

“Hey there, Brian”: Voicing Mormon Cosmopolitanism in a College Apartment

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss a humorous form of voicing called Brian Voice (BV) used by myself and my former roommates, all of whom are students at Brigham Young University and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Bringing the tools and methods of linguistic anthropology together with the anthropology of morality (especially ordinary ethics), I demonstrate the ways in which my roommates and I use this voicing to simultaneously inhabit the two seemingly contradictory identities of, on the one hand, a reverent Mormon and, on the other, a modern cosmopolitan. BV facilitates this identity by enabling speakers to voice both irreverence and anti-cosmopolitanism without incurring the normal social consequences associated with those stances. I contend that BV accomplishes this mitigation of negative consequences through indexing ridiculousness and absurdity. By situating BV within its Mormon context, I demonstrate that in distancing speakers from both hyper-reverence and irreverence, BV entails a practical engagement with the ethics, principles, and ideals of both Mormon morality and cosmopolitan morality, thus allowing speakers to inhabit a simultaneously Mormon and cosmopolitan self.

Keywords: Mormonism; voicing; cosmopolitanism; irreverence; linguistic anthropology

In this article, I analyze a form of voicing called Brian Voice (BV) that is used in conversation by a small group of undergraduates at Brigham Young University (BYU). In this analysis, I show how BV is used to point to certain notions of morality in the Mormon context and allows speakers to manage (however implicitly) the tension between an apparently anti-cosmopolitan religious reverence and a cosmopolitan irreverence. In doing so, I draw on the theoretical work of Lambek (2010), who argues that “ethics is intrinsic to speech and action” (1). Lambek (2010) and Das (2012), both proponents of an anthropological approach to morality that they term “ordinary ethics,” link ethical concerns inseparably to practice in order to push back on a scholarship of morality that they find overly rooted in abstract logic. Essentially, they argue that people form their moral selves through their mundane practices rather than through appeals to an absolute, intellectual notion of morality. As Das (2012) puts it, one becomes moral “not by orienting oneself to transcendental, objectively agreed-upon values but rather through the cultivation of sensibilities within the everyday” (134). The voicing practices that I will describe are exemplary of ordinary ethics because morality appears to be enacted relatively effortlessly through them. Lempert (2013) has pointed to the potential value of ordinary ethics for the study of language, and Sidnell (2010) has shown that scholarship on the relationship between mundane language and ethics goes back at least to Austin (1957), while at the same time criticizing a historical lack of attention to “the ordinary language of ordinary people” and calling for increased scholarly attention to linguistic expressions of morality in everyday life (Sidnell 2010, 124). I contribute to this scholarship by further addressing this nexus of

language and morality, showing how cultural-religious ethical judgements are immanent in the language practice called BV by its speakers.

I will begin by outlining the methods I used in my research and analysis. I will give an idea of the sound of BV, including a brief phonetic analysis, and describe the history of the voicing’s entextualization. I will then discuss the ways that BV functions as a mechanism for creating an identity that is simultaneously cosmopolitan and reverently Mormon. Throughout this article, I use the word Mormon to refer to the religious-cultural system in question. I recognize that many members of this group, myself included, prefer to be identified as “members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” which is the largest official church within Mormonism, with about 16 million members worldwide. However, I feel that by using Mormon, I can speak to a broader cultural movement, which includes active members of the Church and others on its peripheries who interact with the cultural influence of the religion. I use cosmopolitanism to embody an identity, typically desired by American college students, that is sophisticated, worldly (rather than limited or provincial in focus), and politically progressive. In colloquial usage, some college students might refer to a cosmopolitan individual as “woke,” but I avoid this term because it is exclusively political in connotation and its meaning has become increasingly muddled through ironic and critical usage.

This desired cosmopolitanism typically connotes a secularism and intersectionality that conflicts with many traditional aspects of Mormon piety. Thus, a traditional, pious, Mormon identity would be anti-cosmopolitan in many ways, especially given that it is religious, conservative, and insular. However, these categories do not conflict in every respect. For example, both pious Mormon and cosmopolitan identities require some form of well-mannered politeness. Nonetheless, I argue that speakers use BV to bridge the gap between two desired identities, cosmopolitanism and reverent piety, that might otherwise conflict. This balancing act involves the interplay of reverence and irreverence, with BV enabling speakers to parody the hyper-reverence of a conservative, anti-cosmopolitan Mormon while

at the same time distancing themselves from the irreverence that might be associated with certain stances of cosmopolitanism. By setting up a constellation of identities (hyper-reverent, anti-cosmopolitan, irreverent) that they simultaneously distance themselves from, the speakers create an identity for themselves that is at the same time reverent and cosmopolitan. This balancing act points to a complex morality manifested in everyday practice, thus embodying a form of ordinary ethics.

Methodology

This article is based on data obtained during six months of participant observation in my undergraduate apartment in Provo, Utah. There, I observed the interactions of my roommates as we went about our lives as students at BYU. During this period of observation, I recorded and analyzed approximately five hours of talk, including transcribing extended segments. These recordings were taken during periods of naturally occurring conversations in the apartment, and while my roommates were aware that the recording was taking place, no prompts were given to direct the conversation. I base much of my argument on the analysis of the close transcriptions of these recordings, in addition to data pulled from observation notes and interviews with my roommates. Transcription symbols used in this article are shown in figure 1 and are based on transcription conventions outlined by Du Bois (2006).

This research was approved by BYU's Institutional Review Board. At the request of my roommates and in order to maximize confidentiality, I have chosen pseudonyms for myself and my roommates. The pseudonyms Sam, Cole, Eric, and Joe are used for the four interlocutors in both the body of the article and in all quotes and sections of transcribed speech events that I have included. I recognize that the publication of this work presents a limited risk for breaches of confidentiality. All of my former roommates have been consulted about the decision to publish and they have enthusiastically given their approval.

SYMBOL	MEANING	NOTES
@	Laugh	
wor-	Truncated/cut-off word	
:	Lag/Prosodic Lengthening	
.	Terminative intonation	
,	Continuative intonation	
?	Appeal Intonation	Combines with terminative/continuing
<Vox: Name>	Voicing	Mimicking voice of another person
<Misc>	Vocalism	

Figure 1: Transcription conventions

The Phonetic Qualities of Brian Voice

BV is a form of voicing in which speakers mimic the tone, style, and inflection of a particular person known to some of the speakers (see below for a short history of the voicing's enregisterment). It is characterized by a lower and more frontal placement of vowels, a higher-than-normal pitch, and the placement of increased stress on the beginning syllable of intonation units. I argue that the relative strangeness of BV's sound allows speakers to speak in a way that sounds absurd or ridiculous. Comparative phonetic analysis, in which I compare the way BV sounds to the sound of the speakers' normal voices, helps to more clearly illustrate these characteristics. All phonetic analysis was done using PRAAT software.

Figure 2 shows a comparison of vowel placement for an interlocutor, Cole, with his normal voice shown in red and his BV shown in blue. The most apparent difference is the marked variety in vowel frequency between Cole speaking as himself and Cole using BV. For all vowels (except for the F2 vowel formants of /u/), brian-voiced vowels have a much higher

average frequency, with brian-voiced F1 vowel formants being an average of 112.9 Hz greater than the non-voiced, and brian-voiced F2 vowel formants being an average of 163.1 Hz greater than non-voiced vowel formants. Thus, on average, the place of brian-voiced vowels is lower and more frontal than vowels in non-voiced talk. It is also interesting to note that in words that a speaker would normally pronounce with the /a/ sound are pronounced as /ɔ/—when speaking normally, speakers would not distinguish between the pronunciation of the words cot and caught, pronouncing both as [kat]; however, in BV speakers would pronounce both cot and caught as [kɔt]. In respect to this distinction, BV's cot-caught merger does not follow the typical merger patterns of common dialects of American English. That BV does not follow this specific merger pattern is significant because it indicates the strangeness of BV when compared to normal speech.

Figures 3 and 4 compare the pitch of Sam pronouncing the phrase "Hey there, Brian," first in his normal voice (figure 3) and then in BV (figure 4). The pitch contour is indicated by the blue line. As the pitch contour shows, BV is

characterized by a significant increase in overall pitch, as well as an increase in the contrast between the highest and lowest points of the pitch contour. It should be noted that both increased pitch and increased pitch variation are commonly associated with women and with non-heterosexual men (Gaudio 1994, 50-51). While BV is not used to embody or to criticize these groups and speakers all indicated that BV is male, it is possible that BV's indexing of (Peirce 1958), or pointing to, absurdity is accomplished in part through its phonetic links to gender and sexual identities that have often been associated with backwardness. In this way, BV is clearly marked as distinct from a voice that the speakers, all of whom identify as heterosexual males, would normally use.

For a canonical example of the sound of the voicing, BV sounds something like a combination of the iconic drawl of Jimmy Stewart and the voice of Wallace Shawn in his role of Vizzini in the 1987 movie *The Princess Bride*. Although the exact sound of the voicing can vary from speaker to speaker, everyone within the group immediately recognizes when someone in the group uses BV.

In summary, BV is a marked way of speaking that is distinct from these speakers' normal

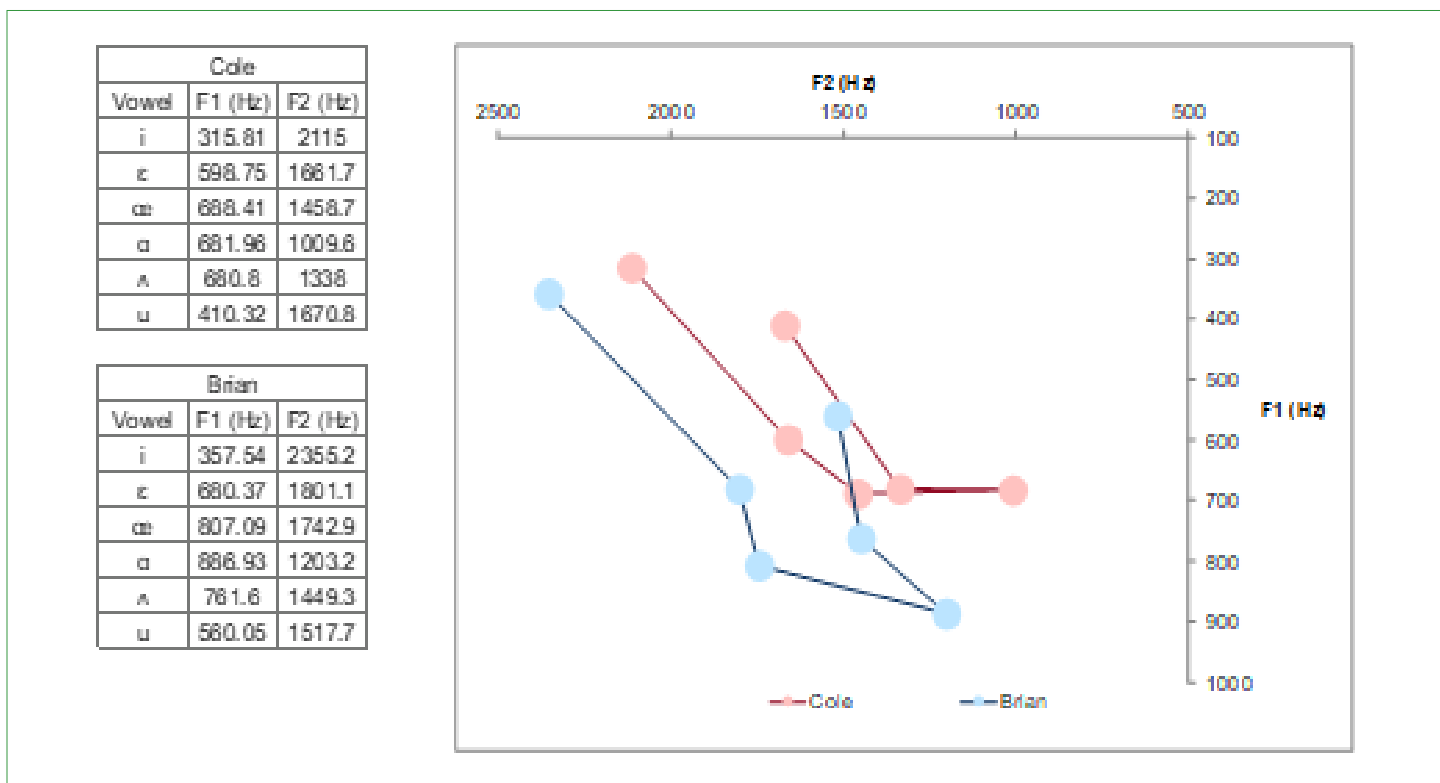


Figure 2: Comparative vowel placement

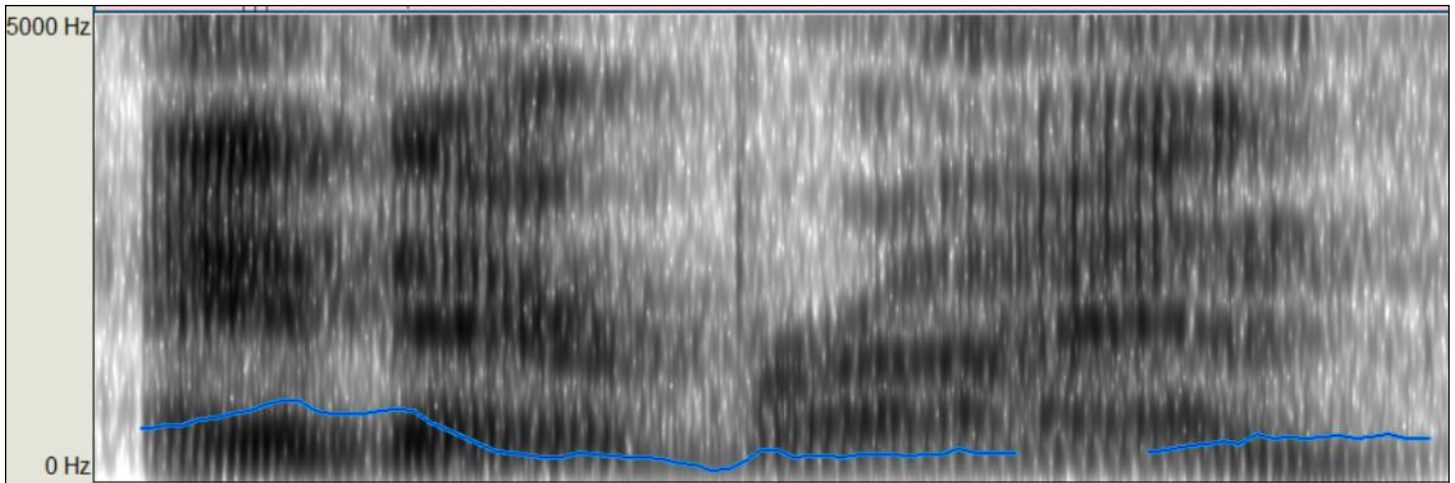


Figure 3: Pitch contour of “Hey there, Brian” in normal voice

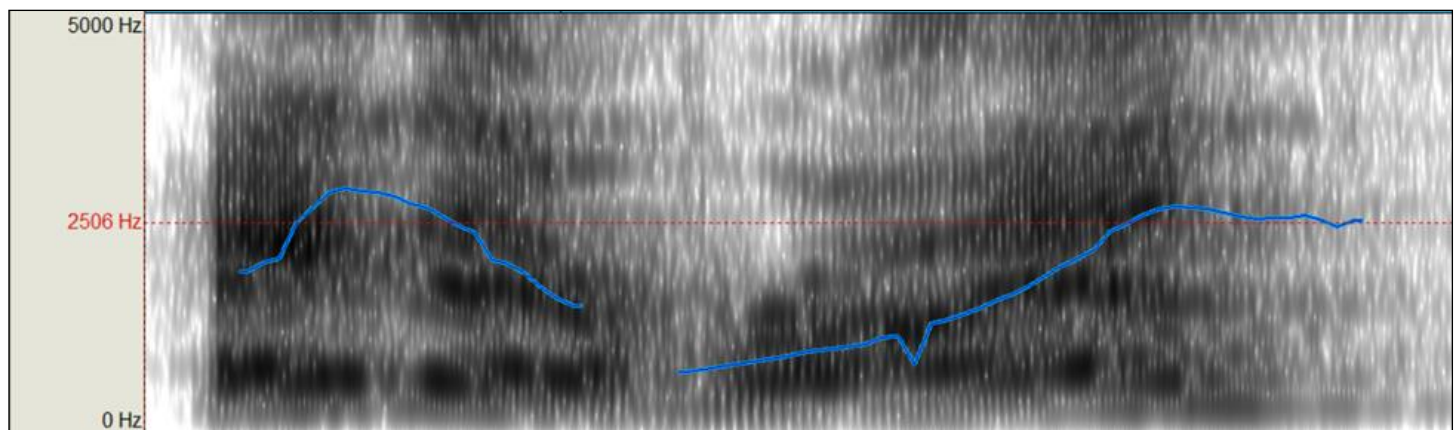


Figure 4: Pitch contour of “Hey there, Brian” in BV

voice qualities. This voicing has a quality to it that sounds ridiculous and somewhat absurd since BV sounds unlike any actual person. This decontextualized quality is precisely what allows for a certain semiotic fecundity. This quality of BV not only as a recognizable voice but also a voice that none of the speakers would normally use produces the indexically ridiculous and absurd quality that I attribute to BV.

The Entextualization of Brian Voice

Entextualization is the process by which discourse is extracted from its original context and made into its own recognizable text-form, or established pattern of speech (Baumann and Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996). Silverstein (2014) has shown that this process of entextualization is particularly important for the creation of voiced identities wherein text-

metrical discourse, a specific type of established speech pattern (see the phonetic features just mentioned), is taken out of its original context (see next paragraph) and made into an extractable and recognizable text-form that can be deployed in multiple new contexts (see further analysis below). As the voicing was separated from its original context, speakers began to recognize it as a distinct register, which they called “Brian Voice.” In this way, the entextualization of BV is a manifestation of enregisterment, the process “whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population” (Agha 2007, 81). In other words, certain speech patterns can come to constitute specific identities. The following story of BV’s enregisterment is critical to understanding how the BV register has come to constitute a very particular “image of personhood” (Agha 2007,

177), a personhood that is indexical of ridiculousness and absurdity.

BV originated as an inside joke between two of the roommates, Cole and Sam, who attended the same church congregation during middle school and high school. They had a mutual friend named Bryson who attended high school with a boy named Randy who would often mistakenly call Bryson Brian, even after being corrected. When Bryson first told this story to Cole and Sam, he ironically voiced Randy in a clearly exaggerated and ridiculous way. Cole and Sam both found the voicing of Randy, as well as the misnomer Brian, to be comical. From then on, Bryson, Cole, Sam, and several other friends would jokingly call each other Brian, mimicking the voicing of Randy from the first telling of the story. This beginning led to two key developments in the enregisterment of BV: the voicing of Randy as the basis for BV and the use of the name Brian as a referrer for speakers. In addition, this further illustrates the indexation of ridiculousness in BV since BV was born out of Randy's repeated use of the name Brian for Bryson even though he had repeatedly been told Bryson's actual name.

As with any proper entextualization that entails the decontextualization of language forms, the initial context of the voicing faded in time, and Randy-the-person became irrelevant to the meaning of the voicing, partly because Joe and Eric, who later became users of BV, never knew Randy. Only the initial ridiculousness of misnaming as Brian remained. Indeed, speakers frequently referred to each other as "Brian," almost always in BV, in the same way that other American males of a similar age might refer to each other as bro, dude, or man. For example, in one conversation I observed, Cole greeted Joe in the following manner:

Cole; <Vox: Brian Voice> Hey there Brian!,
How ya doin? <Vox: Brian Voice>.

The centrality of Brian as referrer continued after Cole and Sam left high school and came to BYU as roommates. There, they used BV around their other roommates, Eric and Joe, who noticed that Cole and Sam frequently called each other Brian. It was Eric and Joe who first began to explicitly call the practice "Brian

Voice." They eventually came to use BV just as much as Sam and Cole, who described to them the voice and its backstory. That the voicing is called "Brian Voice" and not "Randy Voice" and that the speakers refer to themselves as "Brians" and not as "Randys" illustrates the decontextualized distance of BV from the original story.

As the original context of BV gradually diminished in importance, several other inside jokes from Cole and Sam's childhoods were eventually woven into BV. Examples of such co-textualization can be seen in the transcripts below through mentions of "Charlie," "Ha! That's a good one," and "Sorry about it." Each of these refers to a distinct inside joke, totally separate in context from the original Randy story, which have become combined within BV. "Charlie" began when, during an activity at the church congregation, an adult member of Bryson, Cole, and Sam's congregation struggled to convince his young daughter to put on her coat. The scene was somewhat comical for the three friends and dramatic reenactments of the event became entextualized jokes. Eventually, certain phrases from this event became a part of BV and are frequently referenced in brian-voiced speech with mentions of Charlie (the obstinate young child). "Charlie" is now used in BV to refer to someone who is obstinate or annoying. Phrases from another story became a part of BV when a person who visited Bryson, Cole, and Sam's congregation and who spoke in a manner that they felt was somewhat ridiculous would sometimes make comments such as "Ha! That's a good one" and "Sorry about it." When deployed in conversation, these names and phrases would always be used in BV.

As with BV itself, these names and phrases became increasingly distant from their original context, combining with others to form BV as it is spoken today. Thus, BV becomes functionally meaningful by indexing the ridiculousness of the original contexts of these stories while eliding the rest of those contexts. Furthermore, BV points to the absurdity of these original stories while also indexing the phonetic qualities described above. Both the contexts and phonetic qualities are now recognized by the speakers as a "repertoire of performable signs linked to stereotypic pragmatic

effects" (Agha 2007, 80), with those pragmatic effects being the indexing of ridiculousness. Thus, this process of enregisterment has created a register, BV, which the speakers indexically link to an absurd and ridiculous personhood. This indexically ridiculous personhood associated with BV is key to allowing the voicing to distance speakers from both anti-cosmopolitanism and irreverence.

BV, Anti-Cosmopolitanism, and Irreverence

I love my Heavenly Father,
And I will try to be
Reverent when I'm in his house.
Then he'll be near to me.

This passage contains the lyrics to the song "I Will Try to Be Reverent," which is part of *The Children's Songbook*, a hymnal used by children in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The passage demonstrates the importance of reverence in the Mormon religious context. From a young age, children are taught that reverence for the sacred is an essential element of securing closeness to God. The entry for reverence in *True to the Faith*, a broadly used study reference published by the Church, indicates that reverence is a profound attitude of respect and love for God, in addition to respect for other aspects of Mormon religious propriety. The reference states that "the depth of your reverence is evident in your choice of music and other entertainment, in the way you speak of sacred subjects," as well as in "prayer, scripture study, fasting, and payment of tithes and offerings" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2004, 145). In other words, reverence encapsulates the attitude of respect for the divine in addition to respect for other beliefs and behaviors, including speech, that combine to constitute the sacred Mormon person. Thus, for Mormons it is critical to avoid irreverence, which I take to be any action that disregards culturally mandated requirements of respect for sacred beliefs and behaviors. However, BV allows speakers to voice irreverence without incurring the normal social consequences. This is made possible by the ridiculous and thus trivializing nature of BV, by the use of parodic double voicing (Bakhtin

1984), and by the resulting distance which BV places between the speaker and irreverence.

As noted above, BV trivializes situations because of the ridiculousness and absurdity associated with it. Because it began as a joke and is still used as a comedic device, BV is used in contexts that are less serious. As such, speakers often use the voicing to trivialize talk that might otherwise constitute a seriously irreverent statement. I will demonstrate this in examples throughout the paper. The fact that speakers' use of BV shows a deference for the moral considerations of others designates BV as a kind of vari-directional, passive, double-voiced discourse (Bakhtin 1984, 185; Morson and Emerson 1990, 152-154) with which the speakers voice irreverence in order to distance themselves from that same irreverence.

BV creates distance between the speaker and the irreverent in part because when speaking in BV, speakers assume an identity different than their own. In an interview, Eric responded that when speaking in BV, "it's not your deep and earnest self." He later described BV as a "persona that we adopt." Other speakers reflected similarly on this topic, indicating that in some way or another BV allows speakers to assume an identity different than their own. Indeed, when an interlocutor speaks in BV, he assumes the "BV identity." Thus, when he speaks, he speaks as Brian and not as himself. This relates to Goffman's (1981) decomposition of the speaker into the categories of animator, author, and principal. In the case of BV, the animator, or the person physically speaking, is clearly trying to distance themselves from the principal, or the "someone who is committed to what the words say" (Goffman 1981, 144).

Speakers are trying to distance themselves from something, and I argue that that something is both irreverence and anti-cosmopolitanism—either of which could contaminate the moral purity of the speaker, who is sacred because of the emphasis placed on saving face (Durkheim 1912; Goffman 1959). On the one hand, expressing an overly-moralizing and hyper-reverent self, an anti-cosmopolitan religious rube (cf. Hillary Clinton's "basket of deplorables" or Obama's criticism of those who "cling to guns or religion"), could

offend the cosmopolitan sensibilities of the speaker, thus enacting a sort of profanation. On the other hand, these speakers are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a direct expression of irreverence would also constitute a profanation within this religious ideology. I propose that BV is a resolution to this pernicious conflict—and a rather delightful one at that. In what follows, I will explore three different ways in which BV allows speakers to parodically voice both anti-cosmopolitanism and irreverence, thus distancing themselves from those attributes and securing their simultaneously cosmopolitan and reverent selves.

Voicing Criticism

In the Brian apartment, criticism of others is profane because it has the potential to offend. While politeness is certainly an important element of cosmopolitanism, the imperative toward avoiding offensive remarks is particularly significant given the Mormon context of BV. It is a common trope that Mormons project niceness, something that has often been referenced satirically in popular media, including in *South Park* and *Saturday Night Live* (Tobler 2012; Walker 2013). In interviews, all interlocutors expressed the importance of BV in mitigating offense, stating in various ways that BV makes potentially offensive statements sound less mean, both to the criticizer and to the criticized. In this way, speakers use BV to distance themselves from the anti-cosmopolitan and irreverent quality of impolite criticism.

For example, at one point in a recorded conversation, Joe and Cole began to speak to one another, code-switching between English and French, which caused frustration for Sam, who could no longer follow the conversation.

Joe; Je ne sais pas.

Cole; C'est l'acte de naissance?

Joe; That's what I don't know.

I don't know if it's the same thing or different so-

And then I'll figure it out.

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> You guys wanna speak English <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Joe; I am speaking English.

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> Speak in English so I can understand <Vox: Brian Voice>.

This interaction was followed by laughter and more joking. In this example, BV is a particularly effective critique of the undesired code-switching because it acts as a humorous, unsophisticated counter to the cosmopolitanism reflected in the use of French. Sam is able to explicitly state his critique of Joe and Cole, but by doing so in BV he distances himself from this embarrassing, anti-cosmopolitan identity of someone who does not know French and insists that people must speak English in his presence. Furthermore, using BV allows Sam to distance himself from the meanness that could be associated with his criticism.

I observed several other examples of this form of mitigated criticism in a conversation which took place on a Sunday morning as the roommates were preparing to attend the services of their Latter-day Saint young-single-adult congregation. On this particular morning, Cole was the primary author of brian-voiced criticism. According to him, he was particularly stressed to be on time that morning because Joe had asked him to give the invocational prayer at the meeting. In the course of the morning, Cole used BV first to chide Joe for taking too long to get ready and later for having asked him to give the congregational prayer.

Cole; <Vox: Brian Voice> Some Charlie asked me to give the prayer <Vox: Brian Voice>.

In referring to Joe as “some Charlie” while using BV, Cole engages in an impolite (and thus both irreverent and anti-cosmopolitan) practice of criticizing a friend. In this case, BV allows Cole to avoid the consequences of irreverence and anti-cosmopolitanism associated with criticism of Joe. After expressing this criticism of Joe, Cole turned his attention to Sam, who was still in the shower.

Cole; <Vox: Brian Voice> Time to finish up in there <Vox: Brian Voice>.

While Sam verbally responded to Cole's criticism dismissively, he was out of the shower and hurriedly getting ready within 30 seconds of Cole's comment. In this interaction, Cole used

BV every time he directly addressed someone with a critical comment. While he spoke openly and without voicing his preoccupation with timeliness, it is telling that BV was used when addressing others. This supports the idea that BV allows for the speaker to engage in the irreverent (in the context of Mormon culture) and potentially anti-cosmopolitan practice of criticizing one's roommates and friends. In this example, it is Cole's need to mitigate potential offenses to his roommates that leads him to state direct criticism of others only in BV. Conversely, speaking of his anxieties about being late does not directly implicate any friends, and therefore Cole does not use BV because there is no risk of impoliteness. Thus, BV allows speakers to reject the cosmopolitan and Mormon imperative of niceness in order to directly criticize others.

In the previous example, Cole uses BV to explicitly state his criticism, saying exactly what his problem is with another roommate. In other cases, speakers use BV to state criticism sarcastically. In these cases, an interlocutor may not explicitly state their criticism, or they may state the opposite of their criticism, but the critical intent of the comment is still understood when a speaker uses BV.

For example, in one instance Cole, Eric, and Sam were sitting in the living room of their apartment while Eric and Cole were engaging in a lively discussion about the 2020 US Democratic Primary race. While Mormon political culture is often perceived as overwhelmingly conservative, the interlocutors, especially Eric and Cole, actively engage in discussions that evidence their support for progressive left-wing politics. For example, in this conversation they were discussing their approval of then presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders. In the middle of their discussion, Sam began to sing very loudly. Cole stopped talking and turned toward Sam, speaking in his normal voice.

Cole; You having fun over there?.

Sam did not respond and kept singing. Cole spoke again.

Cole; <Vox: Brian Voice> You having fun over there? <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Sam; Oh yeah @@@

Sam then stopped singing and the conversation resumed.

In this example, Cole offers a critique of Sam that functions as a Gricean implicature. In asking if Sam is having fun, the implication is that Cole and Eric are not. This case is particularly interesting because Cole states the critique of Sam's singing twice, first normally and then in BV, but Sam only recognizes and responds to the second, brian-voiced critique, as evidenced by Sam's verbal response, laughter, and cessation of singing. The fact that Sam did not respond to Cole's intended criticism after the non-voiced phrase but quickly responded when the same phrase was repeated in BV may suggest that BV has a pragmatic element that allowed Sam to recognize the critical nature of Cole's remark.

In other situations, speakers use BV to defuse the social tension created by criticism. For example, in one evening conversation, the roommates began discussing what type of cheese stick Joe was eating, and the situation quickly became tense; Joe believed he was eating cheddar while the other three roommates claimed it was Colby-Jack. BV was not used at all during the initial part of this exchange. After Eric, Cole, and Sam continued to insist on their point, Joe began to feel uncomfortable, as indicated by agitated his tone:

Joe; <Loudly> No it didn't say Colby-Jack though <Loudly>.

Sam; But it's pretty--

Eric; That most certainly is Colby-Jack.

Cole; <Vox: Brian Voice> We need to know Brian <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> Brian.

It's not cheddar,

Because it has something else in it <Vox: Brian Voice>.

When Cole stated the imperative to know the identity of the cheese in BV, he clarifies that the cheese's identity is in fact trivial information and not worth the discomfort it is causing Joe. The trivialization is accomplished through BV's

indexically realized quality of ridiculousness. Sam similarly addressed Joe's apparent offense by switching into BV. While he continued to press his point that the cheese was not cheddar, Joe was getting perturbed. It is at this point that Sam began using BV, perhaps to mitigate possible offense. Here, it appears that both Sam and Cole use BV to mitigate a situation in which they had been irreverently and anti-cosmopolitanly critical in a way that might otherwise have led to interpersonal strife with Joe.

In the past, speakers have also used BV to point out the trivial nature of other roommates' concerns. For example, in one instance I observed Cole, Sam, and Eric express sympathy for Joe after he came home one evening from a date that did not go as well as he had hoped. Joe spoke of his disappointment in a normal tone while the other roommates responded sympathetically but in BV. Similar instances, where the speakers would use BV when expressing sympathy for an unsuccessful date, were fairly frequent. In using BV in this way, speakers were able to express culturally mandated sympathy while at the same time trivializing the person's negative experience, showing that they believed each other's worries were not as significant as they seemed to be.

This use of BV to mitigate concerns about dating is particularly significant given the strong cultural expectations regarding dating and marriage in the Mormon context. Mormon theology sees marriage as necessary in order to obtain the highest level of heaven. Thus, dating is highly encouraged among young Mormons generally, and at BYU in particular, as the path to marriage and thereby to heaven. Because of this, dating at BYU differs significantly from dating at most other American universities in that many BYU students get married before graduating. Data shared by the university in the Fall of 2016 revealed that 36% of incoming seniors were married (Averett 2016), and university data aggregated over a ten-year period showed that an average of 25% of the total undergraduate population was married in a given year (Christensen 2012). However, marriage rates at BYU have decreased in the last 20 years (Averett 2016), and I observed the roommates frequently discuss their

apprehensions regarding what they viewed as overly-moralized pressure toward marriage.

In the situation described above, the roommates are caught between a need to express sympathy for Joe (per both the Mormon and cosmopolitan imperatives toward niceness) and the need to avoid conflating that sympathy with an open endorsement of Mormon marriage culture (which would be anti-cosmopolitan). BV allows them to reach a middle ground. On the one hand, speakers could have used their normal voices to express sympathy in this situation. But in doing so, they might risk reinscribing the hyper-reverent position of Mormons who feel that dating and marriage is the single most important thing in a person's life. To assume that position would be to actually become an anti-cosmopolitan religious rube. Since the roommates did not want to do that but would also feel rude (and thus both anti-cosmopolitan and irreverent) if they did not say anything, they used BV. BV allowed them to express sympathy while at the same time trivializing, through the aforementioned ridiculousness, the otherwise anti-cosmopolitan position they are in some ways validating.

In some situations that I observed, the lack of BV following the expression of problematic news clearly indicated the serious nature of the discussed problem. There are some situations and offenses that BV cannot mitigate. In one instance, Cole, Eric, and Sam said something that deeply offended Joe. In the course of the conversation, the roommates implicitly criticized Joe's relationship with his fiancée. Significantly, their comments had implicit sexual implications. Joe was clearly hurt by this, as evidenced by his mumbled responses to their chiding and his withdrawal from participation in the conversation. The other roommates then spent the next several minutes of the conversation attempting to resolve the conflict, frequently inquiring about Joe's feelings and apologizing for talking badly about his fiancée, but never using BV. In the five minutes prior to the offense, BV was used in the conversation 16 times, while in the five minutes following the offense, BV was not used at all. This is significant considering BV was used an average of 3.7 times per minute across all

segments of talk that I transcribed. The above manifested inability to committedly apologize in BV is likely due to BV's indexing of ridiculousness and absurdity. Because of this, BV cannot be the means of resolving a serious conflict or of mitigating the negative consequences of a serious criticism.

When asked about subjects that would be inappropriate to discuss in BV, each roommate's first response was that spiritual topics were off limits to jokes. For example, Sam's immediate response to my question was "church things," but he quickly recanted. He then clarified that he was okay with being sarcastic or joking about the Church as an organization and about people at church, that he was comfortable with what he called "light criticism." However, he said he would not be sarcastic in a "more sacred context." He offered personal experiences with deity as an example of something he would not joke about.

Eric similarly indicated that he was not comfortable using BV to make light of profoundly personal spiritual experiences. However, he indicated that he sometimes used BV to push back against traditional religious norms in Mormon culture. This demonstrates the at times conflicting need of speakers to be reverent, pious Mormons while at the same time resisting anti-cosmopolitan elements of their religious culture. For instance, in a conversation about religious faith, Eric and Cole used BV when expressing opinions opposite to their own in a discussion about the way doubt is treated by Mormons. In many cases, Mormons tend to be uncomfortable with those who question the central truth claims of the Church, such as the belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon or in the Church holding exclusive rights to an authoritative priesthood. While in recent years the Church at an institutional level has begun moving toward a greater openness to members who question established religious narratives, at the level of the laity, many people still openly oppose questioning and doubt. It is this anti-cosmopolitan tendency to resist questioning that Eric and Cole were criticizing. They used BV to voice the opinion that asking critical questions about religious doctrine is bad and leads to apostasy, while using their normal

voices to discuss how questions can lead to growth and an increase in religious faith.

From interview data and observation, it is clear that for speakers of BV, there is discomfort associated with joking about personal religious matters. This explains why the roommates speak in BV when discussing religious subjects in potentially impious and therefore irreverent ways. In order to distance themselves from the negative social consequences of impiety and non-normative religious views, speakers use BV. However, there are also cases where religious matters are seen as anti-cosmopolitan and therefore worthy of ridicule, and in cases where such matters are discussed, BV can protect the speakers from conflation with anti-cosmopolitanism. The voicing allows the roommates to voice irreverence, in some cases in order to push back against traditional, anti-cosmopolitan religious values, and always with limited negative repercussions.

Voicing Taboo

In a previous example, Joe took offense when his roommates breached the topic of sex. While in this particular instance BV was not useful in limiting the profaning effects of criticism or of taboo, in many other cases BV is actually quite effective at separating the speaker from the irreverence associated with taboo topics such as sex or bodily functions.

For example, after a discussion about a T.V. show character who had an affair, the roommates began to discuss the meaning of the word affair. During this discussion, the speakers seemed to find the mention of the word "sex" to be comical, as evidenced by their laughter. They then engaged in a game involving the implicit metapragmatic recognition of the taboo in which they speak openly about sex:

Eric; <Vox: Brian Voice> Sex.

Everyone sa@y s@ex <Vox: Brian Voice> .

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice>@ one tw@o thr@ee <Vox: Brian Voice> ,

Cole; =<Vox: Brian Voice> Sex <Vox: Brian Voice> .

Eric; =<Vox: Brian Voice> Sex <Vox: Brian Voice>.

In this discussion, all mentions of sex were stated in BV. Here, interlocutors were able to use BV to index the ridiculousness associated with BV and attach it to the taboo word. In doing this, the roommates are parodying an anti-cosmopolitan person who is afraid to talk about sex. Through this parody, speakers reinforce their own cosmopolitan identity and humorously push back on the seriousness of this particular taboo. However, using BV also allows them to protect themselves from the irreverence of the taboo in the Mormon context. This trivialization through ridiculousness allows the speakers to distance themselves, as animators, from principalship of the taboo. Thus, even if speakers are primarily concerned with criticizing the anti-cosmopolitan existence of a taboo, they are simultaneously protecting themselves from the potential polluting effects of irreverence.

While taboos around sex exist in many cultures, sex is seen broadly as a taboo topic among Mormons and is particularly taboo when it relates to sexual practices seen as divergent, including extra-marital sex, as was the case in the previous example. The strict avoidance of taboos has formed an important part of the ways that Mormons construct their personhood, both historically and in the present (Kramer 2014; Vogt 1955), and this has had wide-reaching effects in the complicated ways that Mormons approach taboo topics, as noted in cases of psychotherapy and family relationships (Beit-Hallahmi 1975; Koltko 1990; Pearson 1986). Additionally, in Mormon culture there is a special reverence associated with sex. For example, in the "Sexual Purity" section of a Church pamphlet of youth guidelines called "For the Strength of Youth," sex is described as "the powers of procreation" which are "beautiful and sacred" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2011). Thus, the speakers of BV, all of whom were raised as and are practicing members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, are likely to have strong cultural motivations for associating the trivial use of sexual taboos with irreverence. This also helps to explain Joe's previously discussed offense at the mentioning of his relationship with his

fiancée, which had sexual implications, when in most male undergraduate apartments in the US, this might not have been as much of a problem. BV is a way that speakers can balance cultural motivations for avoiding sexual taboos with the need to assert a cosmopolitan identity that is comfortable with openly discussing sex.

The roommates also frequently use BV to avoid the anti-cosmopolitanism of taboo words not related to sexuality. In one instance, Eric and Sam were discussing a story related to expired yogurt in the apartment's fridge, and Cole interjected in BV, characterizing the substance as "diarrhea yogurt." Whether a taboo is sexual or not, speakers can use BV to distance themselves from impolite (and therefore both anti-cosmopolitan and irreverent) statements by voicing that irreverence in a clearly ridiculous way. Across all the conversations I transcribed, 69.6% of explicit taboos (words related to sex, bodily functions, or profanity) were spoken in BV.

Voicing Undesired Identities

Speakers frequently use BV in order to avoid profaning themselves with undesired identities that they sometimes chose to voice in their speech. By undesired, I mean undesired by a particular speaker in a particular context and not related to notions of objective desirability. The category of undesired identities is broad, and I use it here less as a specific category like criticism or taboo and more as a way of grouping the uses of BV which I feel do not fit well in the previous two categories. Essentially, this category contains instances of BV in which a speaker wishes to avoid principalship for a given identity (Goffman 1981). Speakers are thus able to express certain positions without claiming full responsibility for them.

For instance, in a conversation where the speakers were discussing the way geese often cross roads and inconvenience drivers, Cole and Eric both use BV when they say phrases that might be construed as indexically feminine. Cole mentions "little fluffy babies," and Eric pretends to address those baby geese as follows:

Cole; They would just line up,
<Vox: Brian Voice> Their little fluffy
babies <Vox: Brian Voice>,

Sam; =Yeah,

Cole; =And walk them,
Acr@oss th@e str@eet.
@@.

Eric; <Vox: Brian Voice> Alright children <Vox:
Brian Voice> @@,

Here, the speakers use BV to trivialize their use of words that might be associated with a feminine identity, as demonstrated by how Cole only voices the “little fluffy babies” portion of his comments. Through distancing themselves in this way from the feminine, the speakers are able to preserve their own masculine identity. As discussed previously, female voice qualities have often been associated with backwardness and thus anti-cosmopolitanism. Here, Cole and Joe use BV to avoid association with a potentially anti-cosmopolitan identity.

In a different conversation, Sam mentions that his girlfriend, Emily, had told him on one of their first dates that she did not know the difference between a duck and a goose. Sam then suggests that he would ask Emily if she had been pretending to be dumb in order to have something to talk about or if she actually did not know the difference between the two animals. He follows that proposition with a use of BV as follows:

Sam; @@ Oh hey Emily,
<Vox: Brian Voice> Did y@ou rea@lly not
know,
@ the difference between a duck and a
goose? <Vox: Brian Voice>

Cole; =<Vox: Brian Voice> Ha,
That’s a good one <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> Idiot <Vox: Brian
Voice>.
@@@.

Here, Sam was essentially acting out the proposed conversation with his girlfriend. The primary intent of this dialogue is clearly humorous. Sam is mocking Emily for not

knowing something that he felt was obvious. Still, by using BV, which indexes a lack of seriousness, Sam showed that he recognized how ridiculous and offensive it would be to ask the proposed question while at the same time making the joke. Here, BV allowed Sam to avoid the anti-cosmopolitanism associated with criticizing his girlfriend and possibly even a misogynistic identity in clarifying that he was not seriously considering asking Emily the proposed question.

I observed frequent conversations in which the roommates discussed the push and pull between a Mormon theology, which they interpreted as anti-sexist, and a conservative religious culture, which they found problematically oppressive to anyone who was not a heterosexual male. While in more conservative Mormon circles sexist language toward females can be pervasive, the irreverence of misogyny, given the roommates’ interpretation of Mormon theology, as the provenance of the anti-cosmopolitan religious rube is abundantly clear for the roommates. This notion of irreverence, especially when combined with the cultural imperative for niceness, demonstrates the strong motivations that Sam would have for using BV to avoid an anti-cosmopolitan and potentially misogynistic identity. In this case, BV allowed Sam make a joke while distancing himself from undesired qualities. In other words, BV permitted him to speak irreverence and anti-cosmopolitanism without becoming anti-cosmopolitan or irreverent himself.

One of the more entertaining identities that the roommates used BV to distance themselves from involved a twisting of anti-immigrant rhetoric associated with Donald Trump to apply to French people visiting the United States with tourist visas. This conversation arose when Cole and Joe were discussing the difficulties that a French friend was facing in coming to visit them.

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> French people are stealing our jobs <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Joe; @@@,
French people are stealing our jobs?.
@@,
That's the dumbest thing,
I've ever heard.

Cole; <Vox: Brian Voice> We need a big and a beautiful wall <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> Build it <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Joe; <Vox: Brian Voice> Build it.
In the ocean that way these stupid
French people,
Can't come over <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Cole; <Vox: Brian Voice> Oh wait but they have planes?,
Oh no. <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> No_ <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Joe; <Vox: Brian Voice> Build a wall going up to the atmosphere <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Here, the undesired identity is that of xenophobia. I frequently observed conversations among the roommates that reflected pro-immigrant political ideas. Often, these conversations mix cosmopolitan, liberal politics with the theological underpinnings of the pro-immigrant stance assumed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2010). In the example above, Joe, Sam, and Cole engaged in a comedic satire of the then contemporary political discussion of President Donald Trump's border wall and other anti-immigrant sentiments. Using BV adds to the humor and makes obvious the separation between animator and principal (Goffman 1981). They are able to joke while distancing themselves from a political opinion that for them would be both irreverent and anti-cosmopolitan.

BV is also frequently used to voice impious identities. This is particularly true in speech where ideas related to religious faith are criticized. For example, in one conversation

about Joe's choice to study instead of having fun with his roommates (he is the Brian referenced in the speech below), Sam and Cole use BV when evoking notions of salvation and damnation.

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> Brian is uh,
Wasting all his time and is completely unmotivated,
Hasn't gone to the library in three weeks.
He's basically going to go to hell <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Cole; Yes, because

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> Just kidding <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Cole; Cause,
<Vox: Brian Voice> If you don't go to the library,
You're just damned for eternity <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Sam; <Vox: Brian Voice> Oh wait.
Hell doesn't exist <Vox: Brian Voice>.

Here, Sam and Cole are trying to demonstrate to Joe, who just expressed feeling bad about not studying enough, that his worries are relatively trivial. They do this by using hyperbole in BV. In saying that Joe is going to hell because he did not study, the roommates are seeking to point out how ridiculous they think Joe's guilt really is. Their dismissal of Joe's guilt with the line "Hell doesn't exist" references the Mormon belief that the afterlife consists of degrees of glory, all of which are magnificent, rather than a heaven-hell dichotomy typical of other Christian groups. The implication is that Joe should not feel guilty for his perceived lack of studying. Rather, he should recognize that his efforts, even if less than perfect, will end up benefiting him—just as even mediocre morality results in a kingdom of glory, so too will even mediocre scholastic efforts lead to learning.

However, the question remains of why BV was used in this particular segment of talk. Clearly, it is used to add an extra element of humor and triviality to the situation, similar to other examples discussed previously. But humor and triviality would likely have been implied by the ridiculousness of the statements

alone. I would posit that BV was necessary in this context in order to limit irreverence through impiety. As discussed previously, an important aspect of the sacred self in Mormon contexts is respect for spiritual and religious beliefs. Making light of salvation and damnation could risk irreverence on the part of the speaker. However, the anti-cosmopolitan character of BV is also at play in that BV is used here to voice the overly-moralizing religious rube who thinks someone could suffer damnation for not studying. By using BV, Sam and Cole are able to irreverently criticize Joe using a complex satire of Mormon religious imagery and at the same time avoid anti-cosmopolitanism.

The Moral Character of Brian Voice: Reverent and Cosmopolitan

As mentioned in several examples above, BV is able to mitigate the social discomfort associated with irreverent and anti-cosmopolitan statements through trivializing those statements. This trivializing capacity stems from BV's association with the ridiculous and the absurd. BV became an entextualized inside joke precisely because of this characteristic ridiculousness in the original Randy-Bryson context. From this original, ridiculous context, BV was combined with other absurd contexts, and eventually became distant from them. Through association with these original, ridiculous contexts, BV has been enregistered as a phonetic and contextual index of the absurd. Simply put, BV was born and raised in ridiculousness and absurdity, and though now distant from the original ridiculousness, still brings ridiculousness and absurdity into any space in which it is spoken. Because BV is so absurd, it has the power to trivialize what is voiced, and as seen in the examples above, speakers use this to mitigate the negative social consequences of irreverence and anti-cosmopolitanism to which BV gives utterance.

Interestingly, the use of BV mainly in contexts of anti-cosmopolitanism and irreverence has created a specific character associated with BV, which speakers refer to as Brian, "the persona that we adopt." Based on

my observations, I argue that the Brian persona is essentially an overly-moralizing, hyper-reverent, and perhaps politically conservative Mormon that the speakers voice ironically, even parodically, in order to criticize those characteristics while also distancing themselves from the anti-cosmopolitanism and hyper-reverence that they are voicing. For example, when the roommates used BV to express sympathy for an unsuccessful date experienced by Joe, they were able to imply that the failed date was not really a big deal while also expressing the sympathy that an overly-moralizing Mormon might express in equating Joe's failed date to a failure to be married and thereby a failure to be righteous and heaven-bound. The roommates were using BV to parody a position of seriousness regarding Joe's lack of success, and thus the practice of BV becomes a parody of hyper-reverent anti-cosmopolitanism. By parodying this position, which a hyper-reverent, conservative Mormon might assume, the roommates are able to distance themselves from an ethical stance that would be less than desirable to a cosmopolitan college student, namely the heavy emphasis on (relatively) early marriage.

In many of the examples of BV referenced in this paper, including the criticism of xenophobic political currents, Cole urging his roommates to hurry and get ready for church, and criticizing Joe for being morally pure enough to study all night instead of having fun, the use of voicing marks the expressions as unnecessarily moralizing and therefore anti-cosmopolitan. In other words, by using BV's indexical absurdity to criticize these apparently conservative and hyper-reverent statements, the roommates are indicating that those moral attitudes are problematic. This is abundantly clear in the example where Sam avoids association with a critical and perhaps misogynistic identity while voicing an ironic criticism of his girlfriend. By using BV, Sam paints the proposed sexist criticism as absurd, thus avoiding the polluting effects of the anti-cosmopolitanism associated with misogyny while simultaneously asserting a cosmopolitan identity for himself.

However, BV is not solely about criticizing the overly-moralizing positions of conservative Mormons. As we have seen even in examples

where hyper-reverence is being criticized, the roommates' use of BV still indicates some deference to notions of pious Mormon reverence. For example, while BV is used to criticize an overly-moralizing position on studying or having a bad date or being late for church, there is also an implicit recognition that niceness, marriage, and church attendance are important. In these cases, speakers do not use BV to suggest that one should never study or never get married or stop going to church entirely, as one might expect from those wishing to identify as cosmopolitan. Rather, the parodic nature of the voicing implicitly embodies a critique of a decidedly anti-cosmopolitan position that would unduly censure laxness in studying and dating or lateness for church while at the same time acknowledging that suggesting a total rejection of those ideals would be irreverent. As discussed throughout this paper, BV allows the roommates to distance themselves from irreverence associated with interpersonal criticism, with taboo, and with undesired identities that would affront Mormon notions of reverence, thus preserving their own reverent identities. It also allows the roommates to distance themselves from positions reflective of the anti-cosmopolitan rube who they are voicing. Thus, the speakers are free to criticize anti-cosmopolitanism while protecting themselves from the irreverence that might be associated with that criticism.

That the voicing is a means for balancing cosmopolitanism with Mormon reverence is further manifested by there being a reverence that is allowable and is clearly off-limits to BV. As evidenced by the lack of BV following the insult to Joe, as well as by the interview data in which speakers expressed a reluctance to use BV in speaking about personal spiritual experiences, there are certain situations in which BV would introduce too much irreverence. In the end, BV produces a type of Goldilocks phenomenon where the speakers are able to develop the "just right" amount of reverence—not too reverent, but also not too irreverent. It allows speakers to navigate boundaries between the moral requirements of their religious life and the moral requirements of cosmopolitanism. Through BV, speakers are

able to be both reverent, pious Mormons and cosmopolitan college students as they create a cohesive Mormon cosmopolitanism.

Conclusions

BV turned out to be much more than the humorous mimicry that it was at its inception. It has evolved into a means of performing the complex social function of limiting the polluting effects of irreverence while also asserting a cosmopolitan identity. In this way, BV allows speakers to transcend the seeming contradictions between a reverent Mormon and a cosmopolitan self by balancing ethical judgements that might otherwise be in conflict. In its ability to criticize without offending, this quality of Mormon cosmopolitanism's moral imperative toward niceness is made abundantly clear. Similarly, when speakers use BV to speak of taboos or avoid conflation with an undesired identity, their speech reflects underlying moral values. This supports the existence of an implicit Mormon-cosmopolitan morality, a kind of ethics-in-practice that is not being explicitly articulated by the speakers but is felt nonetheless. Furthermore, this research makes it clear that the seemingly mundane, ordinary, everyday language of a group of just four speakers has important implications for anthropological approaches to the study of morality.

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