Special issue on indexicality and enregisterment in pop culture: Introduction[1]

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1 Context: the study of pop culture in linguistics and sociolinguistics

Pop culture can be viewed as a globalized (and commercial) entertainment-related phenomenon with a focus on 'the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system' (Fiske 2011: 19). It is widely represented in artifacts such as songs, TV shows, movies, video clips, comics, as well as within various digital registers used for interpersonal communication. Even though it has been widely recognized as a major cultural and globalizing force in present-day societies, (English) sociolinguistics, with its focus on 'real' (i.e. unplanned, spontaneous and, often, spoken) language as the locus of linguistic variation and change, has traditionally overlooked (but see Trudgill 1983) or even contested[2] the study of performed language (Queen 2018; Werner 2021).

As the term implies, such performed language is closely associated with the act of 'performance', defined as a 'kind of activity that is formally staged or an aspect of everyday life in which a person is oriented to and intends to have some effect on an audience' (Mukerji & Schudson 1986: 50). Two crucial insights that motivate linguistic engagement with such performances are (i) that they typically have a strong linguistic component (see, e.g., Bauman 2011) and (ii) that the performed language represented in

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[2] See, e.g., Chambers (1998), Denis & Tagliamonte (2017) or Sayers (2014) and the related 'debate' articles in a thematic issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* on the question whether media usage has a bearing on language change.

them is subject to highly specific circumstances of production, distribution and reception. Specifically, performed language has been characterized as scripted (e.g. written-to-be-spoken), fictional (i.e. emerging from a writer's imagination), preplanned and edited (e.g. by teams of writers, by performers, etc.) and typically mediatized and thus received asynchronically by the audience (Bell & Gibson 2011; Dynel 2011).[3]

Another characteristic property of performed language is that it is often conveyed by a 'persona' (Coupland 2011: 580), that is, a character perceived by the audience (e.g. a specific character played by an actor on screen or by a comedian on stage, a singer, etc.). Such a persona may or may not be congruent with the actual ('real-life') person impersonating it and, importantly, may use specific linguistic features to styl(iz)e their identity (e.g. as indigenous American: see Meek 2006; or as a culturally authentic Blues or Country music performer: see De Timmermann *et al.* 2024; Werner & Ledermann 2024; for a critical perspective on how white actors mimic African American English, see, e.g., Bucholtz & Lopez 2011). In sum, it is evident that all of the aforementioned factors potentially render performed language as an 'instance … of strategic linguistic design' (Werner 2021: 561) radically different from other forms of spoken and written communication, which in turn may affect the analysis of contextual factors in sociolinguistic work, for instance. It is further worth noting that in pop cultural artifacts the linguistic sign and other modes of communication (e.g. images, music, etc.) regularly interact, motivating multimodal approaches (Van Leeuwen 2015).

This theoretical interest briefly outlined in the preceding passages concurs with an increasing recognition of the 'socially transformative potential' (Coupland 2011: 582) of pop culture in terms of determining people's knowledge, opinions and values. In other words, performed language as used in pop culture has been accepted as an important and ubiquitous form of everyday language (see also Coupland 2016b), which may simultaneously serve as a marker of identities (see further section 3). Given this extensive social impact, it has been argued that linguists should not merely view performed language as yet another form of linguistic data but also as 'language that is embedded in the larger processes of representation and dissemination via the many forms of PC [= pop culture] we experience every day' (Trotta 2018: 29).

Looking back over the past couple of decades, indeed there have been a number of publications examining language in pop culture. These can roughly be divided into three broad areas:

- Work that argues for or adopts the view that performed language is a legitimate object of study in (socio)linguistics;
- Studies that explore how language use constructs identity and place;
- Explorations of the role of globalization in establishing English as the dominant language of pop culture.

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[3] Performances may also occur 'live', of course, with arguably more immediate interaction between performers and the audience, as in live concerts (see Jansen & Gerfer 2023) or theater and comedy (see Clark 2019). This is not the default context, however (see Bell & Gibson 2011; Werner 2022).

As described above, any retrospective account of work on language and pop culture starts with theorizations of performance (Bauman 1975). Such work spawned a great deal of interest in performed language as an object of study in sociolinguistics in contrast to the Labovian focus on 'vernacular', unmonitored speech. Indeed, as some argued, everyday speech is also a type of performance in which people style their speech to suit their audience or for specific purposes, as groundbreaking studies on crossing, styling and stylization have shown (see, e.g., Bell 1999; Coupland 2007; Rampton 2014). Subsequently, scholars began to explore secondary linguistic representations of ethnic others in contexts such as hip-hop culture and stand-up comedy (Bucholtz 1999, 2004; Cutler 2003; Chun 2004). More recently, a 2011 special issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* devoted to the sociolinguistics of performance established how performances are linguistically stylized, potentially producing significant sociolinguistic effects and contributing to language change, enregisterment and the reinforcement or challenging of language attitudes (see Bauman 2011; Bell & Gibson 2011; Bucholtz & Lopez 2011; Coupland 2011; Gibson 2011; Johnstone 2011).

A closely related line of research showcases the central role of language in constructing and negotiating identity and place in various forms of pop culture, including music (Trudgill 1983; Beal 2009; Duncan 2017; Gerwin 2017; Werner 2019; Jansen 2022; Werner & Ledermann 2024), television and film (Meek 2006; Bucholtz & Lopez 2011; Dynel 2011; Mitchell 2020; Pua & Hiramoto 2020; Fought & Eisenhauer 2022; Viollain 2023), comics (Cutler 2023; Walshe 2023) and digital media (Cutler 2016; Wilson 2024), while others have developed broader perspectives on fiction, highlighting communalities across various artifacts (e.g. Denis & Tagliamonte 2017; Montini & Ranzato 2021a). Such work highlights how dialects and accents serve as markers of both personal and regional identity and illustrates their role in reflecting and negotiating the tension between local and global influences, and across intersecting categories of race, gender and ethnicity. Whether in the global music industry, Hollywood films or social media, linguistic choices reflect both resistance to and reinforcement of dominant ideologies, illustrating the complex interplay between language, culture and identity in pop culture. Contrary to the assertion that mediatized language has little effect on language use, this body of work also suggests that people are not passive consumers of pop culture and that, through it, they are exposed to language varieties that are not part of their daily repertoires and the social values attached to different ways of talking. Ultimately, exposure can lead to enregisterment and shifts in language attitudes, potentially resulting in uptake and language change (see Peng 2021).

A third point worth making is that globalization and digital technology have allowed pop cultural disseminators (from international music, television and film conglomerates to individual content producers on social media) to spread their products to international audiences. As Appadurai (1996) and later Pennycook (2007) point out, language is an essential component of the cultural flows that characterize globalization, highlighting how languages are affected by worldwide movements of people, media and ideas, eventually leading to the creation of new linguistic forms and the recontextualization of existing languages. These processes and effects are highly visible in pop cultural

artifacts from digital media to music (see, e.g., contributions to Hollington *et al.* 2022), and while the spread of English as a global lingua franca is a highly salient aspect of global pop culture, a number of studies focus on how specific varieties of English are becoming internationally recognized and enregistered through pop culture (Johnstone 2011; Moody 2021a). Examples include African American English (Bucholtz & Lopez 2011; De Timmerman *et al.* 2024), Scottish English (Cutler 2016; Braber 2018), local British varieties (Beal 2009; Gerwin 2017; Flanagan 2019; Ilbury 2024; Montiel-McCann *et al.* in press) and Caribbean English Creoles (Jansen & Westphal 2017; Wilson 2024).

At the same time, recent contributions take account of the multimodal nature of pop culture artifacts and thus explore the complex interactions and indexicalities between linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial and other modes, including the body (Bucholtz & Hall 2016; Montiel-McCann in press). As Werner (2022) points out, multimodality has been the focus in a number of studies of film, television, advertising and music videos, such as the volume by Djonov & Zjao (2014), but also more recently in comics (Dunst *et al.* 2018), the interaction between lyrics and music (Morini 2013; several contributions in West 2019) and telecinematic language and cinematographic techniques (Gentile 2021; several contributions in Hoffmann & Kirner-Ludwig 2020). Other recent studies look at the combination of linguistic and sartorial practices of Latinx rappers (Garley 2019), music and strategic camerawork in televised discourse (Eberhardt 2024), and racialized performance in stand-up comedy (Calhoun & Yoo 2024), to name but a few.

In view of the theoretical and practical significance of performed language and given the large body of works as described in the foregoing paragraphs, it can be claimed with some confidence that the traditional reluctance of sociolinguists to seriously engage with it has largely been overcome. In fact, its study has continuously been normalized (Pennycook 2010; Androutsopoulos 2016) into a 'sociolinguistics of performance' (Bell & Gibson 2011; see also above) or 'sociolinguistics of fiction' (Stamou 2018), with 'pop cultural linguistics' (Werner 2018, 2022) recently emerging as a broader research paradigm. These developments have been fostered by trends in linguistics at large, with relevant resources such as the *Movie Corpus/TV Corpus* (Davies 2021), theses (e.g. Reichelt 2018; Watanabe 2022), textbooks (e.g. Beers Fägersten 2016; Locher & Jucker 2021; Larroque 2023) and publications from various subfields (see, e.g., contributions to the specialized *Journal of Language and Pop Culture*) becoming increasingly available.

Specifically, there is also a growing body of sociolinguistic journal special issues (e.g. Loureiro-Rodríguez & Moyna 2024) and book-length publications on pop culture (e.g. Queen 2015; Boberg 2021; Fought & Eisenhauer 2022; Jansen 2022), which indicate that sociolinguistics has developed into an important research paradigm for the study of performed language as it possesses a vast potential to contribute towards understanding pop cultural manifestations as multimodal realizations with an extended social impact as described above. To complement and update such efforts (and to balance out the bias towards sociophonetic analyses, which have prevailed in relevant work), this special issue aims (i) to showcase recent

sociolinguistic approaches to English as *the* language of pop culture and (ii) to offer novel perspectives on how current work addresses core concerns in contemporary sociolinguistics centered around indexicality (Irvine & Gal 2000; Silverstein 2003) and enregisterment (Agha 2005).

The choice of these two specific notions is by no means random as pop culture involves (large) audiences in the process of enregisterment, both in terms of reinforcing existing stereotypes and ideologies but also perpetuating them and possibly transforming them (Stamou *et al.* 2015; Squires 2016). This process can further influence language attitudes and may eventually affect language change as audiences (e.g. viewers, listeners and readers) learn to identify the cultural value (Agha 2003) associated with the linguistic features and adjust their speech accordingly (i.e. adopting culturally trendy or high-status forms, avoiding forms that have low cultural value or embracing such forms to express resistance to normativity). Therefore, while individual contributions to the present special issue (see section 3) might also touch upon related concepts (e.g. styling/ stylization, multilingualism, stereotyping, language ideologies, etc.), each article emphasizes the explanatory power of indexicality and enregisterment as sociolinguistic frames for the understanding of pop culture as a multifaceted and heterogeneous phenomenon. Together, with their focus on performed language, the articles contribute towards taking research on indexicality and enregisterment in new directions.

2   Indexicality and enregisterment and their relevance for the study of pop culture

Indexicality and enregisterment are useful concepts when it comes to the sociolinguistic study of performed language as represented in pop culture as they directly pertain to the social meaning of linguistic variation (Eckert 2018). To provide some more background, the genesis of these concepts and their relevance will be fleshed out in order to clarify how they articulate with the individual contributions and their common themes.

The semiotic term *indexicality* (Irvine & Gal 2000; Silverstein 2003) refers to how linguistic signs index or 'point to' people located across geographical and/or social space. In the first-order indexical sense proposed by Silverstein, linguistic features of particular registers (e.g. н-dropping, /v/ for /ð/ and /f/ for /θ/ in British English) index the speech of working-class Londoners, whereas knowing which lexical forms take the /ɑː/ vs. the /æ/ variants is an index of being an educated speaker of RP (Agha 2003: 235). Through repeated metapragmatic reference, linguistic policing and grammar books, but also through mediated representations (e.g. children's animated cartoons; see, e.g., Lippi-Green 2012), the qualities or traits associated with certain groups of speakers can become detached from their the geographical or social roots and become 'floating signifiers' (Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1950]: 63–4 cited in Thurlow & Jaworski 2017: 549) or signifiers that are able to receive any meaning.

In line with the 'third wave' sociolinguistic focus on social meaning (Eckert 2018), when certain linguistic features are deployed in pop culture, they begin to transcend

national and cultural boundaries and function as mobile resources (Blommaert 2010: 218). Performers are aware of the indexical potential of linguistic features and exploit them to create social meaning as well as to fulfill genre expectations (Bell & Gibson 2011: 559). For instance, as repeatedly shown, features of Southern American English and selected vernacular universals (such as *ain't*) are viewed as 'belonging' to the diction of Country lyrics, irrespective of the actual regional provenance of artists (Duncan 2017; Werner & Ledermann 2024). In certain kinds of performance, it is common for selected linguistic features to co-occur with representations of particular characterological figures and/or associated traits and characteristics, which further naturalizes or 'enregisters' the link between the two.

Accordingly, the conceptual links people make between linguistic repertoires or registers and particular types of people and the associated social meanings are referred to as *enregisterment* (Agha 2005), which 'involves the circulation of linguistic forms in social practice and the linking of those forms with social identities and activities' (Johnstone 2016: 635). Once a stylistic variant attains 'higher order indexicality' (Silverstein 2003: 194) or becomes enregistered, attitudes towards it become apparent (Jansen 2018: 118). This process is furthered through the repetition of such links in pop cultural performances like stand-up comedy, televised sit-coms and the like. Yet performances also have the potential to resist normative expectations and trigger shifts in language ideologies among audience members (Beal 2009; see also Gerwin, this volume).

Indexicality and enregisterment are especially relevant to the pop cultural artifacts analyzed in this special issue because language variation and the social meanings linked with particular accents and styles are central to the portrayal of particular types of people in pop culture. An early, and perhaps the most widely known, study in this area is Trudgill (1983), which illustrates the use of 'Americanness' as an indexical of mainstream pop culture and vernacular usage as an indexical of (local) authenticity (see also Beal 2009; Coupland 2011; Moody 2012; Flanagan 2019; Jansen & Gerfer 2023; Shigeta-Watanabe in press; among others).

As Bell & Gibson (2011: 559) point out, interpreting such language variation entails a 'semiotic backdrop of existing meanings and associated forms', without which the performance would have little meaning. Performers are thus highly aware of the social meaning attached to different ways of talking. For instance, Jansen (2018: 118) writes that '[w]hen a singer uses a specific set of features to evoke a certain image, then s/he is aware that a certain stylistic variant operates as an index for a certain social meaning'. This process is also particularly apparent in (animated) films, in which language is used as a 'shortcut to characterization' (Queen 2015: 155), that is, a quick way to build character, bringing viewers to 'associate particular characters and lifestyles with specific social groups' (Lippi-Green 2012: 104). In this respect, it has been shown, for instance, that the use of non-standard varieties like African American English in animated films is associated with minor and comical roles and correlates with unfavorable character traits and social status designations, which may lead to stereotypical representations and stigmatization of this speaker group (see, e.g., the overview Werner & Summer 2024: 231).

Furthermore, as pointed out by Appadurai (1996) and Pennycook (2007), language is an essential component of the cultural flows that characterize globalization (see also section 1). They note that global movements of people, media and ideas lead to the creation of new linguistic forms as well as to the recontextualization of existing languages and ways of talking as resources that can be endlessly taken up, repeated, reanimated and recycled. Concretely, this is illustrated in Alim *et al.* (2009), for instance, for the larger domain of hip hop culture, which has developed into a worldwide movement characterized by processes of language mixing, codeswitching, crossing, styling and stylization to create linguistic identities. Several contributions to this special issue also emphasize the role that language (as it is used in pop culture) plays in shaping global and local identities and how this process reveals the growing power and influence of English in the lives of people in a globalized world.

3   Overview of contributions and common themes

The contributions of the present special issue all focus squarely on the themes of indexicality and enregisterment and investigate how they play out in a variety of individual pop cultural manifestations.

In their study 'Decoding Bollywood: Why Hindi-English code-switching and standard English outrank Indian English', Claire Cowie, Lalita Murty and Beck Sinar start from the general observation that Bollywood films, which are commercially driven productions aimed mainly at Indian audiences, have historically been dominated by the Hindi language. They observe that even with the gradual inclusion of English over the years, the dialogue of the main urban elite characters primarily remains rooted in Hindi. This contrasts with the code-switching tendencies of urban elites in casual conversations as well as other Indian media formats, such as chat shows, where English often takes precedence. While young urban elites may occasionally use English alone, their counterparts in Bollywood films tend to do so likewise, but strictly adhering to standard syntax. In their study, they illustrate that in Bollywood films, English is used without code-mixing primarily by minority groups like Goan Catholics, and their English showcases the morphosyntactic characteristics of Indian English. This usage differs from that observed outside films, where features of Indian English are more widespread. They eventually suggest that the conservative language patterns in Bollywood reflect the conflicting attitudes towards endormative Indian English varieties.

Anika Gerfer and Lisa Jansen explore the enregisterment of another non-standard variety in broadcast media in their contribution titled '"Di game show 'bout spellin' and ting": Jamaican Creole and cultural stereotypes in *Jamaican Countdown*'. Their research investigates how Jamaican Creole and cultural stereotypes of Jamaicans are depicted in the sketch *Jamaican Countdown*, which featured as part of the long-running BBC Three comedy series *Famalam*. The parody stands in stark contrast to the British original game show *Countdown*, known for its intellectual and structured nature, by incorporating elements of Jamaican Creole and Jamaican English for humor. The authors also highlight that despite its comedic intent, the sketch has been criticized for perpetuating cultural

stereotypes about Jamaicans. Their study specifically examines phonetic, morphosyntactic and lexical features used in the sketch. Using a blend of qualitative and quantitative approaches, it analyzes these linguistic features and considers how both language and visual components conspire to shape the representation of cultural stereotypes. Findings indicate that while the linguistic portrayal in the sketch avoids reinforcing stereotypes, other aspects, including visual and contextual elements, do serve to uphold cultural stereotypes about Jamaicans. Overall, Gerfer and Jansen suggest that this underscores the intricate relationship between language and cultural representation in media, especially within parodic contexts.

The aforementioned contribution links to Luca Valleriani's analysis of another British comedy format, in which he studies 'Accent enregisterment through humour in *The Catherine Tate Show*'. He argues that this specific show, which originally aired on the BBC in the early 2000s, serves as a valuable resource for examples of stereotypical language varieties associated with various television tropes, illustrating the general perceptions of speakers from specific regional areas of the British Isles within British society, and how the depiction of such speakers contributes to enregisterment of dialects. Building on earlier studies related to dialects in media and their stereotypical portrayals, Valleriani examines linguistic features unique to the Southeast of England, which are utilized to construct some of the fictional characters of the show. The analysis identifies distinct phonological traits that subtly position Tate's recurring characters both regionally and socially and highlights that the important function of different language varieties in establishing a humorous tone can be understood through the ideas of enregisterment and indexicality. Audiences find humor in characters with accents because they identify the accent and its associated social implications as tied to particular personae, which are essential to the parody constructed for such shows. The study also confirms that within performed language depicting accents does not have to be entirely accurate or comprehensive; instead, the relationship between language and social identity can be formed through the repetition of only a few distinct features.

The interplay of dialect, humor and comedy is also a central aspect in Johanna Gerwin's study 'The role of dialect in comedy performances: Focus on enregisterment and humor'. Like Valleriani, she grounds her examination in the fact that using non-standard linguistic features is a core characteristic of many popular comedy performances. Specifically, she explores how dialect enhances the humor within such comedy acts and how these humorous dialect performances contribute to the enregisterment of a particular dialect. To this end, she analyzes online clips from three live comedy shows available online, Stephen Buchanan's 'How to survive Glasgow', Ali G's 'Harvard Commencement Speech 2004', Riaad Moosa's 'I have a weird accent', as well as a clip from the British sitcom *PhoneShop.* Each of these dialect performances illustrates the linguistic and metalinguistic processes that are central to enregisterment. Additionally, the study shows that in each instance, the dialect serves a specific purpose in creating humor, whether by fostering a connection with the audience or by challenging a (linguistic) status quo. Eventually, the author argues

that while dialect can enhance a performer's comedic effectiveness, humor can simultaneously facilitate the enregisterment of a dialect.

The final contribution, co-authored by Derek Denis and Vidhya Elango, focuses on the representation of an urban variety in social media. In their article '"If ur from Toronto you'll understand": Register change and metadiscursive engagement with mediatized Multicultural Toronto English', they illustrate how Multicultural Toronto English (MTE), a linguistic variety emerging in Toronto, Canada, is particularly associated with racialized youth and how it is enregistered. They suggest that the ongoing process of enregisterment of MTE unfolds through discussions on social media, which helps spread the variety to a broader audience. Based on investigations of online metadiscursive interactions with depictions of MTE, they analyze how audiences engage with, perceive and reinterpret MTE through metadiscourse on both grassroots and institutional social media platforms and discuss the implications this has for its enregisterment. Overall, the authors contend that the mediatization of MTE affects how actual speakers of MTE, especially Black youth, may have their speech perceived and interpreted.

As these summaries show, this special issue explores the intricate relationship between language and contemporary social representation through the lens of pop culture, focusing on the role of English, the functions of scripted and performed language, and the contribution of sociolinguistics. In this special issue, the analyses are mainly qualitative and are thus a good starting point for generating initial findings and exploring understudied areas of investigation. Indeed, we expect that such pioneering in-depth qualitative work can eventually lead to informed (ideally, hypothesis-testing) quantitative research in the future.

The following subsections identify three important themes that cut across the articles in the special issue: (i) the role of English as the language of pop culture; (ii) the functions of largely scripted and performed language in processes of contemporary social representation; and (iii) the value of sociolinguistics as a versatile subdiscipline for analyzing pop culture.

3.1   The role of English as the language of pop culture

English has emerged as a dominant language in various pop cultural contexts, serving both as a medium of communication and a marker of identity (Pennycook 2007; Alim *et al*. 2009; Blommaert 2010). Blommaert (2010) and Pennycook (2007) observe that English, as a global language, is both a powerful tool for global communication and cultural exchange and a complex site of cultural negotiation. English enables the flow of pop culture across the globe, but as it spreads, it is continuously reshaped by the local contexts in which it is used. This hybridization and recontextualization of English reflect the dynamic relationship it has to local languages and lects. English is thus a 'glocalizing' language, reflecting the diverse cultural influences and the broader global engagement of young people around the world.

In this special issue, different varieties of English play a crucial role in all of the contributions. English, especially in its standard form, is often used to signal modernity and elite status, while other varieties are reserved for minority characters like Goan Catholics, working-class provincials (Valleriani) or ethnic others (Gerfer & Jansen; Denis & Elango), marking them as distinct from dominant cultural narratives. This selective use of English highlights its status as a global lingua franca while also reflecting the complexities of its adoption in non-Western cultural contexts (Moody 2021a). Similarly, in the comedic performances analyzed in the articles, English and its varieties (i.e. Indian English, Jamaican Creole, South African English, London Jamaican, regional British dialects, Glaswegian and Multicultural Toronto English) are integral to the construction of cultural narratives and identities within pop culture. 'Standard' English is juxtaposed with other varieties to create a comedic contrast that reflects and possibly subverts cultural stereotypes. While other varieties are used to entertain people, standard British and American English remain the norm by which the characters are judged, largely reinforcing their status as the varieties of intellect and order (but see Gerwin's analysis).

3.2   *The functions of largely scripted and performed language in processes of contemporary social representation*

The articles in this collection show how linguistic features are enregistered through humor and performance, how language practices in media diverge from real-life usage, and how these practices contribute to broader cultural and societal narratives.

Specifically, the contributions emphasize how scripted and performed language in pop culture serves multiple functions in the representation of social identities and stereotypes. For example, comedy sketches utilize regional accents and dialects to create humor, which simultaneously enregisters these linguistic features with certain social identities (see Valleriani; Gerfer & Jansen). They show, for instance, how exaggerated use of Cockney and South-East English accents and Jamaican Patwa by characters aligns with stereotypical representations of speakers as lower-class or less educated. The scripted nature of these performances amplifies such stereotypes, making them more recognizable and reinforcing their social significance. These performances not only entertain but also shape public perceptions, illustrating the important role that scripted language plays in contemporary social representation (see section 1). Similarly, in the Bollywood films examined by Cowie *et al.*, Hindi, standard English and Indian English index specific social groups but in ways that reflect and perpetuate attitudes towards local varieties rather than accurately reflecting how urban elites or ethnic minorities actually talk. Thus, it is fair to say that scripted language in pop culture not only entertains through language but also perpetuates the social norms and identities associated with certain linguistic choices.

In particular, the articles point to the role of humor in shaping social perceptions and reinforcing or challenging cultural stereotypes through language. Humor is a powerful tool that leverages linguistic variation to create comedic effects, builds rapport with

audiences and turns them into active agents involved in the negotiation of new meanings (Maudlin & Sandlin 2015: 369). This use of humor often reinforces societal perceptions of particular accents and the social groups they represent, perpetuating these stereotypes through comedic exaggeration (Valleriani; Gerfer & Jansen). Yet, in other cases, humor may invite audiences to question the social hierarchies and linguistic norms that the performance subverts (Gerwin).

Finally, humor plays a crucial role in the enregisterment of dialects, making certain linguistic features more socially recognizable and associating them with specific identities (Gerwin). Indeed, the analysis of dialect use in comedy shows that humor can accelerate the enregisterment process, where certain linguistic features become widely recognized and linked to particular social identities because of the global reach of pop cultural products. For example, Stephen Buchanan's use of Glaswegian dialect in his performance 'How to survive Glasgow' (Gerwin) not only entertains but crucially also reinforces the association between the dialect and the cultural identity of Glaswegians.

3.3   Sociolinguistics as a versatile subdiscipline for analyzing pop culture

While other linguistic subdisciplines have also engaged fruitfully with performed language (see Werner 2022: section 5), sociolinguistics provides a powerful framework for analyzing the complex ways in which language interacts with social identity, media representation and cultural practices in pop culture. With its focus on analyzing linguistic features, variation and language ideologies, the sociolinguistic approach enables researchers to focus on the propositional and extra-propositional meanings of particular utterances in specific pop cultural contexts. Thus, linguistic signs may also carry non-referential meaning such as when features of a speaker's register index their social class. This special issue underscores the usefulness of sociolinguistic analysis for unpacking the complexities of language in media and showcasing its versatility in analyzing pop cultural texts.

The contributions uncover the nuanced social meanings that underlie the scripted use of language variation in pop culture, shedding light on the processes by which linguistic features become associated with specific social identities (e.g. Indian English and Goan Catholics; South-East British dialects and working-class people; Jamaican Creole and Jamaicans) and the broader social implications of their use. Sociolinguistic theories of enregisterment illustrate the social functions of language as well as the processes by which dialects become socially recognized and imbued with cultural meaning. This approach underscores the importance of sociolinguistic analysis for understanding the intersection of language, identity and media.

The articles in the special issue further illustrate the value of attuning to multimodality as an essential dimension of meaning-making in pop culture. Multimodality refers to the ways in which different representational modes including color, images, sounds, movement, gestures, facial expression and the written/spoken word as well as linguistic stylistic choices combine to make meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001). This also

converges with Bell & Gibson (2011: 559), who point out that sociolinguistic analysis of performance necessarily entails attention to all the modalities involved in a particular performance, not just to language. Multimodal analysis takes into account the role of linguistic and extralinguistic dimensions of human communication in order to fully convey and interpret meaning. Such an approach is essential for analyzing pop cultural data, particularly when this involves various combinations of still and moving images, sounds and written or spoken language, as is typically the case in relevant artifacts. It is not just language that serves to construct identities but also the confluence of characters' hair, clothing, bodily hexis, graphic images, music and so on that work in concert to complete the process of meaning-making, eventually leading to the enregisterment of specific varieties and personae (Gerfer & Jansen; Gerwin; Denis & Elango).

4   Conclusion

By examining the role of English in pop culture, the functions of scripted and performed language, and the utility of sociolinguistic approaches for studying pop culture, this special issue aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language shapes and is shaped by contemporary social representation in global media. Frameworks and concepts from sociolinguistics, including the focus on dialects, code-switching, semiotic approaches to style and language ideologies can be usefully combined with multimodal analysis to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of how people make social meaning in creating and consuming pop culture.

Collectively, the articles demonstrate the critical importance of sociolinguistics in analyzing the complexities of language in pop culture. Thus, they offer insights that are both academically rigorous and socially relevant and may further inform perspectives from closely related domains, such as research on World Englishes (e.g. Moody 2021b), as well as work in other linguistic subfields and neighboring areas, such as pragmatics (e.g. Locher *et al*. 2023), stylistics (e.g. Werner & Schubert 2023), translation studies (e.g. Montini & Ranzato 2021b) and language education (e.g. Werner & Tegge 2021).

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