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### **Title**

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### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9qt0j9rr>

### **Journal**

Issues in Applied Linguistics, 7(1)

### **ISSN**

1050-4273

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### **Publication Date**

1996-06-30

### **DOI**

10.5070/L471005231

Peer reviewed

# Negotiating Price in an African American Beauty Salon<sup>1</sup>

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*For many African American women, the beauty salon is a site of communal bonding, as well as a public space where professional and personal identities are co-constructed by and for women. Client-hairdresser negotiations about hair are integral to women's interactions at the salon. Negotiations must mediate between clients' personal preferences and potential economic investment and the hairdresser's professional expertise, creative agency, and advertising potential (i.e., a clients' hairstyle advertises the hairdresser's craft). Clients employ a range of prosodic, proxemic, and paralinguistic stances to communicate their hair preferences. At times, the discursive stances employed by clients during negotiations serve to challenge their social identities as service recipients and hair care novices (cf. Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991). Similarly, a hairdresser's social identity as a service provider and hair care expert can be renegotiated through stances which invite collaboration from the client. This paper discusses a client-initiated negotiation in which, on the surface, a client seeks to ascertain the hairdresser's prescribed hair treatment. However, the client's use of questions, prosody, and various paralinguistic cues suggests that this negotiation concerns the hairdresser's intended fee more so than it does her intended hair treatment. Furthermore, the client's series of questions during this negotiation seem to violate her role-expectations of hair novice and challenge the hairdresser's social identity as hair expert. As such, the client's subsequent attempt to trivialize the emphatic weight of her own questions is met with failure as the hairdresser exposes, via humor, the marked nature of those questions.*

## INTRODUCTION

Women's hair care is part of the fabric of many cultures, including American and African culture.<sup>1</sup> Bad hair days and the fear of the great unknown—rain and humidity—have undone many attempts to have a good day. In Africa, hair adornment is often central to women's communal bonding as well as a source of income. The time African and African American women spend on elaborate braiding or European hair styles, African American hair styles, Jamaican styles, etc. is both a cultural and a feminist exercise, as well as one which mediates local, national, and transnational identities (Arnoldi & Kremer,

1995). This is especially true in the U.S. where the notion of hair style choice made its socio-economic debut in the 1920s with the introduction of the straightening comb (cf. Ellis, 1994) and then in the 1960s, with the introduction of the Afro. Because this latter hair style troped the black power movement and political, social, and historical inclusion, it also reinforced the notion that hair symbolized cultural identity.

As Mercer (1994) notes in "Hair Style/Politics," this *cultural discourse* of African American hair serves to index one's racial and political identity, regardless of the wearer's intentions. Likewise, braids, dreadlocks, and short afros are often interpreted as reflections of a person's Afrocentric identity (Chevannes, 1994; Majors & Billson, 1992; Levine, 1977), while 'bone straight' perms have been politically interpreted as indicators of an assimilated or Eurocentric identity in the African American community (Bonner, 1991; Russell et al, 1992; Wiley, 1991; hooks, 1994; McGee et al., 1985).<sup>2</sup> Hence, for African American females, the choice about a particular hairstyle often entails a choice about a particular (and often racial) identity.

Pilot observations in an Oakland beauty salon have illuminated the range of discursive stances employed by clients and hairdressers as they negotiate hair care. Negotiations are integral to all salons as they mediate the client's personal hair preferences and economic investment and the hairdresser's professional expertise, creative agency, and advertising potential (i.e. a client's hairstyle advertises the hairdresser's craft). During negotiations, clients and hairdressers likewise employ discursive stances that reflect their respective social identities (cf. Gumperz, 1982; Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991) as hair novice/service recipient and hair expert/service provider. Clients display novice stances by yielding diagnostic power to hairdressers and hairdressers employ expert stances by assuming some degree of authority, either directly or indirectly, over how the client's hair should be treated and/or styled. And yet, occasionally, the discursive stances employed by clients during negotiations serve to challenge their own social identities as service recipients and hair novices. Similarly, hairdressers may renegotiate their own expert status through discursive stances that invite clients to participate in hair diagnosis. Because the resulting hairstyles reflect the client's individual persona(s) as well as the hairdresser's creativity and skill, client-hairdresser negotiations involve problem-solving, compromises and, to some degree, conflict resolution.

In African American beauty salons, client-hairdresser negotiations also exemplify how discourse and interaction mediate the politics of hair and identity for African American women (Bucholtz, 1995; cf. Mageo, 1994). For decades, African American salons have typically served women with a distinct range of hair textures (cf. Drake & Clayton, 1970). This range of hair texture is from slightly wavy to tightly curled.<sup>3</sup> African American females' wavy or tightly curled hair texture has long been critiqued as a reflection of poor grooming and as a marker of ugliness (cf. Morrison, 1970; Haley, 1965; Featherston, 1994), savagery (Jordan, 1968) and militancy (Feagan & Sikes, 1994; Sinclair, 1994).

The beauty salon constitutes a social, political, and highly gendered site where political, professional, as well as aesthetic identities are crafted by and for African American women.

The degree to which the act of creating social identities *through* hairstyle is made explicit in client-hairdresser negotiations often varies according to the particular genre of beauty salon. In salons which specialize in "natural hair care" (i.e., dreadlocks, braids, and twists), the act of creating social identity through hairstyles is often made explicit. Conversely, in salons which specialize in hairstyles that require hair straightening by means of heat and/or chemicals (i.e., perms), this facet of hair care is more implicit.

This paper discusses a client-initiated negotiation in which, on the surface, a client seeks to ascertain the hairdresser's prescribed hair treatment. The client's use of questions, prosody, and various paralinguistic cues strongly suggests that this negotiation concerns the hairdresser's intended fee more so than it does her intended hair treatment. Additionally, the client assumes various 'expert' stances that contradict her role expectations as hair novice/service recipient and further serve to challenge the hairdresser's social identity as hair expert/service provider. This segment likewise demonstrates the subtle ways in which client and hairdresser's respective social identities as hair novice and expert, as well as their respective hair preferences, are discursively mediated in their negotiations about hair. Before exploring this interaction in-depth, it will be useful to review major literature on discourse styles among African American women and girls.

## DISCOURSE STYLES AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND GIRLS

Within the highly gendered site of the African American beauty salon, women employ a cultural repertoire of discourse styles and verbal genres, including *he-said-she-said* (Goodwin, 1980; 1990; 1992), *indirection* and *marking* (Smitherman, 1994; Morgan, 1993; 1994; 1996). These communicative styles are used variably by women according to context and the degree of familiarity between speakers.

Goodwin describes *he-said-she-said* as an elaborate storytelling routine in which a person seeks to address a reported wrong and involves others in the storytelling process. Among the African American girls she observed, *he-said-she-said* was ritualized and often lead to an adamant confrontation between the victim and her alleged slanderer, as well as the girl(s) who originally reported the alleged misdeed. Among African American women in the salon, *he-said-she-said* more often takes the shape of a playful spectacle (cf. Morgan, 1996). It is used by women in casual conversation and, to a lesser degree, in negotiations about hair care. Additionally, women practice a form of *he-said-she-said* in or outside the presence of the alleged gossip for the purposes of mocking them and/or

generating superficial discord among the women. Likewise, the women in the salon who are the subjects of *he-said-she-said* are not as adamant as the girls in Goodwin's research in their responses to the alleged gossipier.

Some clients and hairdressers also rely on *indirection* to communicate their desires and needs concerning hairstyle and treatment. Morgan (1989; 1991; 1993; 1994; 1996) notes that the African American system of indirect speech relies on the collaborative interpretation of a message by speakers and their audience. Morgan further notes that indirect speech is often strategically exploited by African American women. Women also employ marking, an exaggerated rendition of a subject (Smitherman, 1994), to negatively depict a problematic person or situation in their lives<sup>4</sup> or to mock someone or something.

Women's use, interpretation, and responses to marking, indirection, and *he-said-she-said* routines rely on their shared cultural knowledge of how these discourse styles and verbal genres reflect and invoke their cultural experiences. As such, women's use of these discourse and verbal genres during casual conversation or negotiations about hair care both reflect and construct social and cultural bonds and identity. With respect to negotiations in particular, clients and hairdressers' use of these styles can introduce cultural contexts which can then reframe the negotiations in progress.

## SALON DESCRIPTION

The client-initiated negotiation to be discussed took place in a small Oakland salon in November 1995. Joyce, the owner, and Tonya are hairdressers at the salon, which is situated within a working class and largely African American community.<sup>5</sup> Joyce, 44, is also a mother, wife, and avid churchgoer. Tonya, 26, was recently engaged. She rented Joyce's second booth two years ago, after earning her cosmetology license.

Joyce and Tonya's respective clientele include working to middle-class African American women between the ages of 25-70, though the majority of their clients are middle-aged (40-70). Their relationships with their clientele are not merely economic in nature, but social as well. Throughout the day, women network and share information about resources (sales, baby-sitters, etc.). Sometimes clients and hairdressers distribute flyers to their patrons about local activities or job opportunities. The women also engage in lively discussions about family members, personal and professional relationships, African American celebrities, and church.

The ambience of the salon is celebratory of African American women and culture. Joyce designed the salon with purple and gold to reflect the "royalty of African American women." She accents the salon with flowers that are purchased weekly from the flower shop next door. Joyce and Tonya try to keep the door ajar to welcome clients, as well as dilute the smell and fog of hair spray and



other chemicals used on a daily basis. This open door often welcomes other patrons, including church members selling soulful lunches or dinners, and vendors selling products at wholesale costs. Often, and sometimes in competition with the television, the soulful sounds of jazz, gospel, and, on rare occasions, hip hop grace the salon's interior. Several wall hangings do likewise, including photographs of African American women modeling the latest hairstyles. The most salient wall hangings include five artistic prints reflecting African American women's hair care in the salon and at home. One of these pictures depicts a woman getting her hair "pressed" or straightened with a metal comb on the stove.<sup>6</sup> Though most of the clients at this salon get their hair straightened chemically, it is fitting that this picture has found its place within these walls. This African American salon is one of thousands which celebrates and preserves African American women's hair ritual.<sup>7</sup>

## ANALYSIS

In her 13 years as a hair stylist, Joyce has developed a loyal clientele. Many of her clients include family members, church acquaintances, and other women with whom she has developed strong friendships over the years. A fairly typical negotiation between Joyce and a client is typified in Transcript 1. This client-initiated negotiation involves Joyce and her faithful client, Grace. Grace, who is also Joyce's cousin. Below, Grace initiates a collaborative sequence about the final shaping of her hairstyle.

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### Transcript 1: Typical Client-Hairdresser Negotiation<sup>8</sup>

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- Joyce:            *((Sprays Grace's hair with finish sheen))*  
                       *(((Picks in Grace's hair))*  
 Grace:            *(((looks at Joyce through mirror))*  
                       [<What you gon' do?> (.) You gon' make a bun (.) or you just gon'=  
 Joyce:            *(((Joyce looks at Grace through the mirror))*  
                       [(1.0)  
 Grace:            =°leave it down°=  
 Joyce:            =leave it (down)  
 Grace:            *((mouths))* Okay  
 Joyce:            [(7.0)  
                       *(((Joyce sprays Grace's hair, sets hairspray down))*  
                       *(((Bends down))*  
                       [Give you somethin' to (play) with  
 Grace:            *((Snickers))*

This negotiation is fairly concise and straightforward. It occurs as Joyce begins to apply the final touches to Grace's hairstyle. Joyce sprays Grace's hair with finish sheen and begins to pick at the top of her hair. In Line 4, Grace turns her attention to Joyce through the mirror and asks, "<WHAT you gon' do?> (.)

You gon' make a bu:n (.) or you just gon'," which is followed by a one second pause. At lines 3-7, Grace initiates a negotiation sequence. In her first turn constructional unit (TCU),<sup>9</sup> Grace delivers a question, "What you gon' do?>" and in her second TCU, she offers potential styles, "You gon' make a bu:n (.) or you just gon'." Grace exerts agency in initiating this negotiation about the final shape of her hairstyle. Yet, the denotational nature and form of Grace's question constitutes a novice stance. Her question essentially grants Joyce the diagnostic power to determine the hairstyle. In doing so, this question further endows Joyce with expert status. Grace's use of such hair jargon as "bu:n" also indexes her familiarity and experience with a range of particular styles. Grace in fact often alternates between a bun freeze and a partial freeze<sup>10</sup> and as such, is particularly qualified to set up this semantic field of hair alternatives for the *freeze* hairstyle. As Grace pauses, Joyce and Grace make eye contact through the mirror. Joyce momentarily suspends her work until Grace proceeds with "leave it down" which is said in a relatively lower pitch. It appears evident in this case that Joyce has read Grace's lower pitch, as well as the structure of her question, "What you gon' do?" as granting Joyce the power to render a creative decision. Joyce responds, "Leave it (down)." Grace confirms this decision by mouthing, "Okay" which can be interpreted as rendering her approval of the decision they have reached collaboratively. After a seven second pause, though, Joyce adds rather playfully in line 21, "Give you somethin' to (play) with." Joyce's reply further qualifies the basis of her decision in a form and fashion of verbal play. Grace participates in and validates this as a form of play by her snickering reply. As such, both she and her hairdresser, Joyce, co-construct the decision to keep part of her hair down (i.e. partial freeze).

In contrast, the client-initiated negotiation outlined below in Transcript 2 is more extensive and is marked by a series of emphatic questions. This negotiation admittedly concerns more subject matter (e.g. both hair style and treatment) and involves a similar construction, "Okay (.1) so what you gon' do to me today girl?" Yet, the client's subsequent use of consecutive questions is atypical of client-hairdresser negotiations in this salon and is marked as unusual by Joyce, as well as overhearers. The negotiation took place in the late afternoon and involves Joyce, Carla; a client, and Lanita; the ethnographer. Kay, who is mentioned in the conversation but not present, is both Carla's sister and Joyce's client.

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**Transcript 2: An Atypical Client-Hairdresser Negotiation**

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- |          |                                                                                             |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 Joyce: | Okay you can sit in my chair                                                                |
| 2 Carla: | (( <i>smilevoice</i> )) Okay (.1) so what you gon' do to me today girl?(( <i>walking to</i> |
| 3        | <i>Joyce's booth</i> ))                                                                     |
| 4 Joyce: | ((( <i>playfully</i> )))                                                                    |
| 5        | [I don't know                                                                               |
| 6        | (.1)                                                                                        |
| 7        | What you want?                                                                              |
| 8 Carla: | ((( <i>turns to Joyce while en route to Joyce's chair</i> )))                               |
| 9        | [But you know what?                                                                         |

- 10 It don't look like I need a touch up  
 11 Joyce: Huh?  
 12 Carla: It doesn't look like I need a touch up  
 13 (1.0)  
 14 I mean you'll have to feel it  
 15 [(waves hand towards Joyce)]  
 16 Joyce: [It's only been what?  
 17 Carla: I don't know  
 18 (.1)  
 19 Three weeks  
 20 Joyce: You shouldn't  
 21 Carla: =I shouldn't need one huh?  
 22 ((sits down in Joyce's chair, Joyce begins to feel through Carla's hair))  
 23 >So what you gonna do?<  
 24 Line me? ((client feels back of hair))  
 25 >How much is a trim?<  
 26 >Did you wanna trim?<  
 27 ((Joyce laughs))  
 28 [>What you wanna do?<  
 29 Carla: (((Carla turns and winks at Lanita))  
 30 It's definitely dirty though girl (.1) whe:w ((sighs))  
 31 ((agitated voice)) O:::h my son asked me  
 32 What you goin' there for?  
 33 It looks good to me!  
 34 I Was Like Because I Need  
 35 (.1) Because I Want Tol  
 36 ((Joyce begins to feel Carla's hair))  
 37 >How's it look?<  
 38 >How's it feelin?<  
 39 ((Joyce leans forward on clients shoulders and laughs, Carla laughs))  
 40 KAY SAY, "ASK HER A WHOLE LOT OF QUESTIONS  
 41 =TO GET YOUR HAIR DONE"  
 42 I'm just messin with you  
 43 (.1)  
 44 Go 'head on Joyce  
 45 Lanita: Is this Kay's sister?  
 46 Carla: Uh huh  
 47 Lanita: ((squeals)) O:::::::::::H ((laughs))  
 48 Joyce: Yeah  
 49 Carla: O:::::h  
 50 Joyce: That's my daughter  
 51 Carla: Uh huh I figured she was  
 52 Joyce: [No it's just that you asked about seven questions *right* in a row  
 53 ((laughing))  
 54 Carla: [I'm so good  
 55 ((looks back at Lanita and winks))  
 56 That's ma job girl  
 57 (.1)  
 58 I work for a Workman's Comp Company  
 59 (.1)  
 60 Carla: I know how to ask  
 61 Joyce: [Oh La:::wd ((laughing))  
 62 Carla: [I ask people all kind of stuff  
 63 (.1)  
 64 >When's Ya Last Day At Work?<  
 65 (.1)  
 66 >How You Get Hurt?<  
 67 (.1)  
 68 >Who Sent In The Paper?<



## ANALYSIS

This negotiation affords an exploration of the shifting discursive stances and strategies employed by Carla, in particular, in negotiating hair treatment and style. In line 1, Carla is summoned to Joyce's booth, an area where hair treatment is typically diagnosed and hairstyles are negotiated. En route, Carla stops to ask, "Okay (.1) so what you gon' do to me today girl." As a way of answering this inquiry, Joyce asks Carla a question, namely how long it has been since Carla's last perm, a necessary step before reapplying chemicals to the hair. Carla replies, "I don't know (.1) Three weeks."

Joyce's question allows Carla to assess her hairdresser's professional integrity and skill. Women sometimes seek a new hairdresser because their former beautician decided to perm their hair when such a chemical treatment was unnecessary. Bitter clients often attribute this to the hairdresser's lack of skill or their hairdresser's desire to charge a higher fee. Likewise, Joyce's reply in line 19, "You shouldn't," is an indicator to Carla that Joyce will not over-perm her hair by virtue of inexperience or for the purpose of increasing the fee. Joyce's reply also constitutes a diagnosis and expert stance which orients the preceding negotiation towards closure. In line 21, Carla adds almost in overlap, "I shouldn't need one huh," where the "huh" serves as an agreement token<sup>11</sup> or confirmation of Joyce's preceding diagnosis.

This negotiation, though, is apparently not over for Carla. As Joyce begins to feel through Carla's hair, Carla asks in succession, ">So what you gonna do?< Line Me? >How much is a trim?< >Did you want to trim?<," where the first question reiterates Carla's question in line 2, "Okay (.1) so what you gon' do to me today girl?" Also note that within this series of questions is an inquiry about the cost of a trim. These questions in their rapid delivery, abundance, and sequential order provoke laughter from Joyce. Joyce's response suggests that such a line of questions is amusing and perhaps even uncommon in this context.

My pilot observations of client-hairdresser negotiations in this Oakland salon have thus far shown that, while clients often challenge their role expectations as hair novices, they seldom do so by employing a series of emphatic questions. Additionally, when clients who were also Joyce's immediate family members used such a series of questions to negotiate hair care, they were reprimanded by being asked, "Do you wanna do it?" or told, "Just let me do it!" With this client, Joyce responds with laughter. As Joyce laughs, Carla turns to Lanita, winks and states, ">What you wanna do!<" Her wink and the animated delivery of her question seem to acknowledge her questions as constituting an improper interrogation of Joyce while also working to trivialize the emphatic force of the questions. About two minutes later, as Joyce concludes her initial appointment, Carla bends toward the mirror and states somewhat to herself, "It's

definitely dirty though girl,” after which she sighs. Carla’s use of *girl* is a marker of intimacy. As Smitherman (1994) notes, “*girl*” is an informal female address term used mostly between women to mark solidarity and/or mutual admiration.

In a manner characteristic of women’s social interactions in the salon, Carla initiates (in line 31) a complaint about a perceived trouble source in her life. The trouble source is her son and the complaint involves his recent inquiry about her visit to the beauty salon. In lines 31-33 Carla states, “O::h my son asked me What you goin’ there for? It looks good to me!” Carla places stress on *me* as she marks or repeats her son’s comments in an exaggerated and mocking manner.<sup>12</sup> Carla’s negative framing of her son’s inquiry indexes her dissatisfaction with his inquiry. Her reply, “I Was Like Because I Need (.) Because I Want To!” in lines 34-35 suggests that professional hair care is a desire that is not to be questioned by her son. Her reply further asserts that what “looks good to *him*” is immaterial with respect to her decision to go to the salon.

Following Carla’s complaint and assertion, Joyce begins to feel the client’s hair. Here, Carla initiates yet another set of questions. In lines 37-38, she asks “>How’s it look?< >How’s it feelin?<” in rapid succession, which provokes both work-withdrawal and laughter from Joyce. At this point, Carla acknowledges that she has been asking too many questions and states emphatically and in a loud pitch, “KAY SAY, ASK HER A WHOLE LOT OF QUESTIONS TO GET YOUR HAIR DONE!” Carla uses *he-said-she-said* here by implicating Kay, who is not present, as the instigator behind her use of questions. The structure (“KAY SAY ...”) and animated delivery of her accusation parallels the performance of *he-said-she-said* by the African American girls in Goodwin’s (1980; 1990; 1992) study. Through her use of *he-said-she-said* which involves an absent, yet mutually familiar target (Kay), Carla is able to attribute her behavior to Kay, as well as trivialize the emphatic weight and inappropriateness of her questions. In line 41, Carla issues a disclaimer, “I’m just messin with you Joyce” which further mitigates the intention of her prior series of questions.<sup>13</sup> Carla adds, “Go ‘head on Joyce,” which permits Joyce to proceed with hair care. In lines 45-47, Lanita, the ethnographer as well as a marginal participant, learns of Carla’s affinity to Kay and responds excitedly. In line 52, Joyce is explicit about attributing her laughter to Carla’s abundant series of questions. While laughing herself, Joyce states, “No it’s just that you asked about seven questions *right* in a row,” where the adverb *right* emphasizes the consecutive delivery of Carla’s questions. As Lanita and Joyce laugh, Carla engages in a form of verbal play where she then attributes her line of questions to her job. In line 54 Carla states, “I’m so good,” after which she winks at Lanita. Carla continues, “That’s ma job girl (.1) I work for a Workman’s Comp Company (.1) I know how to ask.” Joyce interjects with “Oh La:::wd” at line 61. Carla continues, “I ask people all kind of stuff (.1) >When’s Ya Last Day At Work?< (.1) >How You Get Hurt?< (.1) >Who Sent In The Paper?<” As

such, Carla again uses questions, as well as winks, to bring the negotiation towards an amusing closure and further trivialize the force of her inquiry.

### RETROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT INSIGHT

In reviewing the abundant, sequential, and denotative nature of Carla's line of questions, I became curious as to whether these discourse strategies were employed by Carla to mask her attempt to assess cost. This assumption was further fueled by Carla's preoccupation with various aspects of her hair treatment and most importantly, her first (and only) reference to cost in line 24, "<How much is a trim?<" In an ethnographic interview shortly following this exchange, Joyce revealed that Carla is not a regular client. In fact, Carla visits the salon about once every two months.<sup>14</sup> Joyce also noted that Carla's sister, Kay, usually pays for her hair treatments. On this visit, however, Carla had to pay for her own hair treatment. For this reason Joyce also interpreted the nature and delivery of Carla's questions as an indirect means to assess the price of the visit in order to avoid the discomfort associated with having insufficient funds. These facts suggest that 'novice' and 'expert' stances may be strategically employed by clients to negotiate their particular interests with respect to hair style, hair treatment, and in this case, cost. Having revealed how Carla's negotiation was interpreted by Joyce, I will briefly revisit their negotiation to investigate how Carla's attempt to assess cost is strategically executed.

### REVISITING THE CLIENT-HAIRDRESSER NEGOTIATION AS AN ATTEMPT TO ASSESS COST

After Joyce's summons in line 1, Carla moves to the area where hair is typically diagnosed and treated. While en route, Carla initiates an indirect negotiation to assess the price. She states, "Okay (.1) so what you gon do to me today girl?" This statement, though softened by smile-voice intonation, can be read as "What do you want to do to my hair?" Joyce's reply, "I don't know (. ) What you want?" invites corroboration from Carla in diagnosing her hair treatment. Joyce's invitation to corroborate is not unusual among casual clients, especially when they are discussing hair treatments that require (as does this one) the application of chemicals to the hair. Carla's statement in lines 9-10, "But you know what? It don't look like I need a touch up" may be a subtle assertion that, "It doesn't look like I need a perm." This mitigated assertion could constitute an attempt on Carla's part to honor Joyce's professional expertise as a hair stylist. After an other-initiated repair from Joyce, Carla reiterates in line 12, "It doesn't look like I need a perm." Carla's display of subject-verb agreement is

more formal and may reflect her increased self-consciousness in response to Joyce's other-initiated repair. In line 14, Carla acknowledges Joyce's expertise by noting Joyce's need to make the final diagnosis. Carla states, "I mean you'll have to feel it." Here, Carla's *I mean* may potentially index her discomfort with her previous display of agency. In line 16, Joyce asks, "It's only been what?" in reference to the time of Carla's last perm or chemical treatment. Carla replies, "I don't know (.) Three weeks." Joyce states, "You shouldn't." Carla confirms, "I shouldn't need one huh." As Joyce begins to feel through Carla's hair, Carla asks, ">So what you gonna do?<" Note the similarity between the shape of Carla's question and Grace's question, "[<WHAT you gon' do?> (.) You gon' make a bu:n (.) or you just gon'..." cited in Transcript 1 (see line 4). On the surface, these questions construct Joyce as expert and appear to give Joyce the ultimate power to diagnose Carla's hair treatment and/or style. In Carla's case, however, this possibility is mitigated as Carla follows this construction with a series of questions. Carla continues with, "Line me? >How much is a trim?< >Did you wanna trim?<" Up to this point, Carla has been indirect about her desire to assess cost. In fact, the question, "<How much is a trim?>" is Carla's first and only explicit reference to cost. Joyce laughs at Carla's line of questions as Carla turns to Lanita, winks and states, ">What you wanna do!<" Carla's playful behavior suggests that she may be cognizant of the inappropriateness of her direct and emphatic manner of questioning and the amusing nature in which it is being interpreted by Joyce and Lanita.

Carla's comment in line 30, "It's definitely dirty though girl (.1) whe:w," concedes to the need for a wash and any costs associated. Later, Joyce prepares to apply perm to Carla's hair. This moment marks the official start of Carla's hair treatment and it is not surprising that Carla makes another valiant attempt to assess the condition and her hair. Carla asks in lines 37-38, ">How's it look?< >How's it feelin?<" In response to Joyce's ensuing laughter and work withdrawal, Carla attributes her behavior to her sister, Kay, who often pays for her hair treatments. Carla exclaims, "KAY SAY, ASK HER A WHOLE LOT OF QUESTIONS TO GET YOUR HAIR DONE!" The *he-said-she-said* form of Carla's exclamation exposes Kay as the (alleged) instigator of her line of questions. However, Carla's comment in lines 42-44, "I'm just messin with you (.1) Go 'head on Joyce" is a conscious acknowledgment of her excessive questions which absolves her from any intention to irritate Joyce.

In line 52, Joyce's comment, "No it's just that you asked about seven questions *right* in a row" could be read as a complaint or, at the very least, Joyce's indirect acknowledgment of the rarity of such a series of questions from clients. Lanita joins in the laughter. Carla responds to Joyce's comment (and perhaps to her and Lanita's laughter) by complimenting herself, "I'm so good," after which she turns to Lanita and winks. In this way, Lanita also mediates the directness of Carla's line of questions. Through the wink, Carla establishes with Lanita and perhaps anyone who witnesses it, an understanding that what preceded was all performed in play. As Morgan (personal communication) notes, Carla



establishes a cultural contract that deresponsibilizes her for any possible intention to irritate or disrespect Joyce's professional status. Carla continues, "That's ma job girl," where she again attributes her questions to an outside influence, this time her job. However, Carla's laughter and animated tone is in conversation with Joyce and Lanita's laughter and marks that the negotiation has *fully* evolved into a form of verbal play. In lines 58-60, Carla reveals, "I work for a Workman's Comp Company (.1) I know how to ask," to which Joyce responds, "Oh La:::wd." Carla's concluding remarks, "I ask people all kind of stuff (.1) <When's Ya Last Day At Work?> (.1) <When You Get Hurt?> (.1) <Who Sent In The Paper?>," thus only serve to heighten the degree of laughter among the women in the salon.

## SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

In client-hairdresser negotiations, women employ various discourse styles that mediate between the client's personal preferences and potential economic investment and the hairdresser's professional expertise, creative agency, and advertising potential. For African American women, whose hair is both politically-charged and interpreted (Mercer, 1994; hooks, 1994; Majors & Billson, 1992; Bonner, 1991; Chevannes, 1994; Levine, 1977), negotiations about hair also mediate the politics of African American hair and identity. The client-initiated negotiation analyzed above more boldly exemplifies the former and perhaps universal dynamic of client-hairdresser negotiations.

The client employs questioning and a *he-said-she-said* routine in her indirect effort to assess cost, as well as to trivialize or otherwise deflect the emphatic and direct nature of her questions. In doing the former, she violates her role expectations as a client in this Oakland salon and elicits laughter from Joyce and Lanita. The client's use of cultural contracts or disclaimers (i.e. "I'm just messin with you (.1) Go 'head on Joyce"), smile-voice intonation, and winks to trivialize her behavior is conversely an attempt to adhere to her client-role expectations. Retrospective participant insight support the hypothesis that this negotiation is a means through which Carla, the client, indirectly assesses cost, as well as the professional skill and integrity of Joyce, her hairdresser.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Lena Brown, Alessandro Duranti, Stan Huey, Marcyliena Morgan, Elinor Ochs, Betsy Rymes, and Jennifer Schlegel for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. I am particularly grateful to Marcyliena Morgan, whose comments shaped several of the ideas presented here. Any shortcomings in this final version are, of course, my own.



<sup>2</sup> Straight hair, however, is not always viewed negatively in African American culture. In fact, prior to the Black Power Movement of the 60s which stressed "black as beautiful," straight hair was culturally, stylistically, and politically preferred among many African Americans.

<sup>3</sup> Smitherman (1994) provides a lexicon of African American terms for hair. More curly hair texture is connoted, often negatively, in African American culture as "nappy" and may also be considered "bad hair." Contrastingly, "good hair" often refers to hair that is either straight, wavy, and/or retains a curl. "Kinky" has also been used to describe the curly texture of African American hair.

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes women mark their children, spouses, boss, political figures in order to contextualize a negative or amusing description of these figures in their lives.

<sup>5</sup> All names in this article (with the exception of my own) are pseudonyms.

<sup>6</sup> Ellis (1994) notes that, since the 1920s, straightening hair in this way has constituted a ritual for many African American women who have pressed their hair and continue to do so for aesthetic, pragmatic, economic, social, or political reasons.

<sup>7</sup> Both the cultural discourse of hair and the social significance of hair care has been documented in sociological studies of African American barbershops and beauty salons (cf. Drake & Clayton, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> Transcript notations are as follows:

[ a left-hand bracket indicates the onset of overlapping, simultaneous utterances.

(0.1) indicates a length of pause within and between utterances, timed in tenths of a second.

(( )) double parentheses enclose nonverbal and other descriptive information.

() single parenthesis enclose words that are not clearly audible (i.e., best guesses).

\_\_\_ underlining indicates stress on a syllable or word(s).

CAPS upper case indicates louder or shouted talk.

: a colon indicates a lengthening of a sound, the more colons, the longer the sound

? a question mark indicates a rising intonation as a syllable or word ends

((smile voice)) indicates smile-voice intonation; marks talk which is delivered as though speaker was smiling.

> < the combination of "greater than" and "less than" symbols enclose words and/or talk that is compressed or rushed.

< > the combination of "less than" and "greater than" symbols enclose words and/or talk that is markedly slowed or drawn out.

< the "less than" symbol by itself indicates that the immediately following talk is "jump-started," i.e., sounds like starts off with a rush.

<sup>9</sup> Sacks et al. (1974) describe turn constructional units as the various unit types which speaker may use to construct a turn. English TCUs may take the shape of a sentential, clausal, phrasal, or lexical construction.

<sup>10</sup> With the bun freeze, gel is applied to the hair; hair is shaped in a bun, and this hairstyle is hardened under a dryer. This hairstyle can last for a couple weeks if properly tended. With the partial freeze, only the top of the hair is gelled into a bun and the back of the hair is curled. This style can last for several weeks.

<sup>11</sup> A "touch up" refers to a relaxer or a perm. Like the ritual of pressing hair with a "hot comb," perming or relaxing hair must be repeated within one to two months

after a client's chemical treatment. Hairdressers often decide to chemically treat a client's hair when the client's hair has returned to its original curly texture.

<sup>12</sup> Carla's son accompanied her on this visit and seemed eager to leave throughout their entire stay. As such, his pre-visit inquiry may have been an attempt to deter her trip.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan (personal communication, 1995) notes that "I'm just messin with you" has been used by African American comedians and speakers in general to establish a cultural contract. Within the African American speech community, this disclaimer basically says "Forget everything I just said" and in doing so, absolves the speaker from any intentionality in his/her statement.

<sup>14</sup> Though chemical touch-ups occur approximately once every two to three months, many clients with permed hairstyles typically visit the salon every two weeks to get their hair washed, blow-dried and styled. These clients are considered to be regulars.

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