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Linguistic Variation in Judge Greg Mathis' Courtroom

Courtroom dramas have become a feature of American television viewing. Unlike the days of the fictional courtrooms of *Ironside* and *Perry Mason*, “reality” courtroom programs have expanded in numbers and can be seen across the country and at many hours of the day.¹ In addition, these “reality” courtroom programs (e.g., *Judge Joe Brown*, *Judge Hatchett*, *Judge Judy*, *Texas Justice*) have given viewers insights into the legal system and have provided us with a bit of humor and some seriousness when litigants confront each other or when judges rule on cases. For those who wish to investigate these programs as elements of popular culture, there are many directions from which to proceed. For sociologists and anthropologists, issues concerning group behavior, for example, can be analyzed. For psychologists, discussions about personality types, behaviors, and motives might arouse research interest. For linguists and for students interested in the study of language, courtroom programs can provide a rich source of data for linguistic analysis.

Certainly, language is a central issue in the conduct of legal proceedings. Following conceptual tools advanced in the study of language research, especially sociolinguistics, we may consider court trials as speech situations. According to Finegan (1994), a speech situation can be defined “as the coming together of various significant situational factors such



100 Milford A. Jeremiah

as purpose, topic and social relations” (p. 333). In watching courtroom series, viewers and those in the courtroom can soon determine the purpose for which adjudicators come to court, the issue being discussed and the relationship between litigants and the judge. The aforementioned variables (e.g., purpose, topic, social relations) influence the type of language used by litigants and by judges. In short, the topic of variation in language is an issue that allows for inquiry about courtroom proceedings, and analysts have a reasonable place to begin such an inquiry.

Related Studies

Studies concerning the use of language in courtroom settings have focused primarily on a broad field of study called forensic linguistics. Forensic linguistics addresses such issues as teaching a jury about meaning (Shuy, 2002), the coercive nature of language in courtroom hearings in cross-examination (Fairclough, 1989), language in the legal process (Cotterill, 2002), the nature and structure of witness and defendant accounts in courtroom trials (Harris, 2001), and the use of discourse markers (e.g., *now*, *see*, *well*) in cross-examination (Hale, 1999; Matoesian, 1993). Seldom do investigators examine the interrelationship of sociolinguistic variables that are central to courtroom dialogue, especially as such variables pertain to courtroom documentaries and to the study of popular culture. As for popular culture, courtroom presentations such as *Judge Joe Brown*, *Judge Judy*, and *Judge Alex* have become a part of the daily television fare, similar in popularity to such as programs as *Fear Factor*, *Survivor*, and the various *American Idol* events. The presence of these programs points to changes in the viewing habits of Americans. Furthermore, the variables mentioned above, as have been shown, influence shifts in styles or in registers of language. This line of reasoning should also hold true for persons who bring cases to court to be adjudicated within a dramatic environment. A courtroom series that has drawn the attention of this writer is that of Judge Greg Mathis. A salient feature of Judge Mathis’ show is his use of various linguistic styles when he pro-

Studies in Popular Culture

motes the show and when he conducts courtroom proceedings. Specifically, Judge Mathis shifts between formal and informal varieties of language. Unlike Judge Judy or Judge Joe Brown, who use more formal language, Judge Mathis displays an ability to shift along a linguistic continuum that might be one reason for his success on television. It is true that courtroom programs such as *Judge Mathis* are aired for their dramatic effect and for television ratings. Therefore, it would not be surprising to see and to hear these events conducted in a manner in which language and language variation are central factors used to elicit laughter or viewer curiosity. An example of Judge Mathis' use of language variation can be seen in this exchange with individuals in his courtroom:

Y'all out here having catfights tryin' to become jailbirds.

or,

She was a bag lady when she walked in to you?

In these examples, the judge's choice of the pronoun *Y'all* and the nouns *catfights*, *jailbirds*, and *bag lady* reveals an informal mode of language, and there are many examples of this style of informal language when listening to Judge Mathis in his courtroom setting.

In addition to social factors that shape the language heard in Judge Mathis' courtroom, it should be noted that the language used by Judge Mathis is part of a larger discussion of conversation or conversation analysis, sometimes referred to as ethnomethodology. This approach to language study seeks to "identify different types of utterances and isolat[e] the recurring patterns for their distribution...[in] natural conversations" (O'Grady, 2005, p. 543). The purpose of this paper, then, is to examine the language used by Judge Mathis in litigating cases. To do so, I propose three questions: 1) What are the features of conversation? 2) What linguistic units are salient in a study of variation in Judge Mathis' courtroom? and 3) What sociocultural features influence the way that Judge Mathis uses language in his courtroom? Much of the theoretical framework for this study is advanced by the earlier work of Gumperz & Hymes (1972) and O'Grady et al (2005).

Data for Study

Data for this study were collected over a six month period by viewing segments of Judge Mathis' program that are aired daily in the Baltimore metropolitan area. The data represent more than twenty different episodes of the *Judge Mathis* show. Some data samples were videotaped; others were transcribed, with attention paid to those portions of dialogue relevant for language study. (Consult Appendix A for data samples.)

Features of Conversation

A good place to begin, when examining the language of Judge Greg Mathis, is to consider that forms of language heard in his courtroom are part of the general topic of conversational analysis. As analysts have pointed out, there are structural elements to conversation (Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, 2003; Radford, Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen & Spenser, 1999). Conversation begins with an exchange of ideas between speakers and listeners. When one speaks, another is required to respond orally and/or with gestures. This exchange is known as an *adjacency pair* (O'Grady et al., 2005, p. 543). An adjacency pair is a set of utterances heard by two different speakers. When a person says to another, *How are you?* a listener is required to respond. Greetings are followed by greetings; invitations are accepted or refused; apologies are generally accepted or at least acknowledged. When these structural elements do not co-occur, speakers or writers become confused or draw negative opinions about listeners or the recipients of written communication. In addition, there is an orderly arrangement of elements in conversation that leads to *turn-taking*. When the rules for turn-taking are now followed, the situation in conversation becomes awkward when interlocutors compete for their place to speak. Judge Mathis imposes the rules for turn-taking in a very strict manner. There are instances, however, when plaintiffs and defendants violate the rules of turn-taking by speaking at the same time.

In those instances, Judge Mathis admonishes violators that they cannot speak simultaneously and commands them to be quiet.² Examples of the need to obey the rules of turn-taking can be seen in these statements to one of the litigants by Judge Mathis:

You need to speak to me and only when I allow you.

Ma'am, please be quiet. She didn't interrupt while you were giving your testimony.

or,

Let me hear from these gentlemen.

In an episode where plaintiffs and defendants are bent on continuing the dialogue, without regard for the rules of turn-taking, Judge Mathis simply withdraws emotionally or physically from the case until litigants refrain from speaking, as in this exchange.

If you all continue to speak, let me know when you are ready for me to rule.

At the end of a conversation, speakers close with certain linguistic clues such as *Take care now*, *Later*, or *Have a nice day*. The same holds true when Judge Mathis rules on a case, as in this statement:

You folks have a nice day.

He thus emphasizes the orderly arrangement of elements in the conversation.

In the case of the language heard in Judge Mathis' courtroom, conversation is marked by certain rules as well. At the initial stage of a case, typically a taped version of the case is presented to listeners, and the litigants respond either affirmatively or negatively about the charge or claim rendered against them. Following this initial exchange, the judge confirms or summarizes the case to date. Here the judge might use a range of linguistic styles or registers. Some styles may be humorous, some might be serious, or some might suggest an element of surprise on the judge's part. In this set of comments, the judge responds when two individuals are involved in a suit about a motor cycle:

Let me take a shot of this vodka...

Every week? You some kinna freak...?



or when an ex-wife visits the home of her ex-husband:

You were surprised when she rolled up with your husband.

In the first example above, Judge Mathis' wanting *to take a shot of this vodka* (with the informal term *shot*) and use of the word *freak* brought about laughter from those present in the courtroom. In the latter example above, Judge Mathis made a humorous response in a case involving an ex-lover and her husband with the choice of the word *rolled up*, an informal expression that has an element of surprise in this context.

Certainly, Judge Mathis commands Standard American English (SAE) and demonstrates this linguistic skill throughout the episodes. His formal variety of American English is typically used at the beginning and at the end of a case when the judge renders his judgments. Here are examples of his use of language at the beginning and at the end of a case.

Ma'am, prove your case.

and

I'll grant you a judgment in the amount of \$900. I cannot grant you anything for pain and suffering. Have a nice day.

The formal variety of language at the beginning and at the end of cases is meant to lend a serious tone to the legal process. Studies of language variation (which is the central issue of this essay) should provide the analyst with information regarding language in its social context. Labov (1972) takes a similar position when he states that, unlike invariant units of language, the "variable features of language [should] become the primary focus of attention" (p. 122). We would imagine that the serious nature of rendering justice would allow for only a formal language variety. However, one of the salient features of Judge Mathis' courtroom is frequent shifting from formal to informal varieties of language. For example, the introductory scripts of future cases often show examples of informal language used by Judge Mathis. Here is an example:

People do one thing in the parkin' lot at 4 a.m. and it ain't to git cigarette.

When both sides have been heard and the evidence presented (e.g., eyewitness accounts or written documentation), Judge Mathis then renders a verdict. The point to the above discussion is that the ordered arrangement of linguistic units, as part of a speech event, shows features of conversation, in this case, a legal one. There are instances in which litigants stray from the central topic of the case, and Judge Mathis reminds them to return to the main reason for coming to court:

I don't want to hear all this nonsense. Let's get back to the reason why you are here.

Besides the broad structural features of conversation, the linguistic units of conversation are important if we are to determine how Judge Mathis uses language in his courtroom.

Linguistic Units and Variation

A major component of sociolinguistic theory is to examine the relationship between linguistic behavior and social situations, roles, and functions (O'Grady, 2005). Closely related to the foregoing statement is the concept of a speech community, defined as "any group of people who share some set of social conventions, or sociolinguistic norms regarding language use" (O'Grady et al, 2005, p. 489). It is the idea of a speech community that defines Judge Mathis' courtroom in that the judge and the litigants share a variety of language and the norms for its appropriate use in social context, in this case, the courtroom. Curse words, for example, would not be used by the judge or by the litigants since the social situation of the courtroom imposes linguistic choices on the speakers: they are constrained by rules of language use in this particular speech situation. Furthermore, structural units of speech events shape Judge Mathis' language.

If we look closely at the language of Judge Mathis in courtroom proceedings, certain forms or styles of language are more evident than others. These styles of language, as were noted above, can be considered as registers. A register is a stylistic variant of a language appropriate to a particular social setting, and some investigators have used the term

linguistic variable to explain differences in the choices that speakers make in communication (Wardhaugh, 1988, p. 138). An analysis of the data from Judge Mathis' courtroom reveals that registers heard in Judge Mathis' courtroom are noted primarily with the choice of the *lexicon* or vocabulary items, *syntax*, *phonology* and *prosody*. As with studies of language variation, the emphasis is quantitative in that analysts identify forms of language that occur more often than others (Johnstone, 2000, p. 85). Since it is impossible to cite all instances of variation in Judge Mathis courtroom, let us look briefly at some selected illustrations of these forms of language variation that stand out above others.

Lexicon

The variation of lexical choice in *Judge Mathis* is quite frequent. Furthermore, it reveals his knowledge of the urban vernacular and youth culture. This knowledge is shown primarily through the use of nouns and verbs. The familiarity with this form of language should not come as a surprise to listeners since Judge Mathis, in the promotional remarks of the show, and in instances of the show, takes pride in revealing his connection to an urban background (City of Detroit) and to his rebellious youth (e.g., *gangs*, *jails*, *I was there*) that caused him to be incarcerated. Some examples of this set of lexical choices are *ghetto fabulous*, *mama drama*, *popcorn pimp*, *player*, *player hater*, *doc* or *doctor*, *dope-fiend*, *mess*, *jailbird*, *beat down*, *freak* and *rip off*. Why do these forms of language appear in Judge Mathis' language? One answer can be found in the notion of a lexical field (Finegan 190). A lexical field is a set of words which share some semantic affinity. For instance, take the words *chastise*, *curse*, *chew out*, *demean*, *harass*, *upbraid*. These words refer to confrontational language. However, in a lexical field, not all words have the same status. Speakers select those choices relevant to the speech situation. Words such as *chew out* or *curse out* are said to be less *marked* in informal speech than say *chastise*, *demean*, or *upbraid*. What is important is that the less marked words are more commonly used and learned than the marked ones. Thus, in using language such as *player*, *pimp*, or *freak*, Judge Mathis takes into account the vocabulary that his litigants

know and with which they are comfortable. By using this choice of language, Judge Mathis demonstrates his linguistic versatility in reaching out to his audience in the courtroom and to those watching on television. Judge Mathis might also be choosing a variety of language based on the language of the litigants in his courtroom and is, therefore, adjusting his style of language to fit theirs. This phenomenon would further reinforce the theoretical construct of a speech situation and the appropriate use of language in that context. It is similar to use of the term *communicative competence* in O'Grady et al. (2005).

Furthermore, the initial statements that litigants make in the courtroom give viewers some idea of their often relatively low socioeconomic status and, by extension, their educational background, where knowledge and use of language are important factors. Certainly, this does not hold true in all cases. There are litigants of a higher socioeconomic background that appear in Judge Mathis' courtroom, and these individuals use a variety of language that is closer to the formal end of the linguistic continuum than do other individuals. The opposite is also true in that persons of a lower socioeconomic status, whose linguistic features are generally at the informal end of the language continuum, may use a formal variety of language, as well. In response, Judge Mathis uses a variety of language that is similar to theirs.

In addition to the concept of a lexical field, the choice of lexical items conveys a social and affective meaning on the part of speakers and listeners. Since there are generally elements of strong emotion in legal cases, the litigants' choice of language is clearly relevant to the language used by Judge Mathis. Here is an example of an exchange in which the choice of lexical items reveals a strong emotional component. This case involved unpaid bills.

Plaintiff: Me and my husband befriended M.

Mathis: Where was your husband?

Plaintiff: My husband doesn't go to church.

Mathis: Ok, You weren't telling him. That's cheating. Save it sweetie.

Plaintiff: We had a good time.

Mathis: You all go dancing, eating? You are the only one on the planet that believes that. Get out my courtroom. Go take a hike.

The informality of the word *sweetie*, although sometimes used in an affectionate sense, is used here to convey negative emotion. Likewise, the informally worded command *Go take a hike* conveys a certain anger on the part of the judge to the plaintiff. These linguistic choices, as with others, show that there is an emotional component to language and that Judge Mathis uses them as the occasion allows. Choice of lexical item, although interwoven with an emotional feature, reveals the way that the judge perceives certain issues that affect the lives of his clients. Primarily, when cases come before the judge, involving matters of education and family rancor, Judge Mathis uses language in a forceful manner. Here is one example where the judge chastises an individual.

You need to stay in school and forget about this boy nonsense.

On the contrary, when individuals state that they are continuing to improve themselves academically, Judge Mathis uses affective language that puts him in the role of a counselor or of a parent, as this statement shows:

I am proud of you that you are getting your GED.

or,

I am glad that you are going to college.

Syntax

Certain examples of syntax heard in the speech of Judge Mathis can be labeled as African American Vernacular English (AAVE). A noticeable feature of this variety of General American English (GAE) is the deletion of the linking verb *be* with nouns, with adjective complements, and with prepositions. Judge Mathis has been heard to use such expressions as in *He no gold-digger*, *He ugly at that* and *You in trouble*. In addition, an AAVE form of the verb *be* appears in the speech of Judge Mathis, a particular use of *been*. This verb form has been examined extensively in studies of AAVE (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). One way in which *been* is used is with the base forms of verbs as in *I been know that*. The word *been* also appears after contracted forms of certain verbs (e.g., *have*)

when it comes after the verb *has* as in *It's been time*. Another example of the notable syntax of Judge Mathis is question formation without the inversion of the auxiliary verb *do* as in *You don't work* or with the deletion of the linking verb *are* as in *You hangin' out at the baby ward?* Other forms of language that are usually associated with AAVE and heard in the language of Judge Mathis are the use of multiple negations as in *You ain't makin' no money* and the use of *done* as a marker of perfective action as in *Y'all done mess each other up*.

Phonology

Phonology pertains to the sound system of language. All speakers use specific sound features and vary them, depending on the speech situation. Speakers of GAE know the sounds of the language. However, in the act of communication, speakers demonstrate certain phonetic processes such as addition, reduction, and deletion of phonological units. As with other Americans, Judge Mathis can be heard to reduce the *-ing* ending of words to product /-n/ in that *running* becomes *runnin'* and *smoking* becomes *smokin'*. Judge Mathis can be heard to say quite often *I don't know what y'all smokin'* (a sentence marked both phonologically and lexically). Another phonological feature heard in the language of Judge Mathis is syllable reduction, heard in his pronunciation of the word *ignant* for *ignorant*.

Prosody

Prosody deals with the musical contour of language. It involves such features as stress, tone, and length when pronouncing words or when indicating end marks in larger utterances. For example, in general American speech, speakers use a rising tone in some instances when asking questions. Some speakers tend to elongate vowels in moments of surprise as in *Maan* or *Yeaah*. In listening to Judge Mathis, one hears a rising pitch with certain forms of utterances where the judge senses that a litigant might not be truthful.³ In addition, Judge Mathis uses a higher tone when mimicking individuals or when making a point that he perceives to be illogical on the part of individuals.

Variables that Influence Mathis' Language

In addition to the structural features of language that one observes in Judge Mathis' usage, certain situational features shape his use of language. These features are just as important as the linguistic ones and tend to co-occur with the latter. Close inspection of the language heard in Judge Mathis' courtroom reveals that certain factors influence language variation. These features or variables are *age of litigants*, *types of cases*, and *ethnic group of individuals*.

Age of Litigants

Generally, Judge Mathis shifts from formal to informal choice of language based on the age of the litigants. For persons within the age of approximately 18-35, Judge Mathis uses the informal or vernacular choice of language more often than the formal variety. Generally, the age-based variation is expressed as the dialogue between the judge and litigants proceeds and when the judge needs clarification on an issue:

Defendant: Your Honor, we broke a little bread.

Mathis: Is that the new slang for having sex? I have to show my street cred [credibility] and keep up with the language.

The age-based variation of language, as in the discourse above, would indicate that the judge aims to close the age difference between himself and young individuals who appear before him and to show that he is cognizant of changing forms of language. Age-based shifts in language by Judge Mathis can also be seen when young people display forms of talk that break the rules of conversational ethics. In this example, Judge Mathis listens as two women in their twenties challenge each other with derogatory, simultaneous talk:

You have embarrassed and shamed your family.

I'm not her. Don't act a fool wid me.

Types of Cases

In addition to age as a contributing factor to the variation in styles of language used by Judge Mathis, the types of cases heard influence Judge Mathis' use of informal language. Careful analysis of the data reveals that

the cases typically fall within the broad categories of unpaid loans, infidelity, domestic discord, and default on contractual obligations (e.g., wedding photos, car repairs). It appears as if specific cases enrage the judge more than others. For example, cases that involve delinquency or youthful misconduct, as noted above, bring out the judge's rage, and his informal use of language confirms this observation. In addition, cases that involve family relations that have deteriorated or cases that involve frequently conflicting statements between individuals elicit an informal response by the judge. In this example, Judge Mathis chides the litigants:

Are y'all finish actin' a fool? Y'all makin' a fool outa y'all self.

Notice the informal variety of language as shown in the choice of the pronoun *y'all*, the reduced word endings in *actin'*, *makin'*, and *outa* (out of). In some instances, the types of cases adjudicated trigger an emotional component to the legal situation. This is evident when Judge Mathis perceives that the defendants assume that he is not aware of their behavior prior to their coming to the courtroom. Evidence of this type of language can be noted in the following comment by the judge:

I'm hard to con, and you put the game on me.

Here the choice of the verbs *to con* and *put the game on* are clear indications of the informal language used by Judge Mathis as a result of the types of cases brought before him.

Ethnic Group Membership

Individuals who appear before Judge Mathis' courtroom represent a range of ethnic groups. However, European American litigants seem to be the most frequent ones, followed by African Americans, Hispanics, and others. The use of Judge Mathis' language cannot be divorced from the audience to whom he reaches out in rendering justice. It is true that the judge shifts language to suit the case. However, close examination of the language of Judge Mathis shows that when African Americans litigants are before him, he uses AAVE more frequently than when other ethnic groups are in his presence. The features of AAVE noted are primarily in pronunciation, prosody (i.e., intonation, rhythm, and stress) and vocabulary choices (as discussed above). There is a distinction between general

American informal language and ethnic-specific modes of communication. For example, when the judge uses the words *crack head*, *freak* or *freaky*, these choices might be examples of GAE informal styles of speech as in *You are a crack head* or *You are some freaky something*. On the other hand some forms of the judge's lexicon seem to be African American specific as in *player* and *player hater*. These latter terms, when put to an African American audience, elicit a different response than when placed before other speakers of American informal speech. Here is another example of the judge's ethnic-specific use of language:

I can tell by the way you hooked up today. Pimpin ain't dead. You are tight today, doc.

In the statement above, the words *hooked up* and *tight* carry a different meaning for African Americans than for other speakers of General American English. The term *hooked up* is used to denote dress that is suitable for a specific occasion. The term *tight* can be considered as a synonym for *hooked up*.

The audience in the courtroom plays a role Judge Mathis' use of language. Their laughter tends to spur the judge on, and he seemingly relies on his audience and the court officer for feedback. This was the case in which litigants disputed each other regarding a record contract. In this instance of the judge's speech, an African American individual who had professional associations with the record business was present in the courtroom:

J is in the audience and he might want to sign you up.

Meaning of Study

It has been suggested that courtroom television series are sources of data for language study. They provide analysts interested in the study of language with the structural and functional components of language. The structural components consist of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. The functional components pertain to such features as address patterns, speech acts, and turn-taking. Although separated for

purposes of definition, these components of language tend to function simultaneously. In addressing a client as *doc* or *doctor* (*I'm sorry for you, doctor*), Judge Mathis uses an informal style of communication that brings together the structural and the functional patterns of language. The use of the term *doc* or *doctor* is part of the process of labeling in African American English in which speakers establish racial or group solidarity. It could also be used in terms of a reverse semantic process in that the true meaning of the word is given its opposite meaning. In such instances, laughter ensues or satire is conveyed to the audience.⁴

In addition to the structural features of communication used by Judge Greg Mathis, we could consider his use of language as part of linguistic performance. It is performance in the Chomskyan sense of the word, that is, the manner in which speakers use language. We could also extend the concept of performance as part of an intentional speech act as advanced by Kearns (8). In other words, speakers use language to do something when they communicate in speech or in writing.⁵

As an African American, Judge Mathis is compelled to evince a bi-cultural approach in dispensing justice. He moves between the world that reflects African American culture and the world that reflects general American culture as observed in the practice of law. This movement between cultures is carried out primarily through his use of language. Furthermore, his linguistic dexterity indicates someone who is linguistically sophisticated in his ability to use forms of language considered less sophisticated than other language varieties. It is similar to Gumperz's view of intercultural communication, that is, communication "not confined to interethnic encounters, but . . . prototypical for modern industrialized and bureaucratized western societies...when different subgroups live and interact with one another in large urban agglomerations" (qtd in diLuzio, 2003, p. 5). In situations where people meet to defend their rights and to win personal and social control, two different forms of speaking and communicative strategies contrast with one another. This communication strategy is evident when one notes the communication patterns of interlocutors and their interaction with each other and with Judge Mathis. The courtroom setting

also gives Judge Mathis the ability to use language as power in the sense advanced by Fairclough (1989). In other words, language is an element of social life and an individual's ability to use it in different ways reflects elements of social change. Judge Mathis, at any time, has the capacity to inject variation in his courtroom, and his shifts in communication style mirror changes in American culture where informality and an informal language variety compete with formality and formal modes of communication.

We can use the topic of courtroom series involving judges and clients in the media as tools for examining language in its social context. Since modes of culture, by their very nature, admit of variation, it is not surprising that we would focus on elements of cultural expression, in this case, forms of language variation. Primarily, we are interested in the concept of the variables that influence shifts in styles or registers in conversation. Shifts might occur at a subconscious level of behavior. At the same time, the data seem to suggest that Judge Mathis purposefully shifts his style of conversation based on the key variables of age, type of cases, and ethnic group membership of the persons who bring cases to his courtroom. This relationship of social variables and speakers tends to reinforce each other, and it is not surprising when we consider other speech situations where audience and speaker (e.g. preachers, politicians, concert performers, etc.) reinforce each other.

Connected to the issue of social variables is that of an emotional component that has some relationship to language style. Macaulay, for instance, notes that "through language, we communicate our hopes...and to some extent, our emotions" (60). If we consider that there is an emotional involvement of persons in courtroom proceedings, it is not farfetched to see a connection here between language and emotions. Emotional expressions can be observed from verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. Plaintiffs, for the most part, begin their case with derogatory statements about the defendants. Moreover, the mode of entrance in the courtroom, the hand gestures and the bodily posture suggest a negative feeling towards each other. In light of these expressions of negative emotions, the language generally follows such behaviors.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to examine the dialogue heard in Judge Mathis' courtroom from the perspective of linguistic variation. The units of variation are primarily those of the lexicon, phonology, syntax, and prosody. Furthermore, linguistic variation as observed in Judge Mathis' courtroom is influenced by the variables of age, case type, and ethnic group membership. One might say that these courtroom programs are simply meant to draw a viewing public and that they are not to be considered seriously as topics for discussion. However, this analysis surely shows that use of language in Judge Mathis' courtroom reveals aspects of general American culture, especially aspects of cultural change and power relations as noted through Judge Mathis' shifting choices of various linguistic structures.

Appendix A

Here are several samples of the data used in this study. Obviously, these are truncated portions of the dialogue that occurs between Judge Mathis and plaintiffs. I have noted the type of case, the approximate age and ethnic groups of the litigants. The letter *P* indicates the plaintiff; the letter *D* indicates the defendant.

C1. (Case: A stolen van; European American females)

Mathis: You come here and bring this mess to me? She ripped her off again... Your boyfriend was in jail, too? You all can't find anybody other than jail birds.

C2. (Case: Failure to pay bail; African American male and female, 30's)

Mathis: Go ahead player or ex-player and let me hear your side.

[This example also involved an instance of Mathis' use of mimicry]

C3. (Case: Unpaid loans; African American male and female; 18-20)

Mathis: You know how crazy you sound. A person spending \$300 on shoes and complaining of lack of funds for college. You got on \$200 alligator shoes. I'm hurting for you, doc. Now, you smoking weed? Please, young man, you are in college. You need to grow out



116 Milford A. Jeremiah

of this commercialism.

Your judgment is \$1,500. That's my judgment. Good luck to you.

C4. (Case: Loud and outrageous sex practice; European American males; 40)

Mathis: Prove your case.

P: [Explains the issue at hand]

Mathis: [Asks plaintiff to elaborate]

D: She is a sex fiend, a dope fiend.

Mathis: She is a sex fiend *and* a dope fiend?

C5. (Case: Unpaid loans; European American, male and female; +20's)

Mathis: Man, you some player. You got the game from somewhere. Who

taught you? Are you from Detroit?

D: No, Southern California.

C6. (Case: Unpaid loans; African American female and European American male; 40)

Mathis: I see many women who come on this show and act a fool. Don't turn out to be a drama queen.

C7. (Case: Unpaid bills; European American male and female; +30)

Mathis: Keep the name calling to yourself because I can come up with ones for you.

P: I am the one that work 14 hours.

Mathis: Man, do you own that bill?

D: No, I don't own that bill...I don't know this guy.

Mathis: He was a guy at the carnival. He might have some special tricks.

C8. (Case: Infidelity; African American male and female; 30's)

Mathis: You are a real player, and he is a wannabe player. Teach him the game.

Quiet, he is teaching D the game. His game must be pretty good. Hey baby, you can be on my line, but you can't keep nothin'.

That's not a player. You got the game wrong. That's not pimpin'. That's simpin'. You weren't a player. You a scrub.

C9. (Case: Unpaid bill; African American male and female; 20's)

Mathis: You hangin' out at the baby ward tryin' to pick up women. If he's all that, he must have never been in church. Why would you want a man lay up with you for a whole month? I don't know. I don't know [mimicking the plaintiff].

C10. (Case: Piano; European America males; 40+)
Mathis: What is your argument? Quiet. Did you ever contact him? How long after you left did your attorney contact you?
What did it say? What did it say? Did you ever get any of your items from him? Quiet.
Ok, let me hear from these gentlemen.

C11. (Case: European American male and female; 39 and 60+, respectively)
Mathis: How old are you?
D: Thirty-nine.
Mathis: You're a grown man.

C12. (Case: European American female and male; 60+ and 28, respectively)
P: It's time that he take some responsibility.
Mathis: How old is he?
P: Twenty-eight.
Mathis: It's been time [to take responsibility].

Notes

¹The Michael Jackson case and similar high-interest cases could have contributed to the expansion of courtroom cases, as well. Editor's note: See the article by Elena Oliete in this issue.

²Judge Mathis can be heard to say at intervals, "Quiet" or "Let me hear her/his side of the story" in instances when two individuals are speaking at the same time.

³In their book *Spoken Soul* (2000), Rickford & Rickford note that in black speech, cadence is crucial to meaning as the words themselves

⁴Geneva Smitherman's (1994) research on Black talk addresses similar issues. In addition, research by Teresa Labov (1992) looks at categories of slang used by African Americans and the labels associated with them.

⁵Editor's note: One might also consider the possible influence of the constructed performance situation of the television episode, an element briefly mentioned in the third paragraph of this essay.

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Linguistic Variation in Judge Greg Mathis' Courtroom 119

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