

McCall Jackson

Professor Chris Palmer

LING 3050

9 December 2020

Linguistic Features in Thurop Van Orman's the *Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack*

Thurop Van Orman's 2008 fictional cartoon the *Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack* depicts the life of a young orphan named Flapjack and his adventures with the pirate Captain K'nuckles and Bubbie the Whale. The central location of the cartoon and Flapjack's home is a destitute and isolated harbor in the middle of the ocean called Stormalong Harbor. Stormalong is depicted as run-down, grimy, and has limited access to the outside world. Many of the harbor's residents would be members of the working class if not for the fictional element of the cartoon. Most are sailors, fishermen, or adventurers who like Flapjack, and his companions are poor and struggling; there are very few rich, elite members in their community. Van Orman and the other writers on the cartoon present these economic disparities in numerous ways, including through language. Working class characters are more likely to use deletion in their phonetic pronunciation and often use what many authorities view as nonstandard language like slang and jargon, while the elite members of Stormalong are not. As a result, the creators of the *Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack* take a speaker design approach as they use phonetic writing, slang and jargon, and nonstandard language to emphasize the economic differences highlighted in the cartoon.

Van Orman uses phonetic deletion to characterize the nonstandard language of the working-class community in his cartoon. There are several instances where any one of

Stormalong's lower class residents delete phonetic sounds from their repertoire. For example, in the episode "Kid Nickels," Captain K'nuckles uses the word "somethin'" and not *something*, this phonetic variation is written in the script (Van Orman). Even in the title song that plays in the beginning of every episode, the captain uses the word "drippin'" instead of *dripping* (Van Orman). This phonetic g-deletion, which is really a shift between a velar /ŋ/ and the alveolar /n/, is common in nonstandard English varieties. The use of the /n/ phoneme instead of the /ŋ/ phoneme is often seen in those categorized in a low socioeconomic class, while those in a higher socioeconomic class frequently use /ŋ/ (Wells 17, 19, 26). Often a phonetic deletion is associated with a lack of education or understanding of prescriptive rules these judgments arise due to the stigmatization standard English has towards certain pronunciations. This phonetic shift is seen throughout the series as Van Orman uses it specifically with the captain and his other working-class characters while in the episode "Sweet Life," the Lady Nickelbottoms, the richest woman in Stormalong and a resident of Upper Stormalong, says "thing" and "sitting" with the /ŋ/ (Van Orman). With phonetic 'g-dropping,' Van Orman sets to show distinct differences of the language of the upper- and lower-class characters. Van Orman also does this with a phonetic variation of the /t/ phoneme. Often the main character Flapjack is seen saying "Cap'n" instead of *captain* when referring to Captain K'nuckles (Van Orman). It almost sounds as if he is deleting the /tə/ sound complete, so that instead of saying /kæptən/ it sounds as if he is saying /kæpn/, however, it is also likely that instead he is pronouncing a glottal stop, so that he is saying /kæpʔn/ which seems more probable because glottal stops on the /t/ variation tend to occur when the [n] sound is unstressed when is the case in *captain* (Palmer). Like the 'g-dropping' examples, Flapjack's use of [ʔ] is common in lower-class communities and regional British Dialects (Palmer). While Flapjack, a low, working-class member of the cartoon, tends to use the [ʔ], Lady

Nickelbottoms, Van Orman's representation of the upper-class, pronounces /kæptən/ with the [t] allophone which is common in formal American Dialects (Palmer). Van Orman's inclusion of consonant deletion and variation in his script creates distinct characters that represent different members of society. These societal differences are seen throughout the cartoon series as the language of the characters differentiates between the low, working-class characters like Captain K'nuckles and Flapjack, and the upper-class characters like Lady Nickelbottoms.

Van Orman also displays the socioeconomic differences in the *Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack* through the slang, jargon, and expressions used throughout the series which promotes the register variation of the cartoon. According to sociolinguist Peter Trudgill, language variation tends to be associated with the level of formality which is definitely featured in Van Orman's cartoon (Trudgill, 1992). Common jargon used in the *Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack* includes the phrase "aye-aye," while common slang and expressions include "Oh my goodness," "Oopsie," and "Oh, cannonballs!," these expressions are typically used by Flapjack (Van Orman). On the other hand, Lady Nickelbottoms and her butler Charles use words and phrases like "how quaint," "Milady," and "gentlemen" (Van Orman). The register used by Flapjack is more casual than the one used by the lady and her butler. Between the speech seen in the two classes the prepositional phrases and adjectives mark the register variation, which according to linguists Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan are core grammatical features that indicate register variation along with phonological features which were previously mentioned (Biber and Finegan). Flapjack's casual register can be recognized as it is a language he mostly uses around friends and has a smaller vocabulary range (Jensen). His words are casual and used in everyday situations given the context of the cartoon and informal unlike the lady. Her formal register is disciplined, includes standard English, words borrowed from Latin, and specific word

choices (Jensen). The low, working-class members of Stormalong also tend to use more phrasal verbs, unlike the upper-class members. These phrasal verbs include “pay up,” “catch up,” and “clean up”. These phrasal verbs indicate a casual register because they are multiword verbs, as *up* acts more as an adverb than a preposition, their meanings are more metaphorical than literal, and they can be substituted with one word (Palmer). The casual register that Van Orman creates showcases the working-class community in which it is featured in. According to educator Ruby Payne, children, like Flapjack, who come from poverty struggle to recognize formal register, but master the use of informal register alluding that informal, casual language is a characteristic of the lower, working-class (Payne, 1996). Between the phonological features and register variation of the speakers in the *Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack*, Van Orman promotes this relation between socioeconomic status and register variation to show the language differences between the working and upper classes of Stormalong.

Overall, the creators of this cartoon take a speaker design approach towards their narrative and script. Based on the analysis of how Van Orman and the other writers show a more first wave approach to the language in the cartoon as they use linguistic features to reflect two specific social categories (Palmer, slide 6). The speaker design element that is featured in the cartoon is an important element as they use style-shifting, the variation in an individual’s speech to represent the characters (Meyerhoff, 51). Through having his script include the phonological shifts of the velar /ŋ/ and the alveolar /n/, the glottal stop /ʔ/, phrasal verbs, and different registers, Van Orman’s writing encompasses an element of first wave speaker design that emphasize the standard and nonstandard language differences between two social categories. The point of including these linguistic features, in perspective of the cartoon, is to show how the upper-class who are likely better educated and are in more formal circumstances, like the Lady

Nickelbottoms, tend to focus their speech towards standard English, while the lower, working-class who like Flapjack and his companions are less educated and are in less formal situations stray towards nonstandard English.

However, there are issues with how media sources like Van Orman's cartoon depict nonstandard and standard English. Standard English and the language of standard English is based on written language and literacy, it is not as if someone actually speaks standard English, but it is an ideology of how people should speak (Palmer, slide 1). When Van Orman's cartoon associates nonstandard language with the low, working-class and his less educated members, nonstandard English is depicted in a negative viewpoint. The ideologies behind standard English is present prescriptive rules that result in the stigmatization of and negative social attitudes towards nonstandard English. However, just because the standard avoids stigma does not mean it is as uniform as it is assumed to be. Nonstandard English tends to have more consistent rules than in some English dialects while because standards are unstable and change overtime, the standards have no consistent rule. Although standard English is views more positively, like how Van Orman's carton associates the rich and well-educated with standard language, does not mean to is suddenly correct variety of English or that nonstandard language is any less correct. Also, the speaker framework in which the cartoon approach language reflects these judgments seen in the comparison of standard and nonstandard English. Sociolinguists like Penny Eckert have shown that social categories are not as stable and concrete as sociolinguistics has developed second wave and third wave speaker design which indicate towards how linguistics cannot have a priori assumptions towards social categories, how identity is dynamic, and how language constructs identity instead of identity constructing language, so where Van Orman's cartoon depicts one framework of how sociolinguists like Labov approached social categories and

language and provides examples of these linguistic features with the phonological and register differences in his characters.

In conclusion, Thurop Van Orman's the *Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack* features linguistic features that are common in the working and upper classes to highlight the differences of the language of the two groups in his cartoon. In his script the less educated characters who are members of the working-class are more likely to shift between the velar /ŋ/ and the alveolar /n/, so that they say /səmθən/ instead of /səmθəŋ/ while the upper-class characters are more likely to pronounce the latter variation. The working-class characters are also more likely to pronounce /t/ as a glottal stop in words like *captain* when the ending /n/ is unstressed where the upper-class characters frequently use the [t] allophone. Another language variation Van Orman showcase is in the different registers he gives the upper and lower classes. Van Orman approach to writing his script is first wave speaker design to categorize two social classes. Although by grouping characters into specific social categories is not an effective way of studying the relationship between identity and language to linguists like Penny Eckert, Van Orman's cartoon does depict a framework that some linguists used to study class and language and though this approach may not be very constructive in realistic settings, they do serve a significant purpose in Van Orman's differentiation.

Works Cited

Biber, Douglas, and Edward Finegan. *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Register*. Oxford University Press, 1994.

Jensen, Barbara. *Reading Classes: on Culture and Classism in America*. ILR Press, 2012.

Meyerhoff, Miriam. *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2019.

Palmer, Chris. "Examples of register Variation." Sociolinguistics 3050. Kennesaw State University. Lecture

Palmer, Chris. "Language and Identity." Sociolinguistics 3050, 15 Oct. 2020, Kennesaw State University. Microsoft PowerPoint presentation.

Palmer, Chris. "Standard English." Sociolinguistics 3050, 22 Sep. 2020, Kennesaw State University. Microsoft PowerPoint presentation.

Palmer, Chris. "Variation with /t/ in English." Sociolinguistics 3050, 14 Oct. 2020. Kennesaw State University. Lecture.

Payne, R. 1996. *A framework for understanding poverty*, Highlands, Texas: AHA Publications.

Trudgill, P. 1992. *Introducing language and society*. London: Penguin.

Van Orman, Thurop. "The Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack." SUBSLIKESCRIP, subslikescript.com/series/The_Marvelous_Misadventures_of_Flapjack-1178180.

Wells, John C. 1982. *Accents of English*. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press. p. 207. ISBN 0-521-22919-7.