The role of dialect in comedy performances: focus on enregisterment and humor

JOHANNA GERWIN ⓘD

Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel

Many of the most popular comedy performances are rich in non-standard linguistic features of English. This article addresses how dialect contributes to the humor in comedy performances, and how humorous dialect performance leads to the enregisterment of a dialect. It applies enregisterment theory to online clips of three live comedy performances by Stephen Buchanan ('How to survive Glasgow'), Ali G ('Harvard Commencement Speech 2004') and Riaad Moosa ('I have a weird accent'), and one clip from the British sitcom *PhoneShop* (2009–13). All four dialectal performances showcase the metalinguistic activity central to enregisterment processes. However, in each performance, the dialect also fulfils a dedicated function in the construction of humor, ranging from building audience rapport to the subversion of a (linguistic) status quo. It is argued that just as dialect can help performers to be funnier, humor can help a dialect to become more enregistered.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, performed language, stand-up comedy, pop culture, indexicality, language ideologies

1 Introduction

Many of the funniest and most entertaining comedy performances are rich in non-standard and regional dialect features of English. This article analyzes different functions served by English regional dialect in comedy performances, how dialect creates humor in comedy performances, and how humorous dialect performance contributes to the enregisterment process of the dialect on display. The concept of ENREGISTERMENT was developed by the linguistic anthropologists Michael Silverstein (2003) and Asif Agha (2003; 2007) and describes processes and practices which lead to a linguistic style becoming associated with particular social meanings and values, contexts or situations. This associative link is INDEXICAL in that language signs activate co-occurring signs of other modalities which are socially meaningful. Some illustrative examples of enregistered 'ways of speaking' would be the language typically associated with sports reporters, teenagers or Londoners. While there may not exist a widely used metadiscursive label for 'sports announcer talk' (Ferguson 1983; Agha 2007: 163–4),

'youth slang' or 'Cockney' (Gerwin 2023) are established labels that speakers use to refer to a REGISTER and its associated place and social indexes.

Language forms included in a register can be employed to evoke the social context indexically linked with it (Johnstone 2016), for example, when the register 'sports announcer talk' is employed to create a tense and competitive situation in a non-sportive context in a playful way. One prominent example was the YouTube miniseries about 'Mabel and Olive', the two Labrador dogs of the British sports commentator Andrew Cotter, which went viral during the first UK lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. Unoccupied due to the lack of sports events to report on, Cotter filmed episodes of his dogs' ordinary routines, such as being fed,[1] playing with a rubber bone[2] or going for a walk,[3] and vividly commented on these mundane (non-)activities in his usual commentator style. The register he used evoked the context of an exciting sports event, which was completely at odds with the two Labradors' ingenuous and, often, impassive behavior, thus leading to the 'humorous clash' or 'playful incongruity' (Martin 2007: 6–7), which is a defining feature of humor in general (see section 2). In these clips, it is not the register alone that contributes to the humor. Cotter's 'communicative competence' (Bauman 1977: 11–12) is entertaining in itself, and his distinct Scottish accent keys the performance as special and noteworthy (see section 2). However, the point here is that Cotter's ironic use of the 'sports announcer' register creates a humorous effect, whilst raising awareness of its existence and its (usual) social contexts and meanings by means of his conscious stylization of the register in the performance.

Sociolinguistic registers are reflexive and discursive varieties. They are varieties as they are conceptualized and talked about by speakers themselves, rather than 'structural' varieties, that means, varieties as they are actually used by speakers, and described and defined by linguists (Paulsen 2022: 85–7; Gerwin 2023: 34). Speakers are aware[4] of registers and can use them agentively 'to do social work' (Johnstone, Andrus & Danielson 2006: 82), which, in turn, raises awareness of the register amongst their interlocutors (see Agha 2007: 204–5 for an explication of this circular 'speech chain'). In this way, registers are a resource in identity construction and management, and, therefore, often central to stand-up comedy performances (cf., e.g., Johnstone 2011). However, the exact function of the use of enregistered dialects in these performances can differ significantly, depending on the kind of indexical and ideological work intended by the performers.

The four performances analyzed in this article were chosen to showcase a variety of these functions in the enregisterment of four quite distinct English dialects, namely, Stephen Buchanan's Glasgow English and the sitcom character Christopher's

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[1] *Olive and Mabel*, episode 1, 'The dog's breakfast – grand final', www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPhpJuraz14&t=24s
[2] *Olive and Mabel*, episode 2, 'Game of bones', www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2BZNowCXws
[3] *Olive and Mabel*, episode 3, 'The walk of shame', www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2BZNowCXws
[4] I use the term 'awareness' in the sense expressed by Squires (2016), that is, as a continuum including the levels of 'perception', 'noticing' and 'understanding'.

London-based Jamaican Patois (section 3), Ali G's Multicultural London English (section 4) and Riaad Moosa's Indian South African English (IndSAfE) (section 5).[5] The article does not make an empirical claim as to the frequency of these different functions in performances, nor does it propose a definitive categorization of them. Rather, it makes some exploratory points about criteria, such as the importance of enregisterment processes, their ideological backgrounds and (different types of) humor, that are relevant in assessing the role of dialect in comedy performances. Each of the sketches discussed is easily accessible on YouTube; readers are encouraged to follow the links provided and view the sketch prior to reading the analysis, as no full transcript will be provided.

The article attempts a triangulation of the interrelated concepts of enregisterment, performance and humor (see figure 1), and explores how humor in comedy performance adds to the enregisterment process of a dialect, and, vice versa, how the enregisterment of a dialect adds to the humor in a comedy performance (section 2).

The article argues that humorous dialect performances are social practices contributing to the enregisterment process of the dialect and that a comedy performance is a metadiscursive practice that works differently from other kinds of metadiscursive practices relevant for enregisterment processes (Johnstone 2011).

2   Dialect enregisterment through linguistic humor in comedy performances

This section introduces the two concepts central to my argument, dialect enregisterment and humor.

2.1   Enregisterment and metalinguistic discourse

Enregisterment can be understood as a collective selection process, in which a subset of 'socially differentiable' language features (Agha 2003: 231) are selected into a variety that people are aware of and engage with reflexively, the semiotic or sociolinguistic register (Agha 2003; Johnstone 2017a; Paulsen 2022). Features become socially differentiable because speakers notice and process their use in specific social contexts, speaker types or situations. The co-occurrence of specific language features and social meanings and values leads to speakers constructing indexical

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[5] The choice of male performers only was incidental rather than deliberate. Female stand-up comedians have become much more frequent over the years, and it is not difficult to find comediennes and female actors in sitcoms using and 'doing social work' with their non-standard dialects by drawing on enregistered dialect indexes. However, I found that both the variety of dialects used and the functions served by the dialect in the performance were generally greater in male actors/comedians. This may be a remnant of a NORM effect (acronym from Dialectology for non-mobile, old, rural, males, the demographic traditionally associated most strongly with vernacular language; Chambers & Trudgill 1998), in which men are accepted as the prototypical, unmarked dialect speakers, which, in turn, may encourage more frequent and versatile dialect use by men on the comedy stage. Given the centuries-long male bias in (comedy) performance (Palmer 2003: 68–70) and the ongoing discrimination faced by women in comedy (Kohen 2012), this would not be surprising. Future research should focus on female dialect speakers in comedy performances.
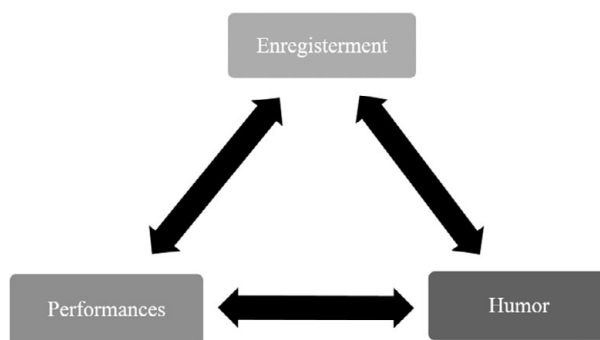
Figure 1. Triangulation of enregisterment, performances and humor

links (Silverstein 2003) between a linguistic form or repertoire, such as the use of monophthongized diphthongs for a Pittsburghese working-class persona (Johnstone, Andrus & Danielson 2006), or a non-standard lexical item like *wagwan* for a London teenager (Gerwin 2024). An indexical link is often enabled by an ideological schema, a larger meaning complex that helps speakers to structure and simplify their worlds. For example, if speakers have an ideological schema of 'correct language', they may classify/enregister varieties into 'incorrect' and 'correct' ways of speaking (Johnstone 2017a).

While registers are social constructs with some stability (Agha 2007: 143), they are also prone to variability and change. Silverstein's ORDERS OF INDEXICALITY (2003) capture the reinterpretation of social meanings based on presupposition: a repertoire with a place index may acquire a social class index, which, in turn, may acquire an identity index (Johnstone, Andrus & Danielson 2006). Alternatively, a repertoire may be seen as enregistered with an INDEXICAL FIELD (Eckert 2008), a field of potential and ideologically related meanings 'any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable' (Eckert 2008: 454). Eckert provides the example of 'released' /t/ (i.e. an alveolar plosive, rather than tap, in an American context) as variably indexing Britishness, education, elegance, prissiness and emphasis, and the social personae of schoolteachers, gay divas, or nerd girls. While Eckert conceives of an indexical field as the (mutually exclusive) meanings that *can* be activated in specific situations, it is also possible to understand an indexical field as a conceptual map encompassing various simultaneously activated social meanings, such as being from a particular place, and a particular social class, and engaging in certain cultural practices.

The process of indexicalization happens through a variety of metalinguistic practices leading to enregisterment. These practices range from fully explicit metalinguistic discourse or 'talk about talk' (Johnstone 2017a: 23), what Penry Williams and others have called 'mention' of linguistic features (Penry Williams 2020), to fully implicit metalinguistic activity, which is identical to 'use' (Penry Williams 2020). When the use of certain features leads to reflexivity in speakers/ listeners, enregisterment happens spontaneously and inadvertently.

Figure 2 displays a taxonomy of different kinds of metalinguistic activity, arranged on a cline from explicit to implicit metadiscourse. In between these two poles of explicitness, different types of 'voicings', imitations and stylizations of speakers, are placed.

The model was developed as part of a larger project on the enregisterment of London English (Gerwin 2023; forthcoming a) to represent and classify different types of data sources for an enregisterment study. For the current purposes, it is important that comedic dialect performances are placed in the middle of this cline, in the 'voicing' category, as they frequently feature overt metacommentary on the dialect that the performers themselves or other people use (as, for example, in the performance by Riaad Moosa and in the clip from the sitcom *PhoneShop* analyzed below). Often, however, performers only *use* their own dialects or imitate other people's dialects and, thus, link it with social meanings incidentally and without overt comment (as in the case of Stephen Buchanan's or Ali G's performances below). With implicit metalinguistic activity of this type, it is not the performers themselves commenting on the accent, but often observers in the media (and increasingly sociolinguists) assessing, for example, the authenticity, appropriateness, or social indexicality of a performer's accent (e.g. Beal 2009; Coupland 2009; Cutler 2016; Jansen & Westphal 2017; Gerwin 2024).

As Bell and Gibson have pointed out, 'staged performance plays a central role in the enregisterment of styles and associated characterological figures in the mediated and digitalized environment of the 21st century' (2011: 561). Specifically, performances may contribute to enregisterment processes in (at least) four distinct ways.

First, performers speaking with an accent or dialect put local language on display and disseminate ways of speaking through their performances. Using non-standard speech on stage plays a role in KEYING a performance. Keying means that the communicative

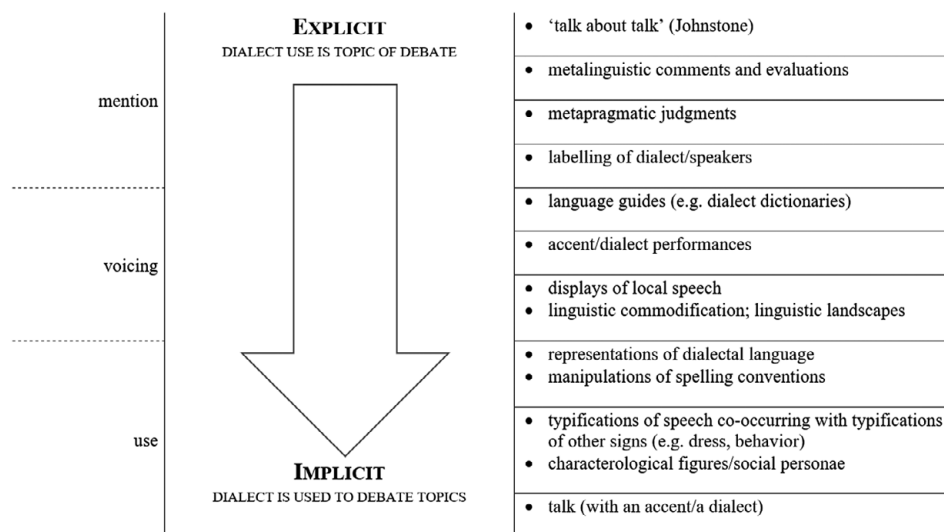|	EXPLICIT DIALECT USE IS TOPIC OF DEBATE	
mention		• 'talk about talk' (Johnstone)
		• metalinguistic comments and evaluations
		• metapragmatic judgments
		• labelling of dialect/speakers
		• language guides (e.g. dialect dictionaries)
		• accent/dialect performances
voicing		• displays of local speech • linguistic commodification; linguistic landscapes
		• representations of dialectal language • manipulations of spelling conventions
		• typifications of speech co-occurring with typifications of other signs (e.g. dress, behavior) • characterological figures/social personae
use	IMPLICIT DIALECT IS USED TO DEBATE TOPICS	• talk (with an accent/a dialect)

Figure 2. Explicit versus implicit metalinguistic discourse

interaction includes some explicit or implicit messages about how the performance is to be interpreted (Bauman 1977: 15). It 'fixes the attention of the audience more strongly on the performer, binds the audience to the performer in a relationship of dependence and keeps them caught up in his display' (Bauman 1977: 16). One of the most important 'keying' devices that Bauman lists is the use of 'special codes'. He refers specifically to 'poetic', sometimes also 'archaic', language used in the performances he discusses. However, in the context of contemporary staged performances, dialects often assume a 'keying' function. A performance can be keyed by a dialect as 'a welcome departure of the everyday' (Cutler 2016: 69) in an otherwise standard-dominant mediascape (Brock 2011: 270, see also Moody 2021: 465).

Second, performers' attributes, such as their appearance, sartorial style and constructed persona, and other modalities, such as the stage setting, audio or visual effects etc., are (explicitly or implicitly) indexically linked with their dialect. Therefore, they publicly define and represent the indexical meanings associated with a way of speaking. Sometimes this link is so striking that performers can become 'models' or 'icons' of a way of speaking. This has happened with Ali G, for example, in that Multicultural London English (MLE) is sometimes referred to as 'the Ali-G-accent' (Gerwin 2024).

Third, this strong link between a persona and a way of speaking may turn performers into prototypical speaker personae or characterological figures of registers themselves. 'Characterological figures of personhood linked to speech' (Agha 2007: 177) are abstract speaker models that represent the social meanings and values of a register and may invite role alignment by speakers using, or avoiding, a particular register. These characterological figures are socially constructed, ideological personae, but individual speakers may come to be seen as concrete instantiations of these personae (Johnstone 2011, 2017b; Cole & van Ostade 2022; Ilbury 2023). They may be individuals that speakers are familiar with or celebrities and performers projecting a specific identity (Gerwin 2024; forthcoming a).

Fourth, as mentioned above, performers' accents are often commented on in mass media, which contributes to the metalinguistic discourse about a dialect, as well as the selection of variables into a register and their indexicalization.

This is how performances, be they in music, film, or on a live stage (theater plays, readings, talks or stand-up comedy), contribute to the enregisterment of varieties in general. Here, I will additionally focus on the aspect of humor, which is prevalent in stand-up and sitcom performances, and its role in and impact on dialect enregisterment.

2.2   Humor

Humor can be defined as 'an emotional response of mirth in a social context that is elicited by a perception of playful incongruity and is expressed through smiling and laughter' (Martin 2007: 10). The notion of a 'playful incongruity' in a social context is crucial (Palmer 2003: 93–5): Situations become funny when something is said, done or happens that is unexpected, unusual or surprising in this particular context. The

mental act of perceiving and processing a situation, idea or event from two unrelated, even incompatible frames of references has been called 'bisociation' (Koestler 1964). Martin (2007) provides the simple example of a pun, such as 'Two cannibals are eating a clown. One says to the other: Does this taste funny to you?' Here, the two meanings/ frames of reference of the word *funny* ('odd/off' versus 'humorous') are brought together in the unusual and unexpected context of cannibals eating a clown. Humans are capable of this type of 'cognitive synergy' (Apter 1982; Apter & Smith 1977), the mental act of integrating incompatible and incongruous frames of reference to humorous effect. The socially established communicative platforms of staged and mediated performances provide an overall frame that creates an expectation of playful and non-serious entertainment in which the audience is alert to the cognitive task of bisociation (Bauman 1977: 11–12; Palmer 2003: 100). Dialects and other sociolinguistic registers are frequently used in comedy performances to create humorous incongruity. Combining the two incompatible frames of reference of excited sports announcer talk and the everyday activities of the two unassuming dogs, as mentioned in section 1, is one case in point. Other functions of dialect in the creation of humorous incongruity are discussed in section 3.

Other than incongruity/bisociation, which represents a cognitive approach to humor, there are two other theoretical approaches that briefly deserve mention; one which casts humor in terms of superiority and hostility towards a socially inferior individual or group, also called 'disparagement humor' (Ford 2015), and one which discusses humor in terms of psychological release and liberation (Attardo 1994: 47–9).

In the superiority framework, the humor results from a sense of superiority of the laughter towards some object, which can be identified as 'the butt of the joke' (Attardo 1994: 49). This type of humor stresses the aggressive aspects of humor, 'intended to illicit amusement through the denigration, derogation or belittlement of a given target' (Ford 2015: 163; see also Brock 2017) and is evident in parody and satire (Rossen-Knill & Henry 1997). Dialects indexically linked with the working class, immigrants or other socially inferior, racialized or stigmatized groups can be employed in comedy performances to negatively evaluate and ridicule these groups and turn them into the butt of the joke (see Pérez 2013). However, dialects may also be employed to hold up a mirror to superior groups, play with established indexicalities and power structures, and reverse the societal status quo in the performance (see Moosa's performance analyzed in section 5).

Punching down or up the social hierarchy can be achieved via hegemonic and anti-hegemonic humor, respectively, whereby hegemonic humor targets socially inferior groups and 'reinforces the audience's belief that the status quo is natural and appropriate' (Santa Ana 2009: 38; see also Calhoun 2019: 28 and Pérez 2013), and anti-hegemonic humor hits out at the powerful, 'debunking the high and mighty, … whose actions are beyond the audience's control, taking them down a notch' (Santa Ana 2009: 31).

The release theory of humor focusses on the psychological sense of release and liberation, both as an individual outlet for psychic energy through laughing and

hilarity, but also as a liberation from conventions, rules and laws (Attardo 1994: 50). There are two interpretations of this release, one pertaining to the people and one to the language involved.

Concerning the people involved, humor and laughing may offer the relief of tension in a personally or socially awkward or challenging situation. Humor helps 'liberating an otherwise suppressed or censored thought … thereby releasing energy' (Santa Ana 2009: 29). Humor also provides a leeway for unconventional or controversial comments or behavior. The assertion that something was said or done 'in jest' creates a frame that leads to a more lenient evaluation of an event or situation than would have been the case in a non-humorous context.

Concerning the language involved, release theory also offers liberation from the rules of language, for example in puns, wordplays, rhyming etc., as well as the principles of communicative cooperation.

Release theory thus constructs humor as a state of mind in which 'anything goes', and it is interesting to explore the individual and social limits of humorous license (Palmer 2003: 161–4). While there is no immediate connection between this understanding of humor and dialect performances, the release aspect of humor plays an important role in the performance of MLE by Ali G, as will be illustrated in section 4.

In this section, I have laid out the framework of enregisterment and presented the three humor theories of incongruity, superiority and release as lenses through which linguistic humor can be assessed. In the following, I will apply them to the four selected comedy performances to show how the use of enregistered dialect helps to construct humor in the performance, and how, in turn, the humorous performance serves the enregisterment process of the dialect. While in all four performances the enregistered indexes of the dialect on display help to construct clashing frames of reference to construct humorous incongruity, the exact function of the English variety on display is quite different.

3   Humor through incongruity of enregistered features: Stephen Buchanan's 'How to survive Glasgow' and *PhoneShop*

A simple and ubiquitous strategy to evoke humor in comedy performances is through playful incongruity involving the *use* and *voicing* (rather than explicit *mention*; see figure 2) of enregistered dialect features. In the clip 'How to survive Glasgow' (2020) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZW7z7XThBVE&t=29s), the Scottish stand-up comedian Stephen Buchanan greets the live audience of the show *Jonathan Ross' Comedy Club* with a distinct Scottish accent: 'Hello, my name's Stephen. I'm from Glasgow. Glasgow gets quite a violent reputation, and this is only based on stuff like statistics.' However, he goes on, Glasgow has recently become gentrified. The first laughs are elicited when he says: 'I read recently that Glasgow is currently the UK's stab capital but also Britain's most vegan-friendly city. Basically, we'll stab you, but we draw the line at drinking milk, because we're not barbarians'. Buchanan juxtaposes two incompatible frames of reference, the violent crime of inner-city stabbings and the pacific philosophy

and practice of veganism, to humorous effect. His strong local accent is in line with his low-key appearance as a White, young(ish), cis-het male Brit. He comes across as 'the guy from the pub', exuding blue-collar friendliness and relatability (Cutler 2016: 71) but, at the same time, suggesting he is more at home in a working-class environment than amongst the gentrified vegans.

Having both established aspects of Glasgow indexicality in general (Braber 2018) and his own identity in this indexical field, Buchanan goes on to exploit his characterological persona for his next joke, a 'survival tip to protect yourself' in Glasgow: 'When I'm walking the main streets at night, […] I always keep my keys between my knuckles. That way, if someone tries to attack me, I'm ready to just … give them my car.' The joke is accompanied by gestures indicating a key in his fist that he then pretends to sling away at the punchline: 'Take the Clio, mate, don't hurt me. Thank you.' The humor of this joke rests in the social meanings enregistered for the Glasgow dialect and other working-class dialects, such as tropes of inner-city deprivation, crime and violence. These create an expectation of a street fight or quarrel involving a car key and a knife. Buchanan's deflection strategy of throwing his car keys away and ceding his car to his attackers is an unexpected reaction and suggests a timidity or cowardice at odds with the enregistered Glasgow hardman index, thus, leading to humorous incongruity.

A comparable, yet slightly different case of humor grounded in incongruity between register indexes and the character in the performance is evident in the selected scene from the final season and final episode of the sitcom *PhoneShop*, called 'Phoneshop Christopher as Jerwayne' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=budVi94NUKg) (series 3, episode 6).

The sitcom revolves around a small team of staff of a mobile phone shop in a typical British (sub)urban high street consisting of some illustrious characters: store manager Lance, who has no authority over his staff, and the sales executives Jerwayne, who is of Jamaican origin and the only Black staff member, Ashley, his best friend, and Janine, the female main part. The show follows newcomer Christopher, a shy and nervous university graduate, who is about to be initiated into the cynical ways of his co-workers. As is typical of sitcoms, storylines are short and usually concluded within each episode, which makes this genre particularly suitable for clipping on YouTube. The characters each portray their own quirks but are quite simply drawn, and no further context is needed to understand the jokes. However, it is important that the mobile phone shop is located in Sutton, south London, and, thus, in an area where many Black immigrants from the Caribbean have settled and where dialects on a continuum from Jamaican Patois to MLE are common.

The selected clip shows a Black man in his thirties, dressed in black with a thick gold necklace and exuding a 'gangster' or 'roadman' style (Ilbury 2023; Gunter 2008), entering the shop and asking Janine for Jerwayne. As becomes obvious from her immediate reaction, the staff have some sort of agreement to shield their colleague from this person. Janine directs the customer to an unassuming Christopher with the words 'Yes, he's just here!' (0:34) and mouths to Christopher 'I'm so sorry' (0:38),

knowing what he is now expected to do, namely, pretend to be Jerwayne. The comedy unfolds between Christopher, whose normal accent is RP with some London features (e.g. intervocalic T-glottaling) and the Black customer. Their brief exchange is represented below.

1	Black customer:	Jerwayne? This ain't Jerwayne.	0:42
2	Janine:	I think you'll find it is.	
3	Christopher:	(in stylized Patois:) That's [daz] me, bro.	
4	Black customer:	What's a White woman doing calling her child Jerwayne?	
5	Christopher:	(in RP:) I was…I was…I was adopted [ədɒptɪd] by a Black	1:00
6		family and so…so [səʊ] my [maɪ] original birth [bɜːθ] name	
7		was Jonathan [dʒɒnəθən].	
8	Janine:	Lil' Jonny.	
9	Christopher:	(in RP:) And they didn't like [laɪk] that [ðaʔ]. So, they changed	
10		it. They said (in stylized Patois while pretending to smoke a	
11		joint:) That's [daz] possibly too dry [tʉ draː] for a son of mine.	
12		(In RP:) And hence, that's why, that's…I'm Jerwayne. Hi.	
13	Janine:	That's what happened.	
14	Christopher:	(in stylized Patois:) For real [rɪl]! And I'd be like [laːk]:	1:30
15		Oh yo mum, mummy! Who cooks up some of them salty fish	
16		and the pea (kisses his teeth) mmh suck it all up. And I…Bring it	
17		up, right in me lip. Peace. (kisses his teeth) Kiss my teet.	
18		Delicious.	
19	Black customer:	Are you taking the piss?	
20	Christopher:	(in stylized Patois:) What? I lie [laː]? (sips from a beer bottle) Ahm	
21		yummy. Multi. (coughs and pretends to spit out). (In RP:)	2:00
22		So, it's lovely [lʌvli] to have met [meʔ] you, (stylized:) innit.	
23		(In RP:) I've got to go [gɒtə gəʊ] now (in stylized Patois:) cause	
24		I've [aːv] got a yam in my m[aː]crowave. And I've got to grease	
25		some of me dry food [fʊt] with the cocoa butter.	2:13

In pretending to be Jerwayne, Christopher unsuccessfully appropriates a Black register.

Here, the humor resides in the incongruity between Christopher's White middle-class yuppie persona, congruent with his usual London-based RP accent, and his serious but failed attempt at sounding authentically 'Black'. Coming from the Black customer, the way of speaking comes across as neutral and inconspicuous, whereas Christopher's output truly deserves the (often inappropriate and derogative) label 'Jafaican' (Kerswill 2014: 436–7; Gerwin 2024), which the Black customers hints at with his rhetorical question ('Are you taking the piss?') in line 19. The humor is 'anti-hegemonic' in that it turns the White man into the butt of the joke.

Christopher's stylization of Jamaican Patois is telling in terms of enregisterment. He 'imagines' the dialect in terms of TH-stopping (lines 3, 11 (*daz*), 17 (*teet*)), monophthongal diphthongs (lines 11 (*dry*), 14 (*like*), 20 (*lie*), 24 (*I've*)), certain lexical items and phrases (lines 11 (*too dry*), 14 (*for real*), 17 (*kiss my teet*)) and 'kissing one's teeth' (lines 16–17), a sucking sound that indicates impatience or

disapproval (Patrick & Figueroa 2002). These language shibboleths are indexed with social aspects such as specific first names (lines 4–12), the smoking of marihuana (line 10), specific types of food (lines 15–16, 24–25), and a confident but laid-back stance and bodily hexis (not represented in the transcript). Christopher's performance of this dialect is blatantly stereotyped in that it refers to only a minor subset of ideologically distorted characteristics of Jamaican Patois speakers (Pickering 2015). It racializes the register via Christopher's implied assumption that this is 'what Black people act or sound like'.

This raciolinguistic enregisterment naturalizes the co-occurrence of specific language features and aspects of race (Rosa & Flores 2017: 632). The register here serves to ridicule the White person appropriating it, rather than the Black person using it, and implicitly criticizes every White person holding stereotyped views about Black Jamaican Patois speakers. Christopher's 'hyperbolic performance highlighting the absurdity of racial ideologies' (Calhoun 2019: 29) is a form of 'reverse humor', which employs stereotyping and racializing tropes for a reverse semantic effect. In taking up and ridiculing stereotypical social meanings in parody, reverse humor creates 'a discourse that is produced, situated, and directed in clear opposition to the racist meaning of earlier [racist or stereotyping] discourse' (Weaver 2010: 32; see also Calhoun 2019). At the same time, reverse humor can also be criticized for reproducing and upholding racial stereotypes (Weaver 2010; see also Pérez 2013: 482–3, Ilbury 2023). Christopher's inadequate use of the register reversely mocks him and other White people trying to appropriate a Black register.

This section has illustrated how humor can be evoked by creating incongruity between the characters of the performance and enregistered social meanings of the dialect. In the case of 'How to survive Glasgow', the comedian Buchanan flouts the stereotype of a violence-prone working-class culture, which is indexically linked with a Glaswegian register, by juxtaposing it with veganism and timid, cowardly behavior. In the case of *PhoneShop*, a Jamaican Patois register, especially in this nonsensical and highly stereotyped form, is at odds with the White yuppie character and the formality of a shop encounter. In both cases, the use of the register (Glaswegian, Jamaican Patois) creates expectations based on the enregisterment of the dialect, which are then systematically subverted by constructing a frame of reference incompatible with them.

4   Register indexes provide humorous relief: Ali G's Harvard Commencement Speech 2004

The clip 'Sacha Baron Cohen (Ali G) Class Day, Harvard Commencement 2004' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUCy75CA3Aw&t=108s) posted on the Harvard YouTube channel and viewed almost 11 million times, illustrates how register indexes may serve to provide humorous relief in a socially awkward situation. Ali G is one of Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy personae, a teenager from Staines upon Thames, a leafy town just outside of London, whose full name is at some point revealed to be 'Alistair Graham Lesley'. Ali G

speaks with an idiosyncratic dialect based on MLE, which, together with his appearance, was intended to satirize White middle-class youths appropriating a 'gangster' style to come across as cool and streetwise (Sebba 2007). He first appeared in the segment 'Voice of da yoof' in *The 11 O'Clock Show* on Channel 4 in 1998 and later hosted a stand-alone TV format, *Da Ali G Show* (2000–4), also on Channel 4. In the US, he became famous in the mid-2000s for his mock interviews with American politicians and other prominent figures at the time, such as Donald Trump and Noam Chomsky, who seemed to be (initially) unaware of his humorous intent. The 2004 performance under discussion would have taken place shortly before his breakthrough into US mainstream culture, and the fact that he was flown in from the UK for the purpose of his speech is topicalized in the performance (see below).

Ali G has been and is still referred to as a speaker of 'Jafaican' or MLE in the British press (Gerwin 2024: 30), but his way of speaking is only loosely based on the actual dialect. While he makes frequent use of the London shibboleth *innit* and other catchphrases associated with London youth language, such as *for real* and *wagwan*, monophthongized diphthongs in FACE and PRICE vowels, and intervocalic T-glottaling (Cheshire *et al*. 2011), his overuse of *me* for *I* and non-standard third-person agreement is idiolectal in that they are not frequent in or enregistered as MLE.

In the clip, Ali G addresses the Harvard graduates of 2004 in his usual style. The Harvard setting creates playful incongruity in that an urban 'gangster' figure like Ali G is stereotypically at odds with both an Ivy League environment and a black-tie event such as a formal graduation ceremony. This incongruity is made explicit by Ali G in his speech when he addresses his audience as 'brainboxes' (3:27) and admits to being 'a bit nervous speaking to so many of you', since the 'only public speaking that me does is to twelve people and […a]ll me has to say is me name and the words "not guilty"'(4:19), referring to his supposed criminal activity and the resulting trials.

After establishing his identity in this way, he moves into more testing territory, as the following excerpt illustrates.

Me agreed to speak here today cause […] [Harvard University] agreed to pay for me flight over here and a hotel room. Sorry, to bring this up now but, when you is told that your hotel bill is being paid for, you naturally assume that that includes essential extras, like breakfast and special-interest pay-per-view movies, innit?	4:28
Imagine my surprise when, this morning, I was given a bill for 164 dollars. Me was actually trying to save Harvard money by buying the 24-hours slut fest packages for 19 dollars 99. I mean, I could have paid for individual films at 11 dollars 99 each, which would have cost you (…he quietly, but audibly, lists and counts titles of several (presumably fictional) porn films…) about 490 bucks.	5:00

5:30 |
| Some of it was even research for this. I was sure one of the cheerleaders in 'Ivy League Amateurs' was wearing a Harvard sweatshirt. In fact, (he lowers his sunglasses and looks at a person in the audience) hello darling! Respect! I expect you need a cushion to sit down on, ay? | 6:00 |

In not only talking about his excessive use of pornography and blaming Harvard University for not footing the accompanying bill, but also suggesting that a female

audience member acted in one of the rougher porn films and now requires a cushion to recover from the violent or excessive sexual activity, Ali G clearly stretches the limits of humor. The content of the monologue violates societal and situational norms on many levels – it is intrusive, sexist and misogynistic – and yet it elicits resounding laughter from the audience. Cohen's hyperstylized persona creates a frame of reference of such leniency that the most inappropriate and offensive propositions go unpunished. I argue that the use and enregisterment of MLE (or an ad hoc register of 'London pseudo-gangster youth style' for Americans) plays a role in this sympathetic construal by the audience.

Ali G's MLE contains non-standard grammar forms (Third person pronoun *me* for first person *I*/possessive *my*, non-standard agreement (*me does*)) as well as non-standard lexis, both indexing a lack of education and intelligence (Beal 2004). His use of MLE activates a racialized characterological figure of a clueless young adult (of color), who lacks seriousness and maturity, does not know how to behave appropriately, and is hypersexual (a stereotype of (male) teenagers and a racist trope associated with Black men; Castle Bell & Harris 2017). In short, it evokes the image of a ridiculous person not to be taken seriously.

These register indexes, together with other modalities such as Ali G's attire (a shiny and baggy, bright red track suit and matching red hat, white basketball trainers, and two thick gold chain necklaces) and his cool and casual bodily hexis, draw a characterological figure outside of the norms of 'respectable' society, so that the unspeakable becomes just about tolerable under the pretext of humor. Impudent, sexist, and idiotic comments are to be expected from someone speaking in London youth slang – it is part of the indexical field of MLE (or comparable urban youth styles). The register indexes sanction the jokes, which would otherwise be conceived as offensive. Here, the enregisterment of MLE/urban youth style offers humorous relief that is only available via the social indexes of the register used. In this sense, the enregistered social meanings of MLE subvert what is perceived as offensive.

Even though Ali G was initially conceived to 'reversely' ridicule White British middle-class teenagers emulating a Black gangster or 'roadman' style, the Harvard setting turns the humor of Ali G's performance into hegemonic, rather than anti-hegemonic humor, in that a White academic audience is made to laugh at the racialized character. Even if the indexicality of a foreign MLE dialect is lost on the Americans in the audience, humorous incongruity is created by the ideological inappropriateness of a racialized register and persona in the context of a formal event at one of America's elite educational institutions. American audience members may have read Ali G as a racialized character trying to garner a humorous response through the incongruity of the register and content of the performance and the setting. In its absurdity, Ali G's humor is self-deprecating, turning himself into the butt of the joke. Yet, due to his racialized persona, non-White people and speakers of non-White registers in general are ridiculed by extension.

Despite the forgiving frame afforded by the register indexes and the humorous license afforded by the superiority, hegemonic humor frame, Ali G is walking a fine

line with his material, which is mirrored by audience members visible in some shots. Whether it was the lack of enregisterment/understanding of the indexicalities of (British) youth language, pause at hegemonic forms of humor, or simply individual borderlines that had been crossed, some members of the audience did not visibly laugh at Ali G's jokes in the clip. This circumstance adds another layer of humor to the performance overall, as the people, who are 'too stuffed up' to understand and go along with Ali G's persona, can be construed as the butt of the joke, in accordance with superiority theory.

5   Humor flouts enregistered language ideologies: Riaad Moosa's 'I have a weird accent'

The final clip analyzed in this article is by the comedian Riaad Moosa, posted on his YouTube channel, and entitled 'I have a weird accent' (www.youtube.com/watch?v= MYYcXS7-Gc8&t=27s). It is a performance that represents explicit metalinguistic discourse (see figure 2), namely, about Indian South-African English (IndSAfE), a lesser-known variety of World Englishes (Mesthrie 2008, 2020).

The clip is interesting in two respects. First, given that IndSAfE is a fairly unknown way of speaking by global standards, it is possible to observe the process of its enregisterment in oneself by simply watching the clip for the first time. The clip provides all the metadiscursive ingredients needed for enregisterment: metadiscursive labeling, language shibboleths and social meanings of the register, as well as a characterological figure or model speaker in Moosa himself. Second, in reporting on the social reactions to his way of speaking, Moosa uncovers not only social meanings indexically linked with the dialect, but also unmasks language ideologies associated with World Englishes in general. Humorous incongruity is constructed by means of flouting the language ideologies enregistered for this dialect.

The performance takes place on a live stage in front of an invisible audience in a South African city. Moosa begins his set proclaiming in an IndSAfE accent: 'I am a first-language English speaker, people. There is no language I speak better than the one I'm speaking now' (0:00). To himself, his accent sounds like 'the Queen's English', the equivalent of (in stylized RP:) 'how now brown cow' (0:31). However, Moosa is aware that, to many people, including the Americans he met on a recent visit to the US, his accent sounds decidedly non-native and foreign. 'They look at me like I'm going *dum-dum-dum-dum* (makes animal noises), like I'm from Middle-Earth or from Narnia, like my accent is bloody made-up' (0:40). Drawing on well-known cultural stereotypes that the average American is ignorant of basic geography, foreign languages and intercultural skills, he recounts one exchange with an American who was trying to 'place the accent' (0:52) and assumed he was from Afghanistan. Another example of miscommunication based on his accent is represented in the following, where he simulates an exchange with an American waiter.

(In IndSAfE:) The only way I can get them to understand me properly is if I speak to them in their own accent. What a huge joy that is. I've got to repeat myself all the time, for stupid stuff, in my mind. 1:12
Can I have some water [ʍɔtɐ], please?
(In the role of an American waiter with a GenAm accent:) I'm sorry, what?
(In IndSAfE:) Can I have some water [ʍɔtɐ], please?
(In a GenAm accent:) I'm sorry, what?
Can I have…can I have some (clears his throat several times, then, louder and in GenAm) water [wɑɾɚ]! 1:30
(again in the role of the American waiter) Oh, water [wɑɾɚ]!!! 1:38

This scene is a jibe at Americans, who, as he says, have 'figured out the algorithm for space exploration' (2:35), yet are incapable of the simple 'mental transaction' (2:20) needed to understand that [ʍɔtɐ] is *water* in his accent. However, it is also a statement on standard language ideology and the ideology of native-speakerism, two ideological schemas (Johnstone 2017a) relevant for the indexicality of this way of speaking.

Standard language ideology holds that a normative standard is the best, most accurate, most intelligible way of speaking, and its speakers the most intelligent, whereas non-standard, foreign, or otherwise deviant ways of speaking are wrong, unintelligible and in need of correction, and their speakers less intelligent (Milroy 2001; Rosa & Flores 2017). That Americans seemingly subscribe to this dehumanizing and racializing ideology is made explicit in the passage quoted above, where, to Americans, his accent is unintelligible ('*dum-dum-dum-dum*') and sounds like an imaginary language.

The humor of this scene rests in Moosa's stubborn conviction that his way of speaking English is just as valid and correct as the American's way of speaking. It is anti-hegemonic humor, in that it imagines his stigmatized and racialized variety as the status quo, mocking speakers of a hegemonically dominant language variety incapable of decoding it. Americans are turned into the butt of the joke.

Moosa's alternative reality stands in humorous incongruity to the language ideology of native-speakerism, i.e. the notion that only speakers of 'inner circle' varieties (the UK, North America, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand; Kachru 1992; see also Moody 2021) are true native speakers of English, and following from this, that the 'non-native' speakers are the ones expected to adjust in a native-speaker context, and not vice versa (Holliday 2006; Pennycook 2017). The anecdote of his visit to America concludes with the following punchline:

(In IndSAfE:) One dude came to me after the show – this is for real, hey – came to me after the show, was like: 2:46
(switches to a stylized GenAm:) Bro, dude, bro, dude, bro, dude, bro, dude, bro, dude, bro, I noticed you do all those different accents in your act. Now, if you can do all those different accents, why do you talk the way you do?

Again, prevailing raciolinguistic ideologies are made explicit in this comment quoted from an American audience member of one of Moosa's shows. Taking a General American or other 'inner circle' accent as a neutral baseline for an English accent, and given Moosa's linguistic talent of mimicking various English accents authentically, it must indeed seem baffling to the American audience member that Moosa continues speaking with his 'weird accent'.

In turning this person (as well as other Americans) into the butt of the joke via reverse humor, that is, presenting Americans as ignorant and stupid, and creating an alternative reality in which IndSAfE enjoys 'first-language', native and unmarked status, Moosa unmasks and subverts prevailing raciolinguistic ideologies indexically linked to his way of speaking. The humor is based in the incongruity of his characterization of himself as a proud and valid native speaker of English, whilst sounding foreign and being unintelligible to Americans, who embody and seem to subscribe to standard and native-speaker ideologies.

6   Discussion: dialect enregisterment, performance and humor

The above analysis of four performances has identified different functions that enregistered dialects or ways of speaking can assume in comedy performances. In Buchanan's 'How to survive Glasgow' sketch and the clip from the sitcom *PhoneShop*, register indexes are at odds with the characters using the dialect or with the situational context and, thus, create humorous incongruity/bisociation. This is a very common use of accents and dialects in comedy. Other noteworthy examples include sketches from *The Fast Show*, e.g. 'The Fast Show' – Posh Cockneys – Northern Pub' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4oaGQ2POC8), in which a travelling married couple from the South enters a pub in the North of England, with the husband proclaiming in an Upper-RP accent: 'Hello, you simple Northern folk. We're Cockneys. East-end born and bred. We love our old mums.' The wife follows up, again in a shrill Upper-RP accent: 'Hello. Have you any jellied eels?' As in the discussed clips, the use of the Upper-RP register is incongruous with Cockney indexes, some of which are made explicit by the characters (being from the East End, family-oriented, and enjoying a meal of pie & mash and jellied eels; see also Gerwin forthcoming b).

Other examples of this function of dialect are the parodies of the 'roadman', a characterological figure of the MLE register, on TikTok discussed by Ilbury (2023). Sketches featuring a 'roadman babysitter' or a 'roadman schoolteacher' are construed as funny because these occupations, involving caring for children and delivering education, are ideologically incongruous with the indexical field of MLE (urban youngsters with immigrant backgrounds and variably involved in crime) and the corresponding characterological figure of the 'roadman'.

In the performance by Ali G, the register and its associated indexes serve to subvert the offensive. The social indexes of an MLE/urban youth style register create a (somewhat) forgiving frame of reference regarding the inappropriate content that is

voiced in the performance. This effect can be observed in aggressive forms of humor (both hegemonic and anti-hegemonic), like satire or parody, when registers are used or mimicked that involve infantilizing or dehumanizing indexes or ideologies, which are activated to dismiss speakers as insane, ridiculous or unserious. Humorous incongruity is further achieved by an ideological mismatch between a racialized character and register and a formal educational context.

In the performance by Riaad Moosa, the register serves to subvert standard and native-speaker language ideologies. By using and overtly commenting on IndSAfE, Moosa achieves humorous incongruity by applying the mindset of these normative ideologies to his native IndSAfE, whose repertoire includes some features stereotypically associated with learner varieties of English. Given that many viewers of this clip may not be familiar with this variety of English (in contrast to his South African live audience, which he directly addresses with 'Don't laugh at me! Many of you are in the same boat' (2:10)), he also newly enregisters this way of speaking, including the attitudes, evaluations and ideological schemas associated with it, for a wider audience.

The analysis of the clips has shown that the use of dialect and the simultaneous activation of register indexes can have subversive power in performances. The 'transformational power' of performances was already noted by Bauman (1977) as an inherent feature of this form of communication, as

> there is … a distinctive potential in performance by its very nature which has implications for the creation of social structure in performance. … Through his performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it. When this happens, the performer gains a measure of prestige and control over the audience – prestige because of the demonstrated competence he has displayed, control because the determination of the flow of the interaction is in his hands. … When the performer gains control in this way, the potential for transformation of the social structure may become available to him as well. (Bauman 1977: 43–4)

Comedy and humor have a special appeal to the audience, which facilitates a 'being caught up' in the performance and increases a performer's prestige and control over their audience. Even if some of Ali G's audience at Harvard may have been disgusted by the sexist content of the performance, the audience stayed for the humorous intent and potential of the show. To illustrate the 'transformational power' of performances, Bauman quotes a childhood story from the autobiography of the Black American stand-up comedian Dick Gregory, who was integrated into a group of kids after a stellar performance of telling jokes that caught the attention and garnered the appreciation of the kids. The performance transformed his social standing among the kids from a picked-upon outsider to 'the funny man', but it did not end there. Once he had gained status and control over his peers via his successful performance, he 'started to turn the jokes on them', thus, reversing the power dynamics and allowing

him to consolidate his status via (aggressive forms of) humor (Gregory 1964: 55; as quoted in Bauman 1977: 44).

Due to the keying function of dialects, humorous performances in dialect and by dialect speakers may achieve what ordinary conversation and (meta)discourses do not: awareness, recognition and appreciation of a register (both its repertoire and indexically linked social meanings) and its speakers, and reflexion of negative attitudes, prejudices and raciolinguistic ideologies, precisely because of the reversal of power dynamics afforded by the performance. Non-standard registers, which are often socially and racially stigmatized and portrayed negatively in metalinguistic discourses, may acquire a status unavailable in non-performative contexts.

As Santa-Ana points out in the context of political satire, 'via humor, certain media personalities … have even greater power to get their messages across to their vast national audience. … The discourse practices of humor establish a more personal relationship with the audience, making for more compelling communication' (Santa Ana 2009: 26). This is relevant for the raciolinguistic enregisterment of some dialects, as humorous performances may both disseminate and trivialize stereotypes and reversely mock and criticize them.

Figure 3 represents the triangulation of enregisterment, performance and humor attempted in this article and summarizes the points raised above.

Performances in general can help to (re)enregister dialects and ways of speaking in various ways that were outlined in section 2 (left textbox in figure 3). Enregistered repertoires and social meanings, on the other hand, may key a performance, enable stylizations in performance and provide social context that does not need to be made explicit by the performer. The interrelationship between enregisterment and humor (right textbox in figure 3) involves the potential of enregistered social meanings to help construct humorous incongruity in a comedy performance, as exemplified by the selected clips. Vice versa, the humorous performance of dialect or by dialect speakers may achieve a level of awareness, recognition, reflexion, and appreciation of register indexes and associated ideologies that would not be accessible in non-humorous contexts.

As laid out above, this is because (successfully managed) staged humor affords status and control of the performer over the audience, for which, in turn, performances provide the platform. While humor may bind an audience to a performer and encourage an audience to become 'caught up' in a performance, it is the performance frame and the associated expectation of entertainment and amusement that grant this opportunity to the performer, and this is independent of the humor theory (incongruity, superiority, release) foregrounded in the performance (bottom textbox in figure 3).

The interplay of the three concepts of sociolinguistic enregisterment, staged and mediated performances, and conversational humor constitutes a central concern for pop cultural linguistics. This relatively new, but prolific research field focuses on performed language and linguistic (and multimodal) representations in pop-cultural artifacts (Werner 2022), and the data analyzed in the present article suggest that a focus

- Enregistered repertoires and activated social meanings key performances, enable stylizations, provide implicit context.
- Performances put dialects on display, disseminate ways of speaking, create characterological figures, contribute to metalinguistic discourses.

Enregisterment

- Enregistered social meanings help to construct humorous incongruity.
- Humorous performance in dialect/by dialect speakers may achieve awareness, recognition, reflexion, and appreciation of register indexes unavailable in other types of communication.

Performances

Humor

- Humor facilitates prestige and control of the performer over the audience.
- Performances provide the platform for humor, regardless of the humor theory that is in focus (incongruity/superiority/release).
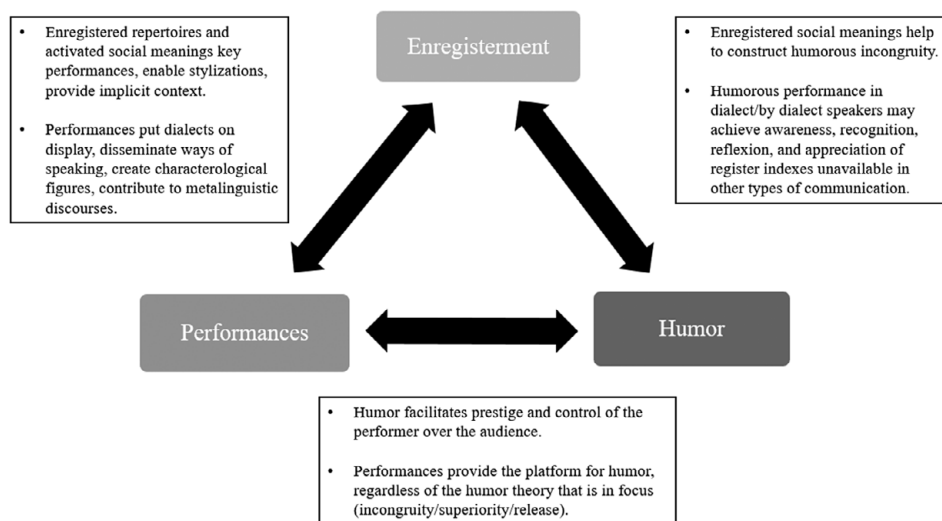
Figure 3. The interrelationships of enregisterment, performances and humor

on enregisterment through humorous performances provides a useful framework for analyzing a variety of pop-cultural phenomena.

The study of enregisterment processes uncovers the social indexicality and, thus, meaning-making potential of variables as they become observable in metalinguistic discourse. Pop culture provides these discursive data points. As modeled in figure 2, performances of ways of speaking offer explicit or implicit metalinguistic commentary about how the social meanings of variables are to be interpreted. The study of the 'meaning-making potential' of performances in language and other modalities is a central research question in pop-cultural linguistics (Werner 2022). The enregisterment approach, while not restricted to performance data (as also evident in figure 2), offers valuable terminology, methodology and theoretical foundation for an analysis of these kinds of data (see, e.g., Beal 2009; Johnstone 2011; Kiesling 2018). In fact, in (humorous) performance, 'linguistic variation is often put on display very pervasively and with richer and more saturated indexical loading than in face-to-face conversations' (Westphal 2018: 96), which makes these types of data especially useful for the study of enregisterment.

Vice versa, comedy performances, which are arguably richer in the variety of topics discussed, argumentative and rhetorical composition, and voiced linguistic variables than other pop-cultural artifacts such as music lyrics, enable enregisterment studies to some extent. Their dissemination via mass media, such as TV, YouTube and on social media, plays a crucial role in 'establishing the register as a social formation, in maintaining or expanding the social domain of its users, and in providing individuals with common intuitions about the significance of usage' (Agha 2007: 153; see also Werner 2022). As this article has further shown, this has the welcome effect of enregistering regional and global Englishes for a large audience, thus

showcasing their heterogeneity (Westphal & Jansen 2020; Moody 2020). Due to the appeal and entertainment afforded by humor, comedy performances are a highly suitable channel for the enregisterment of varieties of English as well as a vital database for the study of their enregisterment.

Author's address:

Englisches Seminar
Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel
Olshausenstr. 40
24098 Kiel
Germany
gerwin@anglistik.uni-kiel.de

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