

**“We act like girls and we don’t act like men”:  
The use of the male-associated variable (ay0) in South Philadelphia**

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In the LCV<sup>1</sup> survey of linguistic change in Philadelphia in the 1970s, the variable (ay0) stood out from all the others (Labov 2001). The backing and raising of (ay) before voiceless consonants was a change led by men, whereas women have otherwise consistently been found to lead sociolinguistic change. Although most Philadelphians showed no overt awareness of this new and vigorous change, a few commented that it sounded like “tough kids” (Labov 2001:203). Hindle (1980) found that in a study of a single female speaker’s style-shifting, more advanced, male-like variants of (ay0) appeared when she was at work, but these shifted to more female-like variants when she was socializing with girlfriends. In a re-study of Philadelphia, Conn (2005) reports that the male advantage in the backing and raising of (ay0) has disappeared. However, in subjective reaction tests, advanced variants are approved of as tougher and more masculine when produced by male speakers, but downgraded when produced by female speakers.

This paper provides an initial report on sociolinguistic fieldwork carried out at a predominantly white high school in South Philadelphia. Analysis of vowel tokens from a sample of six senior girls, three from Irish and three from Italian backgrounds, suggests that the association of (ay0) with toughness may also be in play here. Two of the Italian girls produce (ay0) tokens that are around 150 Hz fronter than those of the other girls. Their production of a comparison diphthong – the female-led fronting of (aw) – is not significantly different from that of the other girls. This study explores the reasons why backer, male-associated variants might be used by the other girls. Their dense network ties in the drinking, fighting Irish neighborhood of Second Street may hold the clue. Their Italian counterparts are quick to disassociate themselves from the Second Streeters, saying “They think we’re scared of them... We just act like girls and we don’t act like men and try to like fight or whatever all the time.” In fact, an outward rejection of fighting and toughness (whatever the reality of an individual’s involvement) appears to be a property not simply of Italian ethnicity, but of a growing awareness of what is considered adult-like behavior, and thus also of what is sociolinguistically appropriate.

### References

- Conn, Jeffrey. 2005. *Of Moice and Men: The Evolution of a Male-Led Sound Change*. PhD dissertation. University of Pennsylvania.
- Hindle, Donald. 1980. *The social and structural conditioning of phonetic variation*. University of Pennsylvania, PhD dissertation.
- Labov, William. 1994. *Principles of Linguistic Change: Internal Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 2001. *Principles of Linguistic Change: Social Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1973-77 project on Linguistic Change and Variation (LCV), led by William Labov, was a systematic survey of the speech of Philadelphians. See Labov (1994:35).