Gangsters don’t eat beetroot: Comment and meta-comment on the mediatized performance of Irish gang culture

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Recent studies in what can be termed the sociolinguistics of performance have illuminated our understanding of the concept of stylization (e.g. Bell and Gibson, 2011; Coupland, 2007; Johnstone, 2011). Situated at the nexus of mediatization and language variation, the present paper discusses media coverage of a particular act of linguistic stylization by drawing on the phenomena of indexicality and enregisterment (Silverstein, 2003; Agha, 2005). The object of the discussion is a character, Nidge, from the series Love/Hate, a drama broadcast in Ireland. Love/Hate is set in Dublin’s gangland – itself a constructed, mediatized space – and at the heart of the study is the stylization of the inner-city Dublin accent, the discernible traces of what this accent does/does not index, and how this is commented upon in media and online discussion of the series. The intriguing thing about this commentary is a fascination with the (perceived vast) distance between the accents of the actors who play these characters and the inner-city accents they stylize. To illustrate this, the paper focuses on a sketch from a very popular comedy sketch show in which the everyday talk of the real-life actor, Tom Vaughan-Lawlor, is juxtaposed against his characterization of the ganglord, Nidge. The sketch can be read as a humorous meta-comment on the performance and stylization of the character, with accents and what accents represent in contemporary Irish society foregrounded. We also discuss the performance itself: the complex relations of authenticity with stigmatized vernaculars and engagement with tropes of authenticity that serve to enregister the accent as indexical of gang membership. Through our analysis we show how an awareness of any deviation from the norm is heightened through media attention and that such bricolage generates rich evidence for the role of media as a critical site for the (re)working of language ideologies.

Keywords: enregisterment, stylization, performance.