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Kamala Harris, Maya Rudolph and the Prosody of Parody

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Abstract

Despite advances in the studies of both ethnolinguistic and prosodic variation, linguists still know relatively little about how individual speakers may use prosody to construct and perform aspects of their identity in dynamic ways. One novel way to study how individuals employ both personal and ethnolinguistic variation is to examine salient linguistic features that occur both in a natural context and in parodies of that same context. The current study analyzes speech from U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and actor Maya Rudolph, who frequently parodies Harris on the American television program Saturday Night Live. Using a comparative analysis of data coded in the Autosegmental Metrical Phonology framework using MAE-ToBI conventions, I show that Rudolph closely mirrors several of the unique prosodic patterns employed by Harris, but that Rudolph does not simply mimic her; rather she employs exaggerated versions of Harris' patterns, especially higher F0 peaks and more phrase-initial falsetto phonation. The results of this study expand our knowledge about how specific idiolectal variants connected to social and ethnic styles are enregistered as part of the public discourse. Additionally, it demonstrates the value of examining parodic performance to better understand and contextualize the speech of public figures.

Index Terms: prosody, sociophonetics, African American Language, parody, ethnolinguistic variation, political speech

1. Introduction

Former California Senator Kamala Harris began her campaign for the presidency in 2019, and was selected by now-U.S. president Joe Biden as his Vice Presidential running mate on August 19, 2020. On January 20, 2021, she was inaugurated as the first woman, first black, first Asian-American, and first biracial Vice President of the United States. As a prominent public figure, Harris has long been the subject of commentary and even parody, especially on the popular U.S. television program Saturday Night Live (SNL). SNL is a comedy variety show that frequently discusses current events, and it is well known for its use of famous comedic actors who parody political figures [1]. Since 2019, actor Maya Rudolph has periodically played the role of Kamala Harris on SNL. Rudolph and Harris share a few important biographical similarities: namely their gender, age (45-60), and unique racial backgrounds (both have one black parent and one non-black parent and identify variably as biracial and/or black). This is of particular note given that Harris uses her position as a multiracial black woman as part of her political persona, employing specific sociophonetic features of Mainstream American English (MAE) and African American English (AAE) to do so [2];[3]. As a comedic actor impersonating Harris. Rudolph is charged with identifying Harris' unique social and linguistic features and matching or highlighting them for comedic effect. Indeed, Rudolph has been praised for her performance as Harris, including by Vice President Harris herself on Twitter [4]. The current paper examines the ways in which Kamala Harris employs selected prosodic features associated with both MAE and AAE, as well as how Rudolph adapts these features and sometimes exaggerates them for comedic effect, thus further enregistering Harris' unique style for the public [5]. This paper is among the first to analyze the ways in which prosodic features are especially salient in a comedic context and can be used in the construction not only of a specific type of political persona but also in the public image parody of a such a figure, thus reifying the persona.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data Collection and Coding

In order to examine prosodic features and patterns associated with MAE and AAE present in the speech of Harris and Rudolph, I built a corpus consisting of all the clips instances where Rudolph parodied Harris on SNL between September 2019 and November 2020. The data consist of 10 audio clips (5 from each speaker). Each clip of Rudolph corresponds to a clip from Harris in a similar context from the preceding week (with one exception for a speech given during SNL's summer break). For example, on October 7, 2020, Kamala Harris debated then-Vice President Mike Pence. The following Saturday, October 10th, Rudolph impersonated Harris on a debate alongside another actor who impersonated Pence. This data set is thus unique in that it contains comparable clips from both Harris' real-world speeches and Rudolph's timey parodies of those same speeches, giving us a clear picture of Rudolph's inspiration for each parodic performance.

The clips varied in length, but given that Rudolph's SNL parodies were generally much shorter than Harris' real speeches, analysis of each clip was capped at the minimum number of Intonational Phrases (IPs) in a clip (N=35) Overall, the total number of IPs examined here is 401, due to the tightly constrained nature of the corpus. The clips were annotated in Praat using the conventions of MAE-ToBI [6];[7]. Following the MAE-ToBI labelling, the corpus was subsequently annotated for a number of phonetic criteria that have shown to differ between MAE and AAE, including number of pitch accents per phrase and F0 differences within the L+H* pitch accent and peak delay, also defined as pitch excursion within a given syllable [8];[9]. The figures below show examples of phrases annotated using MAE-ToBI conventions as well as additional phonetic labels for peak delay and F0 landmarks, since the MAE-ToBI conventions were not designed to capture phonetic differences.

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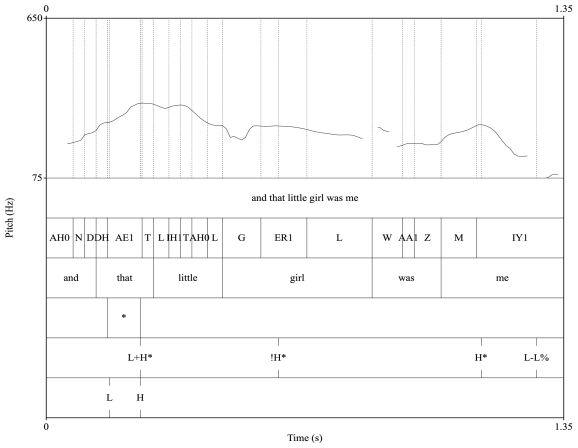

Figure 1. *MAE-ToBI-coded spectrogram of Harris uttering the phrase "And that little girl was me", during the first 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary Town Hall on 6/27/19 . This phrase contains a visible L+H* pitch accent on "that", a !H* pitch accent on "girl" and a second H* on "me" followed by an L-L% boundary tone.*

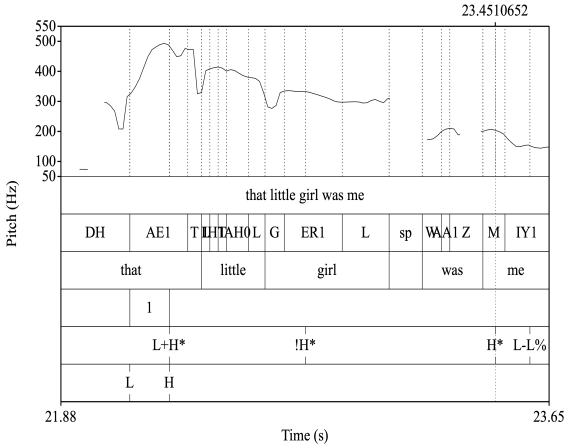

Figure 2. *MAE-ToBI-coded spectrogram of Rudolph uttering the phrase "That little girl was me" during a parody of the first 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary Town Hall that aired on SNL on 9/29/19 . This phrase also contains a visible initial L+H* pitch accent on "that" and a !H* pitch accent on "girl". This is again followed by an H* pitch accent on "me" and finally an L-L% boundary tone.*

2.2. Statistical Analysis

A number of regression models were implemented using the glm function in R [10]. Logistic models were built to compare (1) pitch accent type by speaker and (2) boundary type by speaker. Infrequently occurring pitch accents (H+!H and L*) and boundaries (H-H%) were excluded from this analysis due to their small numbers. (3) A Welch's t-test was also used to test for differences in the rates of pitch accent occurrence between the speakers. Linear regression models tested differences in (4) F0 slope for L+H* pitch accents by speaker, and (5) F0 peak height in pitch accent by speaker, in Hertz. Data visualizations were conducted using the ggplot2 package [11]. Finally, due to the low number of instances of phrase-initial falsetto phonation, this variable was analyzed qualitatively.

3. Results

Overall, results indicate that Maya Rudolph typically approximates Kamala Harris' rate of use of pitch accents, and pitch accent identity. Rudolph differs somewhat from Harris in her use of boundary tones, and the phonetic realization of the L+H* pitch accent, as well as her use of phrase-initial falsetto phonation. The results of each of these analyses will be discussed in turn.

3.1 Boundary Type

With respect to overall distribution of boundary tones in the corpus, the results of the logistic regression model that predicted boundary type by speaker showed significant differences between Rudolph and Harris (Estimate=-35.741, SE= 5.837, t=-6.123 p<.001). Overall, Rudolph uses a higher proportion of L-L% boundary tones (62.6%) than Harris (43%), with Harris using more H-L% tones (42.4%). Both speakers use a relatively low rate of the L-H% boundary (10.6% for Harris, 6.7% for Rudolph).

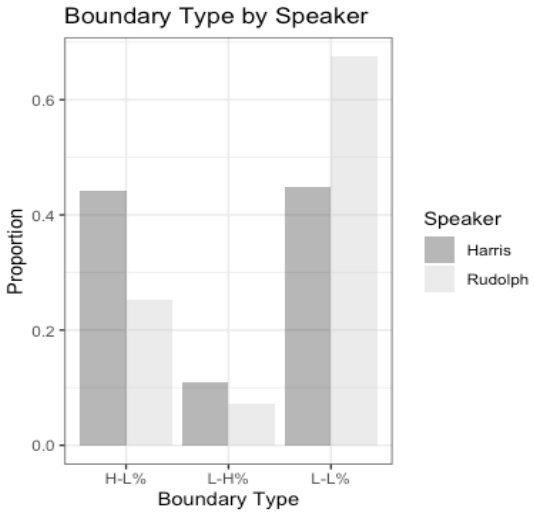

Figure 3: *Proportion of use of the three most common boundary tones in this data set, H-L%, L-H%, and L-L%, along with the proportion of the data set that they compose.*

Given the general patterns for boundary tones described in American English, the fact that Harris uses L-L% and H-L% in nearly equal proportions may be unexpected, since previous research has found that L-L% is typically the most frequently occurring boundary in declaratives [12];[13]. However, in political speech, speakers do have motivation to hold and not cede the floor, which is one common function of the H-L% boundary [12]. These results appear to indicate that while Rudolph is also using a relatively high proportion of H-L% tones relative to previous studies, she does not exactly match Harris' patterns with respect to this variable, instead behaving more like a typical MAE speaker with respect to boundary tones in declaratives.

3.2 Pitch Accent Type and Rate

Overall, both Harris and Rudolph show patterns of pitch accent use that may be more common for AAE speakers than for MAE speakers, given the high rate of use of the L+H* pitch accent in particular [9];[14]. This is somewhat surprising, given that most descriptions of MAE posit that L+H* should be significantly less common than H* in ordinary declarative phrases, though this pattern is more common in AAE than in other English varieties [9];[14]. Rudolph employs a slightly higher rate of L+H* than Harris (35.6%, N=195 vs. 28.6%, N=134). However, the results of the logistic mixed-effects regression model predicting pitch accent type based on speaker showed no difference in the use of these pitch accents by speaker (Estimate =-0.3740, SE= 0.2621, t= 1.427, p= .154). These results suggest that when Harris employs non-MAE patterns, Rudolph's parodies use the same patterns in a slightly exaggerated fashion.

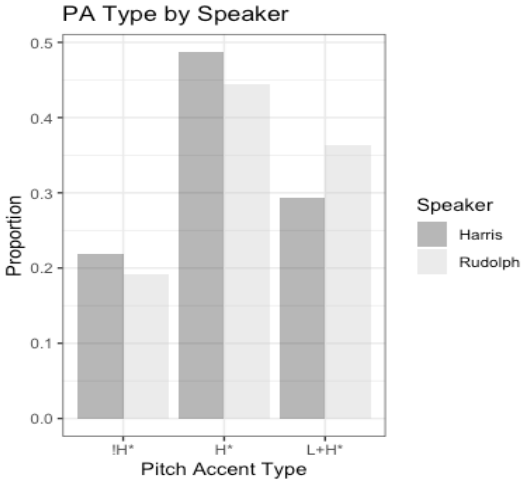

Figure 4: *Proportion of use of the three most common pitch accents in this data set, !H*, H* and L+H*, along with the proportion of the data set that they compose.*

With respect to number of pitch accents per phrase, Harris and Rudolph also generally match, with Rudolph using slightly more per phrase. Harris has an average rate of 3.81 pitch accents per phrase, while Rudolph has a rate of 4.32, though this difference is not statistically significant. Results of a Welch's two sample t-test reveal no difference in the rate of use of pitch accents per phrase overall in the data set (t=-1.7791, df=238.11, p=.0765

3.3 Slope in L+H*

In order to characterize Harris and Rudolph's intonational patterns both phonologically and phonetically, I also examined the realization of the L+H* pitch accents, as more extreme realizations have been found to vary in ethnolinguistic, social and stylistic ways [15]. In these models, speaker was found to be a predictor of for phonetic realization of this pitch accent (steeper F0 rises within the syllable) based on the result of a linear model testing slope of F0 rise by speaker (Estimate=504.57, SE= 77.38, t=6.522, p<.001). Additionally, this difference in slope appears to be driven by steeper rises and higher F0 peaks in Rudolph's phrases, given the results of a model testing F0 height in L+H* pitch accents by speaker (Estimate=35.741, SE= 5.837, t=6.123, p<.001). These findings suggest that Rudolph is using the specific phonetic implementation of the L+H* pitch accent to draw further attention to this aspect of Harris' speech, possibly for comedic effect.

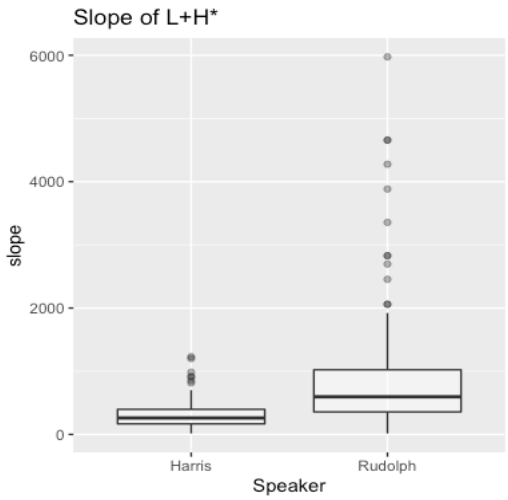

Figure 4: Differences in slope of (F0 change over time) in L+H pitch accents in phrases uttered by Harris and Rudolph. Rudolph's phrases generally have larger slopes, indicating that F0 within L+H* pitch accents increases over a longer time span in her phrases than in Harris'.*

3.4 Phrase Initial Falsetto

Finally, one additional pattern was observed in Harris' speech that appears to be even more prominent in Rudolph's parodies of her. Phrase-initial falsetto phonation has been documented as a stylistic phenomenon in the speech of some African American speakers, and does occur with some frequency in this data set [16];[17]. Following the methods of [18], falsetto here was primarily coded perceptually, though I set an F0 floor of 450Hz for its characterization, according to descriptions of the acoustic properties of falsetto by [19].

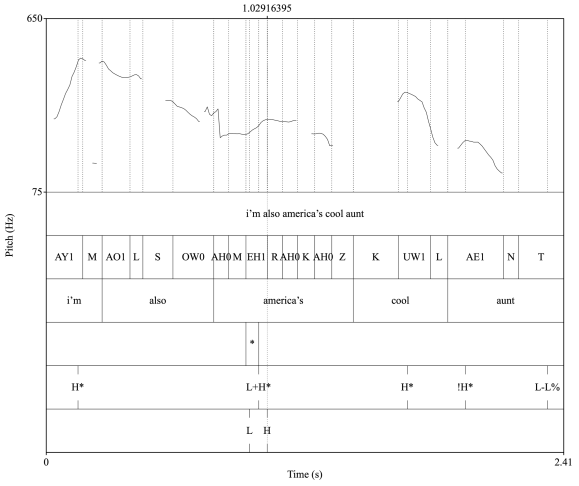

Figure 5. *MAE-ToBI-coded spectrogram of Rudolph uttering the phrase "I'm also America's cool aunt". This phrase contains visible phrase-initial falsetto that coincides with the first H* pitch accent, as well as an L+H* pitch accent on "America's". The range of the utterance is 140-518 Hz, with a mean of 399Hz.*

Although the number of instances of phrase-initial falsetto phonation in this corpus is too small for quantitative analysis, it is evident that this too is a resource that Rudolph uses to draw out aspects of Harris' speech that may be especially salient to the audience. Impressionistically, this appears to be a distinctive element in the speech Harris, but even more so in the speech of Maya Rudolph's parodies of Harris. Of the 401 IPs examined, 38 of them begin with such a tone. Of those 38 IPs with phrase-initial falsetto, 24 of them were utterances by Rudolph, while 14 were uttered by Harris, demonstrating that while Harris does employ this pattern, Rudolph likely exaggerates its frequency for comedic effect. Additionally, given the results showing that Rudolph's F0 rise during L+H* pitch accents was significantly higher than Harris', these results may also suggest that Rudolph's rises in these falsetto instances may also be more extreme, further adding to the dramatic effect.

Taken in conjunction with Rudolph's other accurate mimicries as well as exaggerations of Kamala Harris' prosodic features, these instances of phrase-initial falsetto phonation also support her effective imitation and amplification of the Vice President's sociophonetic patterns.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of these analyses demonstrate that Kamala Harris employs a unique linguistic style with features that reflect her position as a black, female political figure, and that these features are effectively imitated and exaggerated by Maya Rudolph in her impersonations of Harris. In this way, both Harris and Rudolph in a caricature of Harris, demonstrate how prosodic features may be salient and effective resources for public figures in the construction of a specific type of speaker persona. Of particular interest is the finding that Harris uses a greater proportion of the H-L% boundary tone in declaratives than Rudolph, given its relative scarcity in naturalistic speech of MAE speakers in declaratives. The results indicate no significant difference in the rate of use of pitch accents overall between the two speakers, as well as no significant difference in the use of pitch accent types. Both Harris and Rudolph employ a higher rate of use of L+H* pitch accent than may be expected for most MAE speakers, which that may serve to highlight Harris' alignment with AAE (and Rudolph's caricature drawing attention to this fact) [8];[9];[14]. With respect to the phonetic properties of the aforementioned L+H* pitch accents, Rudolph employs a more dramatic slope than Harris and this appears to be driven by differences in the maximum F0 during these pitch accents. Finally, Harris sometimes employs phrase-initial falsetto phonation; Rudolph also effectively parodies this feature, using it with even more frequency and potentially a more dramatic implementation than Harris does. These findings suggest that the use of these prosodic features is part of what characterizes Harris' speech and assists in the construction of her highly-specific political persona. Additionally, the fact that Rudolph is able to so effectively mimic and sometimes amplify these features for comedic effect suggests that these features are perceptually salient enough to be enregistered in the public imagination. In this way, our examination of Rudolph's prosodic features when she inhabits the role of Harris sheds light on how comedy and parody in particular may give us insight about what real speakers do in natural contexts.

Future studies may compare other comedic actors parodying political figures to see if they can effectively mimic similar prosodic properties. They may also examine audience response to use of different intonational contours as well as their phonetic properties in political and parodic contexts to test how much these differences in production are not only salient for listeners but also effective as comedic strategies. Finally, such data may also be useful for analyses of the political utility of the use of specific linguistic phenomena by politicians who act as characterological figures.

5. Acknowledgements

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