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Accent enregisterment through humour in *The Catherine Tate Show*

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The Catherine Tate Show (2004–7) is a rich source of instances of stereotyped language varieties as linked to various TV tropes, reflecting how speakers coming from specific regional areas in the British Isles are generally and stereotypically perceived within British society, thus contributing to their linguistic enregisterment. Building on previous works on dialects in the media and their stereotypical representations, this study gives an account of the various implications and functions of the linguistic phenomena that are specific to the Southeast of England and that are exploited for the creation of some of the fictional identities presented in the show. Specific phonological features that implicitly collocate Tate's recurring characters both regionally and socially are identified and their functions discussed.

Keywords: humour, accents, stereotyping, enregisterment, indexicality

1 Introduction

The Catherine Tate Show (2004–7) is a British TV comedy sketch programme that received high ratings, peaking at 4.2 million viewers in the third series, thanks to the memorable and widely reiterated catchphrases uttered by Catherine Tate's invented characters, whose humorous identities are constructed, among other aspects, through a recognisable idiolect. Lexical, grammatical, stylistic and prosodic choices contribute to this construction, but it is arguably the adoption of regional accents that plays a key role in the creation of stereotypical characters in Tate's sketches, as 'phonetic variation is not just long-standing in formal study, … but also in the public mind' (Preston & Niedzielski 2010: 2). The comedian, in fact, consciously or not, selected specific stereotypical phonological features for each of her characters, thus enhancing, with her performance, pre-existing associations between regional pronunciations and social connotations.

Despite the fact that the discipline of sociolinguistics has traditionally focused on the language that occurs in everyday life, a new set of empirical studies revolving around the analysis of the use of different varieties of performed language has recently started to appear in the (socio)linguistic literature under the label of 'Pop Cultural Linguistics'

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(Trotta 2018; Werner 2018, 2022; cf. previous work by Johnstone 2011; Bell & Gibson 2011; Lippi-Green 2012). The present study places itself in this area, arising from a renewed scholarly interest in the analysis of performed language. It builds on the assumption that 'the mediatized performance of vernaculars can contribute to the construction of typical or "exemplary" (Agha 2003) speakers and to a heightened reflexivity on language and identity' (Androutsopoulos 2014: 9); therefore, the sociolinguistic analysis of fictional texts has shown that, while mass-mediatised language imitates real everyday language, the reverse may also be true: media language can become 'enregistered' and has the potential to influence interactional practices in everyday talk.

Building on these premises, this article offers an analysis of four short excerpts from *The Catherine Tate Show* (2004–7), each one illustrative of the performed language used to construct a particular character in the show. Particularly, it focuses on characters with southeastern British English accents, in order to show how various linguistic phenomena, all pertaining to the same dialect area, are differently exploited by Tate both in quality and frequency to index different personas. The analyses of excerpts of dialogue are conducted through the tools of sociolinguistics and phonetics,[1] as they represent discussion of allophonic realisations of specific phonemes as associated with different social groups. Both sociolinguistics and phonetics are 'bottom-up' areas of linguistics, mainly based on the collection of empirical data (Thomas 2013: 108; see also Thomas 2002). The former 'aims for naturalness', whereas the latter 'prizes replicability in experiments' (Thomas 2013: 108), but this is not an issue in general when sociolinguistic analysis is applied to performed language in pop culture, which can be considered 'pre-fabricated orality' (Baños Piñero & Chaume 2009).[2] Scripted dialogue is not entirely natural, but it does emulate natural language (despite being able to offer a distorted and exaggerated form, as explored in this article), thus providing interesting implications for the public imaginary of identities associated with specific linguistic choices. The concepts of linguistic stereotyping, indexicality and enregisterment are explored before showing, through the analysis of the selected excerpts, that the use of some phonological phenomena can collocate speakers not only from the regional but also from the social point of view, which is also confirmed by the comedic power of their reiteration.

2 Humour, accents and stereotyping

As stated by Davies (2009), 'dialect is probably used more often in jokes and humour than in other kinds of writing', and eliciting humour is, in fact, one of the functions of

[1] The melding of sociolinguistics and phonetics is known as 'sociophonetics'. Although the aims of this study are comparable to the general aims of sociophonetics as a field of study, this article is not explicitly framed within a sociophonetic approach because it lacks acoustic and spectrographic analysis of utterances recorded in naturalistic settings, an aspect that is typically associated with this methodological strand.

[2] This definition referred specifically to film/TV dialogue, but it can arguably be extended to all forms of fictional (audiovisual) dialogue.

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the use of language varieties in fictional dialogue according to the taxonomy of audiovisual products on the film- and TV-repository website *Dialects in audiovisuals* (Ranzato *et al.* 2017). This function is text-external, since it does not involve an actual deeper understanding of the text, but it is linked to the way viewers react to that aspect on the basis of pre-existing connotations that have been associated with that specific dialect (and/or accent) in the society within which it appears (Hodson 2014: 10; see also Lippi-Green 2012). In other words, the use of language variation has the power to help construct a humorous tone because it relies on one of the many aspects of this multifaced phenomenon, namely its interpersonal factor. This sociolinguistic orientation is explicitly addressed by the 'superiority or hostility theories' (based on Morreall 1983; Raskin 1985), which builds on the idea, originally suggested by such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes, that 'we laugh at others because we consider ourselves superior' (Dore 2020a: 17–18). In this framework, there is no explicit mention of accents and dialects, but the reaction to regional voices arguably fits this description of the phenomenon of humour, and it is possibly the reason for their wide adoption in comedy shows and performances.

A more explicit reference to the opposition between different languages and/or varieties is found in the theoretical notion of language and ideology: Irvine & Gal (2000: 35), also building on other scholarly works (among others, Silverstein 1979 and the studies collected by Schieffelin *et al.* 1992), define 'ideologies' as the conceptual schemes or ideas with which the understanding of linguistic varieties are framed and mapped on people, events and activities. They identify three semiotic processes by which ideological representations of linguistic differences are constructed, namely 'iconisation', 'fractal recursivity' and 'erasure' (Irvine & Gal 2000: 37–8). This framework, which is based on Peirce's theory of signs (1995), has been adopted and revisited more recently by Cavanaugh (2020) and Irvine (2022), and it is grounded on the idea that 'people have, and act in relation to, ideologically constructed representations of linguistic differences' (Irvine & Gal 2000: 37). These frameworks support the fact that accented voices in performed language convey humour because they have an inherent linkage to certain qualities and social images ('iconisation'), but also because they involve the projection of an opposition ('fractal recursivity', but see also the aforementioned superiority theories).

This perception of accented voices that arises from hearers' ideologies thus leads to their association with stereotypes, and, in fact, the presence of varieties in media discourse is frequently indebted to this tradition, as recognised, among others, by Kozloff (2000) and Lippi-Green (2012). In this sense, it is useful to quote the definition of stereotyping provided by Hodson:

> A basic definition of stereotyping is that it occurs when a group of people are characterized as possessing a homogeneous set of characteristics on the basis of, for example, their shared race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, appearance, profession or place of birth. Stereotypes take a single aspect of a person's identity and attribute a whole set of characteristics to them on the basis of it, presenting these characteristics as being 'natural' and 'innate'. Stereotypes can be enormously

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> influential, colouring the way that we see and understand the people thus stereotyped, as numerous studies have demonstrated. (Hodson 2014: 65–6)

Language varieties are thus one of the parameters that lead listeners' perception of speakers' identity, which is why filmmakers and TV-show creators rely on preconceptions associated with accents and dialects to outline the socio-cultural background of fictional characters. The fact that language is frequently a tool to create a stereotypical character does not necessarily mean that the linguistic portrayal must be stereotyped too; although character and linguistic stereotyping often go hand in hand in the case of comedic and parodic performances (see section 3), which is the focus of this study, these two processes should be considered separately (Hodson 2014: 67). In any case, however, 'between stereotype and reality – objective or perceived reality – the representation of accents and dialects in fictional dialogue offers a complex and interwoven topic of regional and social nuances to the eye of the researcher' (Bruti & Ranzato 2022: 212). Such features are used as a fundamental means to design memorable idiolects that mimic, amplify, or transform reality in ways worth analysing and discussing, as the academic interest in this topic has recently shown (see, among others, Dore 2020b; Valleriani 2020; Zabalbeascoa 2021; Bruti & Ranzato 2022). Stereotypes triggered by a humorous dramatic effect are especially evident when a contrast between language varieties is clearly perceived, as this creates conflict, mimesis and suspense (Dore 2024: 389–408; quoting Delabastita & Grutman 2005: 16).[3]

The semiotic association between a stereotype and a specific social identity, generally enhanced and established through the repetition of utterances and circumstances (Di Ferrante & Attardo 2022: 6–7; see also section 3), makes language varieties the perfect tool for what can be defined as 'ethnic humour'. Ethnic humour is defined as 'a type of humour in which fun is made of the perceived behaviour, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific socio-cultural identity' (Apte 1987: 28). When this type of humour arises from the repetition of a dialectal utterance, it means that some aspect of that utterance must be considered to be 'enregistered', a concept discussed in more detail in the following section.

3 Enregisterment in performance

As previously mentioned, the presence of a dialect or an accented voice in fictional dialogue is sometimes due to a text-external function, such as that of creating a specific effect (e.g. humour), grounded on viewers' pre-existing knowledge of that variety and the connotative meanings that are traditionally associated with it (Hodson 2014: 10). When this process is activated, it means that the variety has become 'enregistered', and

[3] The study of accents in media discourse is often included in the field of multilingualism, based on the broader definition of the term 'multilingual' offered by Delabastita & Grutman (2005), which comprises not only foreign languages and accents, but also intralingual variation (in the sense of regional accents, dialects and sociolects).

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its presence in the text might even enhance this phenomenon: 'as well as bringing existing knowledge *to* a new text or film, readers and audiences also take ideas about language varieties *from* that text or film' (Hodson 2014: 10).

The term 'enregisterment' was introduced by Agha (2003) and refers to a set of linguistic norms as 'a linguistic repertoire differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register' (Agha 2003: 231), thus involving a correspondence between speakers' language and speakers' socio-cultural status. In other words, this process is explained by Beal as follows:

> Due to a variety of discursive and metadiscursive activities, the latter involving what Johnstone et al. term 'talk about talk' (2006: 84), a particular set of features associated with an accent is 'enregistered' – represented collectively in the public imagination as a stable variety and maintained across time and region via practices that reiterate the value of the accent and its link to social status. Once it is fixed in place and time in this way, people can reflexively respond to a variety as a cultural value, and the repertoire of enregistered features can be used by speakers to express and/or perform identity. (2010: 94)

Indeed, Beal sees Agha's concept of 'enregisterment' as a development of the language-ideological approach, first introduced by Silverstein (1976). He identifies three orders of indexicality that correspond to three different gradual levels of social awareness of the association between linguistic features and social groups. This approach substantially overlaps with the Labovian paradigm, consisting of three categories of linguistic forms that represent different phases in linguistic change (Labov 1972: 314) and, interestingly, the third one (which follows those labelled as 'indicators' and 'markers') is called 'stereotypes'. What is interesting here, if we take as valid the correspondence between Labov's 'stereotype'[4] and Silverstein's 'third-order indexicality', is that the latter leads into 'enregisterment', and this implies that, if a linguistic form or a set of forms (a language variety) has become enregistered, it necessarily involves a component of stereotyping. These stereotypes arise from various potential meanings, which, according to Eckert (2008: 453), are not precise or fixed but rather comprise a constellation of ideologically related meanings, called an 'indexical field'.

The connection between linguistic choices and social meanings was also discussed by Johnstone (2011) in terms of its centrality in performed language, naturally building on the theoretical framework that has been outlined in this section. In particular, she argues that in

> performances, the potentials for enregisterment are multiple, and we cannot be sure what indexical links will be forged or what cultural schemata will be evoked to enregister them. The construction of humorous personae like the ones in the skits can enregister particular linguistic forms in multiple overlapping ways, some linked to place and some not, sometimes aligning different cultural schemata with one another but sometimes juxtaposing conflicting schemata. (Johnstone 2011: 661)

[4] It must be clarified, however, that Labov conceived the category of 'stereotypes' as made of forms that are liable to disappear, while an 'enregistered' variety is stable in the public imagination (Beal 2010: 94).

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Results from Johnstone's study on dialect enregisterment in radio skits are useful in this case, as they validate the application of theories coming from anthropological linguistics (Silverstein 1976, 2007; Agha 2003, 2007) to sketches in general (including TV sketches; see next section) and all types of staged performance (defined as any performance on a stage-like area, including the area in front of a camera or a microphone, involving a clear separation between performer and audience; Bell & Gibson 2011: 557). Performances are made for the audience, not simply to the audience, so their explicit purpose is not only that of communicating a message, but also to entertain viewers/listeners (Bell & Gibson 2011: 557), and this implies that linguistic forms are chosen to evoke specific identities. Johnstone observes that people may interpret skits in different ways, therefore she admits that the same forms may index different cultural schemata (2011: 656), but what is sure is that some type of semiotic correspondence is established through performance. Among the multiple linguistic levels at which this process of indexicality can be activated, the phonological one – accent – 'is perhaps the most obvious linguistic means by which performances index identity' (Bell & Gibson 2011: 570).

In the case of parodies, gags and comedy sketches in general, indexed identities are defined by Johnstone as 'humorous personae' (2011: 661), which can be included in the more general terms of 'stereotype' – identified by film theorists Schweinitz & Schleussner as 'coordinated with the dispositions, expectations, and desires of a wide audience' (2011: xii) – and 'stock character' – according to Quantz (2015: 37), a set of formulaic features, including types of speech, traditionally associated with certain identities (both reported and discussed by Ranzato 2021: 183). Although it has not been adopted and explored in scholarly literature yet, there is another definition that perhaps best applies to a fixed schema characterised by an accented voice, which is that of the 'accent trope'. This expression is mainly found online and on social media, and the best definition is provided by the Wiki website *TV tropes*: accent tropes are 'useful notes that deal with the way in which characters from a certain region and their actors pronounce words, and the character traits these pronunciations imply' (https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AccentTropes, accessed 30 May 2024).

A variety of accent tropes, a type of fixed schemata created mainly on the basis of the regional pronunciation of words, is found in the case study of this research (see section 4).

4 *The Catherine Tate Show*

Catherine Tate (born Catherine Jane Ford) is a British actor, comedian and TV-show writer, who gained popularity thanks to her programme *The Catherine Tate Show* and has since then participated in numerous other projects, both in cinema and television. Among her most recent jobs, she has created and starred in Netflix's mockumentary sitcom *Hard Cell* (2022) and BBC One's TV sitcom *Queen of Oz* (2023).

The Catherine Tate Show is a television comedy sketch show, which aired between 2004 and 2007 on the television channel BBC Two, for a total of three

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seasons (each one consisting of six episodes), although a few special episodes followed later. All the episodes were written by Tate herself in collaboration with Darren Litten, directed by Gordon Anderson, and produced by Tiger Aspect Productions. The show has received positive acclaim since its release and has been nominated for several accolades, winning two Royal Television Society Awards and two British Comedy Awards.[5]

The show features a wide variety of characters, each with their own distinct and often exaggerated personality traits, including recognisable idiolects and memorable catchphrases. Each episode sees the succession of sketches with different protagonists (all impersonated by Tate herself and accompanied by recurring actors), which are still circulating at present on social media (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok). As mentioned, all of these characters have a unique voice and most of them have an accented one, whose main shibboleths are generally emphasised in the catchphrases, as will be shown in the analysis. Stereotypical linguistic features of numerous British English varieties ranging from northern and southern British English accents, Scottish English accents, Northern Irish English accents, but also Southern Irish English accents and L2 English accents, are abundant in the show and they contribute, in various ways, to constructing humorous accent tropes (see section 3).

4.1 Methodology

For the sake of this study, prominence will be given to a specific dialect area. This is done in order to provide a fuller account of the dynamics that bring writers and performers in this show to portray speakers of the same dialect macro-area, but who use phonological traits differently both in quantity and quality. This way, a discussion on which vernacular features are attributed to particular identities with specific attitudes and behaviours is provided. All the characters' idiolects analysed in this section can be considered as instances of southeastern British English accents, which were selected because Catherine Tate was born in this area and may be more aware of the semiotic function of its most common phonological phenomena.

Excerpts of dialogue from some sketches are transcribed in each following subsection focusing on individual characters to provide a linguistic context to the traits that are analysed and discussed (which are found in almost every sketch featuring the same characters, as they are a fundamental component in their identity construction). The transcriptions were made by the author, with the aid of the subtitles of the official DVDs, and using dialect respelling (e.g. in the case of the phenomenon of H-dropping) to render visually those phenomena that could otherwise not be noticed in the written form. For the same reason, bold type is used to signal the variables that are relevant in the discussion. Both vowel and consonant features typical of the southeastern area of England are discussed, with a particular attention to the various

[5] The complete list of the awards obtained by the show can be viewed at www.imdb.com/title/tt0441051/awards/?ref_=tt_awd (accessed 30 May 2024).

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realisation of /t/, which appears to be the most frequent variable used to index specific fictional identities. Other phonological features might be considered in the excerpts, but, due to limited space, only those that are relevant to comment on the enregisterment of southeastern varieties of English are included in the analysis, which is not suggested to be exhaustive.

4.2 Derek Faye

Derek Faye is the only male character in the series played by Tate. He is portrayed as a closeted gay man who lives in London with his mother and is always shown having a bad reaction when his interlocutors assume or imply that he is gay.[6] Derek is introduced during the second season and excerpt (1) contains his main catchphrases.

(1) Derek, episode 2x03, min. 8:02

Shop assistant:	Tickets for Gay Pride, they're ten pounds cheaper if you get them in advance.
Derek:	How ve**r**y da**r**e you? I've never been so insulted.
Shop assistant:	What d'you mean?
Derek:	Well, what is exactly that you are insinuat**in**'?
Shop assistant:	I'm just saying we've got Gay Pride tickets on sales today.
Derek:	And how do you know I'm not ma**rr**ied with w**i**fe and kids?
Shop assistant:	Uhm, are you?
Derek:	Who, dear? Me, dear? Ma**rr**ied, dear? No, dear.

Apart from various visual and contextual cues that may be stereotypically associated with gay men of his generation (e.g. the use of a purse, or the fact that, for example, at the end of this sketch it is made explicit that he has just purchased a David Beckham calendar and the DVD of *The Best of Judy Garland*), this aspect of Derek's identity is also indexed through language. He uses features of Received Pronunciation (RP) and avoids stigmatised features like glottalisation. In certain contexts, he uses some features of the 'heightened' version of RP, which is defined by Wells (1982b) as 'upper-crust RP (U-RP)' and by Gimson (1984) as 'conservative RP'. The most striking one of these features is tapped-R, which is the realisation of intervocalic /r/ as a tap ([ɾ]) rather than a retroflex vibrant sound ([ɹ]) in the words *very* and *married.* This is a very rare phenomenon in modern-RP speech and it is used perhaps only by the older generation (Fabricius 2018: 51). As it repeatedly appears in parodic representations of upper-class people in telecinematic texts and the media (Honey 1989), it can be considered as a stereotype in the Labovian sense. In a previous study about the comparison between the language of the royal family in real life and how it is represented in audiovisuals, Valleriani (2021: 147) observes that tapped-/r/ is in decline even in the aristocratic context. However, its sporadic

[6] Apparently, as can be read on IMDb, this character is based on a fan who was offended after Tate, who assumed he was gay, told him that she had a lot of gay fans. This can be read in the section 'Did you know' at this link: www.imdb.com/title/tt0441051/?ref_=ttawd_ov (accessed 30 May 2024).

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use appears to be still consistent in specific words, such as the adverb *very*; therefore, it may have been consciously selected by Tate for Derek's recurring catchphrase (*How very dare you?*). Further, from the point of view of consonants, Derek's idiolect is characterised by a consistent release of final stops (*insulted* and *married* in excerpt (1), but it is especially heard in words that end in [t] in other parts of dialogue), which is a (U-) RP feature (Valleriani 2021: 147) and may also index a gay identity, as demonstrated by Podesva *et al.* (2001).

Another U-RP feature Derek uses is the pronunciation of the last phoneme of the suffix *-ing* with an alveolar rather than a velar nasal, generally called the [ɪn]-variant (Wells 1982b: 283), in *insinuating* (rendered in the transcription with an apostrophe). Finally, another feature of U-RP is the monophthongisation in *wife* [wa:f], a phenomenon called 'smoothing' by Wells (1982a: 238), considered by the scholar as a secondary peculiarity in upper-class speech. It has later been identified as very frequent in the modern accent of the British elite, especially among female speakers (Valleriani 2021: 147).

The connection between the use of RP and sexual orientation is not straightforward, but its combination with a high-pitched voice and other cues in the character's attitude creates a socially marked idiolect that sounds effeminate, a characteristic that is stereotypically associated with gay men. It is important to point out that even though RP can no longer be considered as the standard accent in Britain, it is still considered as a prestigious one and, despite belonging in the southeastern area from a typological perspective, is a 'regionless' one.

According to the traditional theoretical framework in the field of language and gender, standard and prestigious varieties are more frequently associated with women and, by extension, people with an effeminate voice quality (Lakoff 1975), while (heterosexual) men are more keen to use working-class and regional forms in any context as features of masculinity (Wells 1982a: 20). This implies the existence of a sort of covert prestige of some regional accents and dialects in this sense. The use of (U-)RP by men, however, only indirectly indexes homosexuality and is only one of the potential meanings included in the 'indexical field' (Eckert 2008) related to this prestigious accent. Derek's use of RP features concurs with other visual and para-verbal elements (i.e. his effeminate sashay and his gestures with 'hands [that] tend to twirl circularly while speaking, cross at chest level, or be suspended in mid-air, the palms upwards'; Passa 2021: 268, paraphrasing Orrù 2014: 76) in the construction of his possible gay identity. Such ideas are supported by the aforementioned insights on the difference in language between genders, as summed up in the pioneering work by Lakoff (1975). While these insights are perhaps outdated and certainly highly stereotypical (for a more modern approach in the field see, among others, Cameron 2020 and Levon 2020), they confirm the implicit mechanisms in the construction and perception of the stereotypical character of Derek Faye, whose analysis highlights the fact that 'there is a need for additional studies investigating how sets of variables cluster together to form gay styles and all linguistically constructed styles' (Podesva *et al.* 2001: 187).

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4.3 Nan

Joannie Taylor, generally known simply as ‘Nan’, is an elderly woman who is often prone to swearing and use of taboo language and who frequently complains about various aspects of modern life, displaying a significant generational gap and often offending those around her with her blunt and unapologetic remarks. Despite her caustic exterior, she occasionally shows a softer side, particularly in moments that highlight her relationship with her grandson, Jamie (played by Matthew Horne).

Nan’s character became one of the most iconic and beloved parts of the format, and Tate’s performance as the character was widely praised and contributed to the popularity and critical acclaim of the show. This can be inferred from the fact that two Christmas specials (in 2009 and 2015) were entirely dedicated to the character, and that a spin-off comedy film entitled *The Nan Movie* was aired in 2022. Nan lives in London and is linguistically portrayed as a working-class Cockney speaker, as can be heard in one of her first appearances, transcribed in excerpt (2).

(2) Nan, episode 1x03, min. 6:28

Jamie: Hey nan, have you seen Jean lately?
Nan: **Wh**o?
[…]
Nan: Wha**t** abou**t** her? (…) I **ain’t seen** her.
Jamie: You’ve not seen Jean from over the road? Are you sure?
Nan: Of course I’m sure, what’s the ma**tt**er with **ya**? I **ain’t seen no-one**, **’a**ve I? I **ain’t seen** a living soul, I **ain’t been** outside **me** door.
[…]
Nan: Oh, yes, **I seen** her!
Jamie: I knew you had. What did you say to her?
Nan: She got fat. Oh, **ain’t** she fat, that woman? You **seen** her l**at**ely? (…) Wha**t** a liberty!

The phonological phenomena that place Nan on the spectrum of Cockney accents include H-dropping, diphthong shifts and morphosyntactic variants. H-dropping is perhaps the most consistent one in all Nan’s sketches, and it is clearly noticeable in the words *who* and *have* (transcribed with an apostrophe) in (2). H-dropping has long been established in Traditional Cockney and popular London speech (Mott 2012: 85), but nowadays it is commonly traced in many other working-class accents in Britain, too, thus being defined by Wells as ‘the single most powerful pronunciation shibboleth in England’ (1982a: 254) and by Mugglestone as a ‘symbol of social divide’ (2007: 95). The fact that H-dropping has been subject to strong stigmatisation explains why its use in the southeast has recently declined, especially among young people: Kerswill *et al.* (2008: 7) report a considerable gap in the percentage frequency for this consonantal variable between elderly (58.1) and adolescent speakers (11.0).

The other most frequent phenomenon is T-tapping, the replacement of /t/ when in intervocalic position (or in final position preceding a word starting with a vowel) with a tap, as in Nan’s pronunciations of *what* [wɒɾ] and *matter* [mæɾɐ]. This phenomenon is generally considered the most striking characteristic of General American, while

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other allophonic realisations of /t/ are more commonly perceived as British (e.g. T-glottalisation, see section 4.4). Yet Sivertsen (1960: 119; but see also Wells 1982b: 325) affirms that 'taps are regarded as the normal, "correct" variant, in contrast to glottal stops, which are too rough, and alveolar stops, which are too posh' (also confirmed by Tollfree 1999: 170). This clarification does not align with Nan's rough attitude, but it may arguably be an explanation for the use of T-tapping to characterise an elderly person, as Sivertsen's observation is reflective of the linguistic situation of the 1960s.

Aside from H-dropping, other modern frequent features of Cockney such as the diphthong shift in *lately*, pronounced as [lʌɪtli], and the open realisation of the final weak vowel in *matter* [mæɾɐ] are heard consistently in all sketches featuring Nan. From a morphosyntactic point of view, she makes abundant use of non-standard features that generally index working-class identity in performed language: these include the double negative (*I ain't seen no-one*), the omission of the auxiliary in present perfect verb forms (*I seen*, which becomes *I ain't seen* when negated), and the use of the first-person singular object pronoun as a possessive (*me door*).[7]

The Cockney basilect as an index of the working class of London has been enregistered in metadiscourse for centuries (Gerwin 2023: 37), and consequently been largely used in telecinematic productions to characterise members of this social stratum (see, for example, Ranzato 2018), who are often also depicted as uneducated, with an outspoken personality and a direct conversational style. This tendency shows the existence of such stereotypes associated with the variety, hence Tate's choice of building a humorous persona on this linguistic perception. Among the numerous linguistic peculiarities of Cockney, such as the use of H-dropping – rather conservative and apparently in decline compared to the other features (see section 4.4) – were coherently selected by Tate as the main traits to characterise an elderly woman belonging to the London working class.

4.4 Lauren Cooper

Lauren Cooper is a belligerent disaffected teenager who often finds herself in humorous situations at school, interacting with teachers and classmates, and her defiant attitude and distinctive London accent have made her one of the most memorable characters of the show. The character's popularity even led to several special appearances, including a notable sketch with the then prime minister Tony Blair in 2007 (Di Martino 2022: 119). The character dies during a skit in a 2007 Christmas special, but she then appears again in short performances in 2017 for the Red Nose Day and in 2020 for a telethon during the Covid-19 pandemic.

[7] The description of this phenomenon in these terms is, however, debatable, as observed by Cole (2022: 109), who argues as follows: 'Previous research has documented in southern dialects the "use of *me* for *my*" … However, I suggest an alternative: *me* is not used as a possessive pronoun, instead *my* can be pronounced as either [miː] or [mɪ]. This is not equitable with the object pronoun being used as a possessive pronoun, instead, it seems to be a matter of pronunciation.'

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Lauren is clearly portrayed as the caricature of a ‘chav’ and is, in fact, also mentioned by Di Martino (2022: 109; but cf. Bennett 2012) in her ethnographic research on this British stereotype, as she perfectly meets the definition of the term: ‘a young person in Britain of a type stereotypically known for engaging in aggressively loutish behaviour especially when in groups and for wearing flashy jewelry and athletic casual clothing’ (Di Martino 2022: viii).[8] From the linguistic point of view, the ‘chav’ is not fixedly associated with a specific regional variety, as this type has gradually incorporated local stereotypical identities that already existed (e.g. the Manchester ‘townie’, the Liverpool ‘scally’, the Birmingham ‘kev’, or the Scottish ‘ned’; Di Martino 2022: 93), but it is always associated with urban areas and, consequently, with urban varieties and linguistic innovation. London being the most influential urban centre in the UK, it is not surprising that ‘chavs’ are often portrayed as having a marked working-class London accent, like Lauren Cooper, as heard in the scene transcribed in excerpt (3).

(3) Lauren, episode 1x03, min. 18:18

Ryan: Alrigh**t**?
Liese – Lauren: Alrigh**t**?
Ryan: You ready, Liese?
Liese: Uhm, yeah… Listen, Ryan, she didn’t know there was a par**t**y a**t** all.
Ryan: I know. […] She ain’t invi**t**ed.
Liese: Wha**t**?
Lauren: Am I bo**th**ered?
[…]
Liese: What are you gonna do?
Lauren: Nothing, ’cause I ain’t bo**th**ered. *(While overlapping with Liese)* Do I look I’m bo**th**ered? Do I look bo**th**ered, though? Does my face look bo**th**ered? […] Aks me if I’m bo**th**ered.

The most striking phonological phenomenon in the first part of excerpt (3) is the consistent glottalisation of /t/ in the utterances of all the three characters, Lauren, her best friend Liese (Niky Wardley) and the boy she has an infatuation for (Matthew Horne). A clear glottal stop (/ʔ/) is heard both in final position, as in *alright* and *at*, and in intervocalic position, for instance in *party* and *invited.* While T-glottalisation is a phenomenon that is very common in London speech (see, among others, Wells 1982b: 321–2; but also, more recently, Mott 2012: 82), in most sites of the dialect continuum of the area (certainly present in Cockney, but also very frequent in Estuary English), it is also noticeable in numerous other urban varieties in the UK. Its realisation, however, is not always as consistent and as marked as heard in Lauren’s sketches by Tate, where the three adolescents make abundant use of this phenomenon and they arguably emphasise its articulation for parodic purposes. This aspect suggests

[8] Regarding the etymology of the term, Renouf (2007) suggests that the lexeme in several variants first emerged in a series of variable dialectal uses in the nineties and was revived in the early 2000s to refer to ‘a young British person of low education, having insufficient means to live away from home though sufficient to indulge in the purchase and wearing of hitherto socially-prestigious items of clothing, such as Burberry caps and other fashion accessories’ (Renouf 2007: 70; see also Di Martino 2022: 31).

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that T-glottalisation is exploited as one of the main linguistic tools to index a group of audacious and irreverent teenagers from London or an urban setting in general.

Sociolinguistic studies show that this phenomenon is not a recent innovation. Although it probably originated in the southeast and spread from this area to the rest of Britain, T-glottalisation has been enregistered only in relatively recent times. In fact, T-tapping as mentioned in the analysis of Nan's speech (see section 4.3), was the traditional 'neutral' allophone of /t/ in London speech, whereas [ʔ] is to be considered as a linguistic innovation. As generally happens with innovations, this phenomenon is mostly heard in teenage speech (see Fabricius 2000 and Badia Barrera 2015 for a discussion on the recent spread of glottal stops among young RP speakers too, as a fashionable speech trademark among adolescents), which explains why it is so consistent and marked in Lauren and her friends' utterances, but T-tapping was preferred to characterise Nan.

As for the other phonological features that may be expected from this stereotypical character, phenomena such as H-dropping and diphthong shifts are only occasionally heard (e.g. later in the dialogue in excerpt (3), min. 19:31, Lauren pronounces *mate* as [mæɪʔ]), while the metathesis in the word *ask*, pronounced as [aks], is slightly more consistent as it is often present in Lauren's recurring line *Ask me if I'm bothered*, also present at the end of excerpt (3).[9] From a morphosyntactic perspective, she occasionally uses the non-standard auxiliary verb *ain't*, as also addressed in the case of Nan.

On the contrary, a notable frequent phenomenon in this dialogue, but also in all sketches featuring Lauren Cooper, is TH-fronting, undoubtedly the character's main recognisable linguistic feature. This phenomenon entails the use of labiodental fricatives [f, v] in place of dental fricatives [θ, ð]. Compared to other London features, Wells argues (1982b: 328), all native Londoners do use dental fricatives too, or, at least, they 'have the ability to distinguish between *free* and *three*' (Wells 1982b: 328). Therefore, TH-fronting might be considered as a stylistic variant, subject to the usual variability that characterises linguistic change (see Schleef & Ramsammy 2013, who observed that this phenomenon is not particularly sensitive to phonotactic and morphological factors in London as happens, for example, in Edinburgh). It is also true, however, that more recent studies have demonstrated an increase of this feature in the inner city, and especially among adolescents (Kerswill 2003: 12; discussed in Fox 2015: 221). In Lauren's case, as previously mentioned, the use of this feature is the most striking characteristic of her idiolect, since it occurs in her popular catchphrase *I ain't bothered* (and all of its variants). Lauren pronounces the word 'bother' as [bɒvə] (RP: [bɒðə])[10] and this phrase became extremely popular in Britain, probably because it was

[9] See Cole *et al.* (2022) for a short discussion on the occurrence of this feature in the southeast of England, and especially in Multicultural London English, whose influence on all English-speaking communities shows 'incrementation with an adolescent peak', as read in Cheshire *et al.* (2011: 156).

[10] In most scholarly literature, the phenomenon of TH-fronting includes the replacement of dental fricatives with labiodental fricatives in general, but on some occasions (like, for example, in Kerswill *et al.* 2008) this definition refers only to the use of [f] for /θ/, whereas the substitution of /ð/ with [v] – discussed in my case study – is referred to as DH-fronting.

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recognised as a functional way to parody or voice a teenage girl with an aloof attitude. The expression started to be largely used and quoted on various media and the use of the non-standard spelling 'bovver' was even adopted in the subtitles of the official DVD of *The Catherine Tate Show.* The catchphrase, after all, was selected as Word of the Year in 2006 (Phillips 2006), and in 2016 the *Oxford English Dictionary* updated the entry by adding that it was made famous by Catherine Tate (Tran 2016). The word has thus become enregistered with a new spelling after its introduction, based on a pre-existing indexicality between the phenomenon and the younger generation in London – with a percentage frequency of 74.1, compared to only 19.4 among elderly speakers (Kerswill *et al.* 2008; quoted in Fox 2015: 221)[11] – and its following reiteration in pop culture.

4.5 The Essex couple

Paul and Sam are known for their humorous and often exaggerated portrayal of a typical aspirational Essex couple, characterised by their distinctive accents, mannerisms and sometimes superficial concerns. Every sketch revolves around the suspense created by Sam (played by Catherine Tate) regarding events which happened during her workday, making Paul (played by Lee Ross) hang on every word. At the end, it is always discovered that the event is rather trivial, but they both get excited and burst into laughter. Excerpt (4) contains a typical dialogue between the two characters.

(4) Sam and Paul, episode 2x01, min. 11:46

Sam: I've not **t**old you about **t**oday, have I? I can't believe I ain't **t**old ya.
Paul: Tell me what?
[…]
Sam: There is absolutely no w**ay** I could have gone to twenty past ten without telling you what's happened to me tod**ay**.
Paul: What is it?
Sam: You are gonna d**ie**!

Paul and Sam are publicly recognised as 'the Essex couple', and this label is mainly due to their accent, although 'what constitutes an Essex accent is complex and there may be generational differences in how this term is interpreted and used' (Cole & Evans 2021: 647). Essex was actually part of the East-Anglian dialect area, and the older generation might still consider an Essex accent as a typical East-Anglian one. However, younger speakers are more likely to associate this variety with London features as a result of Londoners settling there and the popularity of the reality show *The Only Way is Essex* (having aired on ITV since 2010), whose protagonists speak with an accent that resembles Cockney (Cole & Evans 2021: 647).[12] Although the variety spoken in this

[11] As reported by Schleef & Ramsammy (2013: 27), TH-fronting was identified as being favoured by working-class adolescents in other sociolinguistic studies, too (e.g. Milroy 1996; Kerswill 2003; Stuart-Smith & Timmins 2006; Stuart-Smith *et al.* 2007), demonstrating that this is true not only in London.

[12] The reason for this linguistic shift in the area of Essex is a historical one, and it is well explained by Cole & Evans (2021: 642): 'As well as being the name of a language variety, "Cockney" is also the name given to a

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popular show may have enhanced the enregisterment of the modern Essex accent as sharing several phonological features with Cockney, some of these features are also found in excerpt (4), and *The Catherine Tate Show* is older than the ITV programme, therefore their perception as peculiar to Essex already existed.

When listening to the dialogue in excerpt (4), it can be noticed that realisations of /t/ in postvocalic environments are typically glottalised (e.g. in *what*). In other cases, as happens in most of Sam's utterances (e.g. in *told*, *to* and *today*), it is aspirated as [tʰ] and, at times, it involves some degree of affrication (see Wells 1982b: 322) and becomes [tˢ]. Nevertheless, the most evident and consistent phenomena in Paul and Sam's idiolects are diphthong shifts, especially pertaining to the PRICE and FACE lexical sets, so that in the dialogue in excerpt (4) Sam pronounces *today* [tədʌɪ], *way* [wʌɪ] and *die* [dɒɪ] (see Cole 2022 for an account of the influences of Cockney on the accent of Essex in naturally occurring speech). There is no apparent reason behind the choice of these features as being more appropriate than other London/Essex features to index an average middle-class couple, but it may be suggested that the couple's markedness in their vowel system combines well with their prosody, which is extremely loud and creates a humorous clash with the triviality of the content of their conversation. This clash is emphasised by the characters' animated facial expressions and hand gestures, thus achieving the humorous function from a multimodal perspective. Paul and Sam are portrayed as being sincere, friendly and easy-going, which meets only partially the stereotype of the Essex Man and the Essex Girl, pejorative terms for materialistic and unintelligent people (as explored by Biressi & Nunn 2013: 23–43).

5 Discussion and conclusion

This study has tried to demonstrate the role of performed language in combination with other markers of identity (e.g. physical aspects, clothing, mannerism, gestures and facial expressions) in the construction of fictional stereotypical characters in performances, very often portrayed as having regional accents. The key role of language varieties in the construction of a humorous tone, the ultimate purpose of stereotypes in comedy shows, is explained by the concepts of enregisterment and indexicality: the audience laughs at characters with an accent because they recognise that accent and its social meaning linked to specific personae as being a key feature of the parodic identity created for the show. In order to achieve a performative function, the representation of accents need not necessarily be fully representative of the variety, as the

group of people. Traditionally, a Cockney is considered to be an individual who was born within the sound of the Bow Bells in Cheapside, the City of London, and lived in London's traditional East End. However, over the last century, the Cockney Diaspora has seen traditional East London communities relocate to the London peripheries, the home counties, and, in particular, to Essex (see Watt et al. 2014; Fox 2015). No single reason led to the mass relocation of traditional, white, working-class East Londoners into Essex. Instead, the Cockney Diaspora emerged as a result of a wide range of inter-related factors such as the deindustrialisation of the East End and the slum clearance programmes which ran between the 1920s and the 1960s (Watt et al. 2014)'.

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connection between language and social image is established with the reiteration of just a few features. The findings of the present study converge with previous work that found that performed language 'is selective in choosing among a restricted inventory of salient and pervasive linguistic features that are considered indexical' (Werner 2021: 562).

As agreed by Irvine & Gal, linguistic features are 'understood through folk theories (ideologies) that often posit their inherent hierarchical, moral, aesthetic, or properties within broader cultural systems' (2000: 78). Identities, in other words, are indexed in part by their language variety because that variety has been enregistered in the public imaginary. Their exploitation in performed language is due to this phenomenon and, at the same time, confirms it and re-establishes it. To put it another way, 'speakers/writers may take an active part in the process of enregisterment', as stated by Beal (2010: 94). More recently, Di Martino (2022: 78) has confirmed that 'mass media representations contribute to the emergence of characterological figures and expand the social domain of individuals acquainted with register stereotypes, allowing them to respond to such register stereotypes'.

As demonstrated by Johnstone (2011), the notions of enregisterment and indexicality can be applied to humorous sketches, thus the adoption of this theoretical framework for the analysis in this research. Accent features in skits are socially recognised as indexing multiple but specific social factors and are emphatically introduced in the characters' catchphrases, and their repetition enhances both the humorous outcome of the text and the enregisterment of that specific accent/feature.

The linguistic analysis of some sketches from the popular British comedy *The Catherine Tate Show* has shown this direct correspondence between linguistic variables and social meaning. The characters in the show, who can arguably be considered as examples of 'accent tropes', use different phonological features pertaining to the same dialect macro-area (i.e. the southeast of England) with a different frequency and quality, according to their social-group belonging. A few phenomena were identified as cues for the characters' social factors (e.g. age, gender, sexual orientation, social class and education, but also personality traits). For example, a common variable in the idiolect of all the fictional characters that were analysed is the realisation of /t/: it is an alveolar stop in the case of a posh speaker, a flap when it is uttered by an outspoken old woman, a glottal stop in the lines of a belligerent teenager and it is aspirated by a middle-class woman from Essex.

The connection between the allophones and the speakers' identity is, as explained, not automatic, as it is grounded on only one of the several ideologically related meanings that comprise the indexical fields linked to the linguistic features (Eckert 2008). This connection works because it concurs with other contextual and visual factors to reach the goal of eliciting humour. This study confirms that enregisterment in performances has multiple potentials (Johnstone et al. 2006: 661), as linguistic variables index various cultural schemata and, at the same time, the constructed humorous personae can enregister particular linguistic forms, as is the case, for example, with the widely recognised respelling of the word *bother* as *bovver*, originating from the most popular catchphrase of one of Catherine Tate's characters. While it has concentrated exclusively

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on the analysis of English southeastern voices, it would be interesting to expand this research and conduct a similar study with other memorable characters portrayed by Catherine Tate, who are characterised as speaking with other regional British, American, or L2 English accents.

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