resists and rejects ethnic models in others. Nash, for example, talked about rejecting her community's ways of talking, at the price of being seen as different:

*Nash:* My mother didn't speak that often, but when she did, she read to me, and she always used correct language. She always did; she never told me I had to, but she always did, so that's what I heard.

*Bean:* This is the way it's done, kind of -

*Nash:* -Un-hmm. And, and now down the street, at the Candy Hill Market, now that's not the way people talked. And they would look at me real funny.

In her writing, Nash orients herself to her perception that whites expect blacks to write in an emotional way and attempts not to write that way, choosing instead a reportorial style. Some of Nash's work is also partly aimed at undercutting what she sees as ethnic expectations: she has, for example, collected and restored antique photographs of and written news-
paper columns about local rural African Americans who, contrary to stereotype, were sometimes quite wealthy.

For Barbara Jordan, African American speech style is an inalienable element of her own. Although she does not think of herself as a "preacher," she describes the influence of black preaching style on that of any black orator:

The, uh, what black or-, oratory is an important ingredient of the black experience because preachers have been so paramount in leadership roles in the black community throughout the country. You are going to find that there are any number of people who are public speakers who try to reflect what they have heard from their minister, and the black minister has a definable and totally, uh, in my opinion different style of oratory than anybody else in the country. And it is because of that role of the black minister, a role which I don't believe is paramount in any other race or group of people but it is that, it is there, it is there for us, and it is because of that preaching that, uh, influences, I think, the way that a person who is black would deliver an, an address or a speech.

When asked if she was "part of that tradition," Jordan exclaimed, "Of course I am! How can I not be a part of that tradition?"

Linda Chavez-Thompson speaks of rejecting ethnic stereotyping as a child by refusing to notice it:

Chavez-Thompson: In school, uh, I know that I was less than ten years old and I remember feeling different because, uh, a little boy and a little girl called me a Mexican. And, Is- you know, I said, "Well, I know THAT" you know, it was like,

Johnstone: [So what?]

Chavez-Thompson: [so what’s wrong with that? And then, my own, my own, when I say my own, my, my friends, who were Hispanics, Mexican Americans treating me differently, because I used to hang out with some of the Anglo girls in school, because they did, they, they, and I got, I never really saw and never treated myself as any different.

But she also described insisting to the manager on proper service in a restaurant where her family was treated sloppily, attributing the sloppiness to their being "the only Hispanic family in the place." Being Hispanic is connected with Chavez-Thompson's vocational identity in a very direct way: most of the members of the union local that she manages are Hispanic, and her job involves using Spanish fairly often. Her speech (in English) to us was not markedly Hispanic-sounding. (Features of Hispanic English include, for example, the pronunciation of -ing as [in], the devoicing of /z/, the deletion of the regular past-tense marker when the root ends in an alveolar consonant, and the use of intonation patterns that sound hesitant to non-Hispanics; see LeVine and Franco 1982 and Peñalosa 1981.) She did, however, display her ethnic identity during the interview in nonlinguistic ways, describing at length how her grandfather taught her to make formal speeches (in correct Mexican Spanish) as a child and how moved she felt when she and her daughter visited Mexico City for the first time.

Jordan displayed her willingness to identify herself with her ethnic group in several ways. Her speech style in general is characterized by
displays of verbal virtuosity: elevated diction, self-conscious word choice (and commentary about word choice), extremely careful articulation, grammatical complexity, and a lack of editing. These are features that have been identified with African American style (see Balester 1993) and traced historically to the valuation in black culture of the “man of words” (Abrahams 1976). Jordan also switched into markedly African American phonology and intonation at one point in the interview, during a narrative about talking to an elementary-school class. Nash’s linguistic style was not noticeably (to us) influenced in the interview by African American models, though perhaps the main theme of the interview was her assertiveness and uniqueness, characteristics that Hecht et al. (1993) have described as “core symbols” for African Americans.

Expressing Individuality

To summarize, the women whose talk I have examined here are uncomfortable defining themselves, or having others define them, in terms of gender. Even when they can cite cases in which they are treated differently because they are women or in which their acting and talking in markedly gendered ways served them well, they deny talking or acting like women and claim to have been uninfluenced by gender discrimination. On the other hand, they readily acknowledge acting and talking like Texans, either all the time or for strategic purposes; and they are not unwilling to cite ways in which their ethnic identities influence their behavior and speech. Why should this be?

One explanation is psychological. Whitehead and Smith (1986:166) cite a number of studies showing that Americans attribute their own success to their ability, effort, and other internal factors, while they attribute failure to external factors such as the difficulty of the task or bad luck. The women whom I have described here are all highly successful, some despite considerable odds. It may not be surprising, then, that they explain their achievements in terms of psychological predispositions: they have no need to present themselves as victims of the process of identity ascription and no real reason to present themselves as its beneficiaries. But this does not explain why they are, in fact, willing to talk about empowerment via region and ethnicity.

Another part of the explanation may have to do with the nature of the handicap imposed by female gender. It could be that, by these people, talking or acting “like a woman” is still seen as a liability in a way talking like a Texan or like an African American or like a Hispanic is not. It could be, in other words, that for these women ascribed gender identity is still a greater social and linguistic burden than is regional identity or ethnic identity. This is despite the fact that a Texas “twang” is a decidedly mixed blessing in terms of linguistic prestige for people in public life (and Texans are well aware of the stigma attached to Southern-sounding speech) and despite the continuing stigmatization of African Americans and Hispanics.

To understand completely why Chavez-Thompson, Jordan, Nash, and Springer talk about talk they way they do, we need to examine their own
most common and most spontaneous explanations for the provenance of their acting and speaking styles. For these women, ethnicity, gender, and region are not determinants of how people talk. Instead, they are resources that are selectively and sometimes consciously used in the presentation of self. They reject the notion that they talk and act as they do because they are women or because they are African Americans, or Hispanics, or Anglos, or Texans. What they present to the world when they write, orate, negotiate, or lecture are, they insist, their unique selves, shaped by particular circumstances of birth, family, inclination, and luck. Each claimed repeatedly that she talked and acted the way she did because she always had, because she was born that way, because of influences of particular friends and relatives early in life. Nash, for example, “always knew” that she was talented with words. She refers to her style as something that “started happening” when she was in elementary school. Most explicitly, Nash points out that the linguistic choices she makes are in service of the expression of her individual uniqueness, “who I am”: 

Nash: Well, it’s, it’s actually in in the handling of the language. I want to make sure that I am not digressing from who I am when I speak. When I, when I speak, uh, verbally or when I speak, uh, in the written [mode], “This is me.” I don’t want to be somebody else when I’m writing a story about [my father-in-law], I want to be the same person who wrote the story about [a farmer]. . . . “That’s the same person,” you can read the story and say “I bet that’s the same person [who wrote that],” even though the material is completely different.

Springer attributes her success in court to “being herself,” in response to a question that was meant to get her to talk about being a woman:

Johnstone: Do people ever talk about differences in style between male and female attorneys in the in the courtroom?
Springer: Yes, they do, a lot. Uh, in the courtroom, uh, difference in style and people have told me that they think that I’m successful in the courtroom because I can identify with the jury, that the juries like me. And I haven’t ever figured out why, except that I try to smile, and I try to just be myself, and I don’t put on any airs.

When Springer does attribute aspects of her style to the influence of a woman (her mother), she does so, interestingly, by means of a biological metaphor that immediately particularizes the source of influence: she claims to have inherited her mother’s “teacher genes.”

Linda Chavez-Thompson also speaks of a relative, the grandfather who taught her to make speeches in Spanish, as an important source of influence. But she attributes her success as a negotiator and administrator mainly to her own inborn talent, a ”sixth sense” that she has always had, as recognized by a man for whom she worked as a secretary:

When I met this gentleman, he, maybe recognized the potential. Uh, whether he recognized a talent that I might have had: I have almost this, this sixth sense of people sitting down and beginning to tell me their problem, and I automatically can figure out what the solution might be and how do we get there. And I’ve always had this; I, I, I’m sort of like a middle child in the family. There’s two older, and there’s,
there's, uh, five younger, but I'm the one that, that everybody looks to to make a decision.

For these women, the primary reasons for linguistic choice are particular reasons. They talk as they do because they are the particular individuals they are, shaped by the particular circumstances of their birth, family, and community. If there are speakers who are victims of their gender, ethnicity, or place of origin, speakers who "are spoken by" language rather than creating language as they speak, the successful public speakers whom we are studying do not feel that they are in that group. These women are resourceful in two ways: as members of a mobile, heterogenous society, they have many resources from which to choose as they construct ways of expressing their uniqueness, and they are good at doing so. As Linda Chavez-Thompson puts it:

And I think that the advantage—and I use it, believe me, I use it—the advantage is, uh, I AM female. I AM Hispanic. I am, uh, labor. Of course, some people would take that as three strikes against me, but, but that's besides the point.

Not all speakers are as resourceful. For some, limited education or limited contacts outside a small, tight community mean that fewer choices are available; for others, the aptitude or motivation to choose effectively is lacking. I do not mean to suggest that ideologies about gender and other social attributes do not exert enormous influence over how people talk. I do want to point out, though, that the process is an indirect one, always mediated by the individual.

Discussion

In a 1993 article, Donna Eder reports on a study of working-class adolescent girls' teasing about romance and sex. Eder found that the girls referred to traditional concepts of how females were supposed to act in teasing each other, but that the teasing functioned more to strengthen bonds among the girls than to socialize them as females. Stereotypical romantic and sexual behavior was a resource to be played with rather than a source of inescapable influence. This finding leads Eder to call for more study of "the spontaneous and innovative side of an individual's behavior" (1993:29) and to wonder whether adults as well as children might not selectively use dominant social ideologies as resources.

Our study of Texas women suggests that the answer is yes. To see ideologies about gender, ethnicity, and region primarily as constraints on what a person can do is to miss the fact that individuals use ideologies creatively. As speakers decide, consciously or unconsciously, how to sound, they pick and choose from among the available ways of sounding. Our interviews with Texas women show that this is in fact the way they themselves understand their language. People, at least people like these, those who shape public discourse, are motivated at least as much by the need for self-expression—the expression of a unique, differentiated self—as they are by the necessity to replicate social ideologies.
The women whom we are studying take various approaches to being Texans and to being women, as well as different approaches to their ethnic backgrounds and to their vocations. They are members of a common speech community in that they all participate, to one extent or another, in a large public network of influence, but they cannot be said to orient to the same set of norms for speech or other behavior. Instead, their sociolinguistic identities are constructed in discourse. These Texans shape languages to use as they shape individual identities in the social space defined by the axes of region, gender, vocation, ethnicity, and ideologies about talk, as well as by more particular axes of family, community, psychology, and the need for individuation.

Notes

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1. Both in its concern with speech and writing for public audiences and in its use of sociolinguistic data collected in relatively formal interviews, the project thus focuses on relatively non-“vernacular” speech, in contrast to many other sociolinguistic studies. This is because we are interested in the public sources of influence that increasingly supplement private neighborhood and family networks as agents of linguistic change.

2. The material in this paragraph is greatly condensed, in the interest of space. It is drawn from the language-attitude interviews described above and from the enormous literature in history, political science, literary studies, and anthropology on Texas women.

3. Transcription conventions: I have indicated overlapping talk with brackets and latched talk with equal signs; the transcriptions otherwise employ normal English orthography and punctuation. I am more interested in this article in what the subjects said than in how they said it, and this system makes the transcripts easiest to read. Capitalization indicates unusual emphasis. Material that I have left out is indicated with ellipses.

4. There is not much scholarship to date on discourse-level features of southern speech; see Johnstone 1992 for an overview of what has been done. There is, of course, an enormous body of scholarship on language and gender in general, but this is not the place to review it. See Tannen 1993b, for example, for work on gender and interactional style; Eckert 1989 on sociolinguistic effects of gender; Graddol and Swann 1989:12–40 and Sachs et al. 1973 on biological versus learned aspects of vocal pitch.

5. Monophthongized or glide-reduced /ay/ before voiced sounds is common throughout the South; it is specifically monophthongization before voiceless obstruents that appears to be associated with Texas identity. Bailey 1991 shows that opinion-poll respondents who rate Texas as a “good” or “excellent” place to live are more likely than others to use monophthongal /ay/ before voiceless obstruents.
6. The issue of religious identity and ethnicity connected with it is more complicated. I have not dealt with it here.

7. The variety spoken in this sort of context is not actually called, by its speakers, "Spanish." It is a variety that involves frequent, extremely fluent switches from English vocabulary and syntax to Spanish and back, with the conversation as a whole sometimes seeming more Spanish and sometimes more English. The case can be and has been made that this is a distinct "language" or "dialect" (linguists do not have an appropriate term) rather than the result of switching between two separate languages. Linda Chavez-Thompson, like many Texas Hispanics, calls the variety "Tex-Mex" (another of the case-study subjects uses the expression "speaking mixed") and emphatically denies that people are speaking Spanish when they speak this way; further west, it is sometimes referred to as Pocho Spanish. See Anzaldúa 1987, Ornstein-Galicia 1981, and Peñalosa 1981.

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