

Linguistic Passing and Racial Identity Performance in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*: A Sociolinguistic Reading

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ABSTRACT

*This study examines the representation of linguistic passing and racial identity performance in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* through a sociolinguistic perspective. Employing a qualitative research design with a close reading approach, the study analyzes dialogues, narrative descriptions, and communicative practices related to language use, accent, register, and strategic silence. The analysis is informed by Bucholtz and Hall's sociocultural linguistic framework, particularly the concepts of identity emergence and indexicality, as well as Irvine and Gal's theory of language ideology. The findings reveal that linguistic passing is a gradual process through which racial identity is continuously constructed and negotiated rather than an instantaneous transformation. Stella's identity is maintained through deliberate adjustments in speech style, register, accent, and strategic silence, enabling her to conform to the linguistic expectations of White society. The study further demonstrates that language functions as a primary resource for constructing social identity, while language ideology shapes how linguistic features are interpreted within specific social contexts. These findings contribute to sociolinguistic literary criticism by highlighting that racial identity in the novel is produced not only through physical appearance but also through everyday linguistic practices, emphasizing the central role of language in identity performance.*

Keywords: linguistic passing; racial identity; sociolinguistics; language ideology; *The Vanishing Half*

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a fundamental role in social life, functioning not only as a medium of communication but also as a powerful marker of individual and collective identity, particularly within multicultural societies. Beyond conveying information, language embodies cultural values, social norms, and shared experiences that shape interpersonal interactions and community membership (Mubarok et al., 2026; Okonkwo, 2025). The ways individuals speak, including their choice of vocabulary, accent, and linguistic style, often reveal aspects of their ethnic background, social class, and cultural affiliation, making language an important resource for constructing and expressing identity (Ekwere, 2022). At the same time, language may reinforce social boundaries by privileging dominant linguistic practices while marginalizing speakers who deviate from accepted norms, thereby influencing processes of inclusion, exclusion, and identity negotiation. Consequently, viewing language as a dynamic social practice provides a valuable perspective for understanding the complex relationship between communication, identity construction, and cultural diversity in contemporary societies.

Linguistic passing refers to the strategic use of language or specific linguistic styles to project a desired social identity, often differing from an individual's original social, ethnic, or racial background. Through this practice, speakers adopt linguistic features associated with another social group to gain acceptance, avoid discrimination, or access greater social opportunities (Eastman & Stein, 1993). This phenomenon demonstrates that language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a resource for constructing and negotiating identity. (Bucholtz, 1995) argues that linguistic practices can reshape ethnic identity, while Ghafournia (2014) highlights that language choice reflects broader social hierarchies and class distinctions. Likewise, Kamwangamalu (2001) shows that multilingual speakers use linguistic passing to negotiate identity in multicultural societies. Therefore, linguistic passing provides an important sociolinguistic perspective for understanding the relationship between language and racial identity.

Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half* provides a compelling literary context for examining the relationship between language, race, and identity. The story follows identical twin sisters, Stella and Desiree Vignes, whose lives diverge after Stella chooses to pass as white while Desiree remains connected to her Black identity (Arequi, 2022). Stella's decision requires her not only to conceal her racial background but also to adopt the linguistic and social practices associated with white society in order to sustain her new identity. Through these contrasting life choices, Bennett illustrates how racial identity is continuously negotiated rather than fixed. By portraying identity as fluid and socially constructed, *The Vanishing Half* offers an important literary text for exploring how linguistic passing contributes to the performance and maintenance of racial identity (Kristianto, 2023; Morgado, 2022a).

Previous studies have widely examined racial identity and racial passing in literary and cultural contexts, particularly by focusing on the psychological, cultural, and social experiences of fictional characters. Adaha & Azon (2025) analyze racial passing in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*, emphasizing the psychological conflicts and social consequences of passing. Similarly, Morgado (2022) discusses the influence of colorism and racial passing on identity formation in Bennett's novel, while Sheenam (2024) highlights the identity crises experienced by characters who cross racial boundaries. Earlier studies by Wald (2000) and Dreisinger (1994) further demonstrate that racial passing narratives challenge conventional understandings of race and identity in American literature. Although

these studies provide valuable insights into racial identity and passing, they primarily emphasize literary, cultural, and psychological perspectives, leaving the sociolinguistic dimensions of linguistic passing relatively underexplored.

Despite the growing body of research on racial identity and racial passing in literary studies, limited attention has been given to the role of linguistic passing in shaping and performing racial identity, particularly from a sociolinguistic perspective. Previous studies have primarily emphasized psychological, cultural, and historical dimensions, while the relationship between language use and racial identity construction remains underexplored. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how linguistic passing functions as a sociolinguistic strategy for constructing and maintaining racial identity in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*.

Based on the identified research gap, this study aims to identify the forms of linguistic passing portrayed in *The Vanishing Half*, analyze how language is used by the characters to construct and negotiate their racial identities, and explain the relationship between language use and racial identity performance from a sociolinguistic perspective.

This study is expected to contribute to the development of sociolinguistic approaches in literary analysis by providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and racial identity. It also offers insights into how linguistic practices shape identity performance in literary texts and serves as a reference for future research on language, identity, and race within the fields of sociolinguistics and literary studies.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This study employed a qualitative research design using a close reading approach within the framework of sociolinguistic literary criticism. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aims to explore the meanings embedded in linguistic expressions and communicative practices represented in a literary work. The research focuses on how language is used to construct and perform racial identity in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. Therefore, the analysis emphasizes textual interpretation rather than statistical measurement.

Data Source

The primary data source was Brit Bennett's novel *The Vanishing Half*, published by Riverhead Books. The novel was selected because it presents extensive representations of language use associated with racial identity, social mobility, and identity negotiation. The data consisted of dialogues, narrative descriptions, and character interactions that illustrate linguistic passing and racial identity performance. Secondary data were obtained from books, scholarly journals, and previous studies concerning sociolinguistics, language ideology, linguistic passing, racial identity, and literary criticism to support the interpretation of the findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected using documentation and close reading techniques. The novel was read several times to identify passages relevant to the research objectives. The selected data included (1) dialogues

showing shifts in language style or register, (2) narrative descriptions of speech, accent, or voice, (3) evaluations of a character's language by other characters, and (4) communicative silence or language avoidance related to identity performance. Each relevant passage was documented, coded, and classified according to the research categories before being analyzed.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis. The analysis consisted of four stages. First, the researcher identified and selected textual passages relevant to linguistic passing and racial identity performance. Second, the selected data were classified according to recurring linguistic patterns. Third, the data were interpreted using Bucholtz & Hall(2005) sociocultural linguistic framework, particularly the concepts of identity emergence and indexicality, complemented by language ideology theory (Irvine & Gal, 2000), and raciolinguistic perspectives (Rickford, 2016). Finally, the findings were interpreted thematically to explain how linguistic practices contribute to the construction and negotiation of racial identity in the novel.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Construction of Linguistic Passing through Identity Performance

The findings indicate that linguistic passing is a gradual process achieved through continuous identity performance rather than an instant transformation. Characters negotiate their identities by adjusting language use, speech style, and communicative behavior according to social and racial expectations. This finding is consistent with Dennihy (2017), who argues that passing in *Caucasia* is a strategic and situational performance rather than a permanent identity change. Likewise, studies on Indian English novels and the use of code-switching in *Sang Penantang Badai* and *Cantik Itu Luka* show that linguistic choices reflect ongoing identity negotiation within different sociocultural contexts (Akira et al., 2025; Auliya et al., 2024; Krantikar, 2024). Therefore, linguistic passing can be understood as a dynamic process shaped by language, social interaction, and cultural context.

The quote "*She slowly became her...*" illustrates that Stella's transformation is a gradual process of identity construction rather than an instant change. By continuously adjusting her language, behavior, and social interactions, she performs a new racial identity that is increasingly accepted by others. This finding supports Bucholtz & Hall (2005) concept of identity as an emergent process, in which identity is constructed through repeated linguistic and social practices. Similarly, Dennihy (2017) argues that passing is a strategic and situational performance rather than a permanent abandonment of one's original identity. Therefore, Stella's transformation demonstrates that linguistic passing is sustained through continuous identity performance within a particular social context.

Bucholtz & Hall (2005) argue that identity is not a fixed attribute but an emergent process constructed through linguistic and social interaction. According to their sociocultural linguistic framework, identity is continuously negotiated through language choices, communicative styles, and interactions within specific social contexts. In this study, Stella's transformation demonstrates this process, as her racial identity is gradually constructed through repeated linguistic performances that are recognized and accepted by those

around her. This finding indicates that linguistic passing is not merely an individual choice but a socially negotiated process influenced by language, interaction, and prevailing social ideologies.

Identity transformation extends beyond physical appearance to include language choices, speech styles, and registers. Language functions as an important resource for constructing and expressing social identity across different contexts. Previous studies have shown that linguistic variation, multilingual practices, and language choice reflect how individuals negotiate ethnicity, social roles, and group membership (Bramlett, 2012; Fuller, 2007). Likewise, Llamas & Watt(2010) argue that variations in speech contribute to the formation and transformation of individual identity. In this study, Stella's linguistic choices demonstrate that racial identity is continuously performed and negotiated through language rather than being determined solely by physical appearance.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research showing that racial passing has long functioned as a strategy for achieving social mobility and avoiding racial discrimination (Cutter, 2016; Trépiéd, 2019). Although the motivations and social contexts of passing have evolved over time, the practice continues to reflect the dynamic negotiation of identity across different social categories.. In *The Vanishing Half*, Stella's linguistic passing demonstrates that identity is not solely determined by physical appearance but is continuously constructed through language, social interaction, and everyday performance. These findings highlight the important role of language in sustaining racial identity within a particular sociocultural context.

Accent and Register as Indexes of Racial Identity

The findings reveal that accent and register function as important linguistic markers in the construction of racial identity. Beyond their communicative role, these linguistic features shape how individuals are perceived and accepted within particular social groups. Previous studies have shown that ethnic accents symbolize cultural identity and social belonging while also influencing stereotypes and interpersonal interactions (Brighi & Szymanski, 2024). Likewise, accents and speech registers may reinforce racial categorization and social positioning within specific communities ((Singh, 2020). These perspectives support the finding that linguistic variation serves as a significant resource for constructing and maintaining racial identity in *The Vanishing Half*.

The dialogue between Stella and Blake, particularly Blake's comment "*Your country talk,*" demonstrates how accent functions as a marker of social and racial identity. Blake recognizes Stella's rural speech as a distinctive linguistic feature that reflects her social background rather than merely her way of speaking. Previous studies suggest that *country talk* carries social and cultural meanings associated with rural identity and is shaped by broader language ideologies (Hall-Lew & Stephens, 2012). In *The Vanishing Half*, this remark indicates that Stella's linguistic performance is not entirely free from traces of her past, revealing that accent remains an important index of identity despite her efforts to construct a new racial identity.

The analysis indicates that accents carry important social meanings beyond their linguistic function. Accents serve as markers of cultural identity and social belonging, influencing how individuals are perceived and categorized within society. Previous studies have shown that accent is often associated with social status, cultural background, and group membership, which may reinforce stereotypes and shape interpersonal interactions (Kalin & Rayko, 2013; Teshaboyeva & Fayzimurodova, 2025). In *The Vanishing*

Half, Stella's accent becomes a significant linguistic marker that reveals traces of her background, demonstrating that accent contributes to the construction and recognition of racial identity.

According to Bucholtz & Hall (2005) principle of indexicality, linguistic features such as accent, register, and speech style do not merely convey information but also index social meanings and identities. In *The Vanishing Half*, Stella's speech functions as an index of racial and social identity, allowing others to associate her with a particular social group. Her careful adjustment of accent and register reflects an intentional effort to align herself with the linguistic norms of White society. Consequently, language becomes an important symbolic resource through which racial identity is communicated, recognized, and maintained in everyday social interaction.

This phenomenon can also be explained through the concept of language ideology proposed by Irvine & Gal (2000), which argues that language is interpreted according to prevailing social beliefs and cultural values. In the novel, Stella's accent is not judged solely as a linguistic feature but is associated with assumptions about race, class, and social status. As a result, her successful linguistic performance enables others to perceive her as belonging to White society. This finding demonstrates that racial identity is shaped not only by individual language use but also by the ideological framework through which society interprets linguistic differences.

The present findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the close relationship between language, accent, and identity. Brighi & Szymanski (2024) argue that accents function as markers of cultural identity and social belonging, while Kalin & Rayko (2013) demonstrate that accent influences social perception and often reinforces stereotypes associated with particular groups. Similarly, Walter shows that accents may contribute to the racialization of speakers through socially constructed linguistic categories. In line with these studies, *The Vanishing Half* illustrates that Stella's accent and register play a central role in negotiating and sustaining her racial identity, confirming that linguistic practices are inseparable from broader social and ideological processes.

Strategic Silence as a Linguistic Strategy

The analysis indicates that silence functions as an important linguistic strategy in constructing and maintaining racial identity in *The Vanishing Half*. Rather than representing the absence of communication, silence serves as a meaningful communicative practice that conveys social intentions, emotions, and interpersonal relationships. Previous studies argue that silence performs various communicative functions, including emphasizing meaning, regulating interaction, and reflecting power relations within social contexts. Therefore, silence should be understood as an integral component of language use that contributes to identity construction and social interaction.

A clear example of strategic silence appears when Stella responds to Blake's question about her conversation with Loretta by saying, "*Oh, you know. The girls. Little things like that.*" (Bennett, 2020). Instead of providing a direct explanation, Stella deliberately gives a vague and indirect response. Although her answer appears cooperative, it conceals information about her relationship with Loretta and prevents Blake from questioning her further. This communicative strategy enables Stella to protect the racial identity she has carefully constructed.

Jaworski (1992) argues that silence is not merely the absence of speech but a meaningful communicative act governed by social and pragmatic conventions. In Stella's case, silence operates as a

strategy for avoiding sensitive topics that could expose her past identity. Her indirect responses demonstrate that silence may function as a form of self-protection, allowing individuals to regulate information and minimize social risk during interaction.

From the perspective of Bucholtz & Hall (2005) sociocultural linguistic framework, Stella's strategic silence also contributes to the emergence of identity through interaction. By withholding particular information, she maintains the consistency of her linguistic performance and reinforces the White identity recognized by those around her. In this sense, silence functions alongside speech as an indexical resource that supports the ongoing construction and negotiation of racial identity.

This strategy is further explained through the concept of language ideology proposed by Irvine & Gal (2000). Stella's silence is effective because the surrounding society interprets her identity according to prevailing racial and social assumptions rather than questioning what remains unsaid. The dominant ideology allows her silence to be perceived as ordinary privacy instead of concealment, thereby reinforcing her successful performance of racial passing.

The present findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that silence functions as an important communicative resource rather than a simple absence of speech. While earlier research primarily discusses silence in interpersonal and intercultural communication, this study extends those perspectives by demonstrating that silence can also operate as a sociolinguistic strategy for maintaining racial identity. In *The Vanishing Half*, Stella's strategic silence complements her language choices and speech style, illustrating that both spoken and unspoken communication contribute to the successful performance of linguistic passing.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that linguistic passing in *The Vanishing Half* is constructed through a combination of language use, accent, register, and strategic silence. Stella's transformation is not presented as an immediate shift in racial identity but as a gradual process of identity performance achieved through continuous linguistic adaptation. The findings reveal that everyday communicative practices enable Stella to negotiate, construct, and maintain a new racial identity within the social environment she inhabits.

The analysis confirms that language functions as a primary resource in constructing social identity. Beyond its communicative purpose, language reflects social position, cultural background, and group membership. Through deliberate adjustments in speech style, register, and communicative behavior, Stella aligns herself with the linguistic norms of White society. This finding supports sociolinguistic perspectives that identity is actively produced through language and social interaction rather than inherited as a fixed characteristic.

The relationship between linguistic passing, racial identity, and language ideology is central to understanding Stella's identity construction. Linguistic passing allows Stella to perform a socially accepted White identity, while racial identity is continuously negotiated through her linguistic choices. At the same time, prevailing language ideologies shape how society interprets her speech, accent, and silence, enabling others to perceive her as belonging to a different racial group. Therefore, identity construction emerges from the interaction between individual linguistic performance and broader ideological structures that assign social meanings to language.

This study contributes to sociolinguistic literary criticism by demonstrating that racial identity in *The Vanishing Half* is constructed primarily through linguistic practices rather than physical appearance alone. While previous studies have emphasized racial passing as a visual or social phenomenon, the present study highlights the central role of language in sustaining identity performance. Speech style, accent, register, and strategic silence collectively function as sociolinguistic resources that enable Stella to negotiate and maintain her racial identity. These findings enrich the understanding of how language operates as a powerful mechanism for identity construction in contemporary literary narratives.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that linguistic passing in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* is a gradual and dynamic process through which racial identity is constructed and maintained through language. Stella's transformation is achieved not only through changes in physical appearance but also through the strategic use of speech style, register, accent, and silence. These linguistic practices enable her to negotiate a new social identity that is recognized and accepted within White society.

The findings further demonstrate that language serves as a central resource in the performance of racial identity. Drawing on Bucholtz and Hall's concept of indexicality and Irvine and Gal's theory of language ideology, the study shows that linguistic features acquire social meanings that influence how individuals are categorized and perceived by others. Consequently, Stella's successful passing depends on both her linguistic performance and the ideological framework through which society interprets language.

This study contributes to sociolinguistic literary criticism by emphasizing that racial identity in *The Vanishing Half* is constructed primarily through linguistic practices rather than physical appearance alone. It expands previous studies on racial passing by highlighting the role of language as a powerful mechanism for negotiating and sustaining social identity. Future research is recommended to explore linguistic passing in other literary works or to compare identity construction across different cultural and sociolinguistic contexts.

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