

Making sense of variation: Pleasantness and education ratings of regional vowel variants
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While several variationist studies have approached the task of describing the phonetic character of the radical changes affecting regional vowel systems such as the Southern Vowel Shift, few studies have attempted to directly measure the attitudinal load such changes carry for those who use them. To this end, the current paper is designed to study listeners' awareness and social evaluation of specific regional vowel variants in a three-part perception test using acoustically manipulated speech samples. Earlier results (Fridland 2002) showed that perceptual salience of regional vowel variants is strongly tied to local production, with listeners showing much greater accuracy regionally placing shifts they themselves use uniquely and less accuracy placing shifts, such as fronted high back vowels, that are found in all U.S. dialects. The current paper examines how listeners rated these shifted variants on competence and solidarity measures.

For the study, participants from Memphis, TN rated speech samples which had been synthesized so that the 'sample speakers' were actually several guises of the same speaker with different vowels shifted. To provide the speech guises, the formant structure of selected vowel classes involved in the Southern Vowel Shift (ey, E, uw and ow) were altered using the ASL speech synthesis software for the CSL. Each guise was manipulated so that a single vowel class' F1 and/or F2 structure was altered to represent a recent variant of that vowel in the Southern shift, a more traditional Southern variant, or a Northern shift (NCS) variant. Different aspects of the shifts were highlighted for each 'guise', which were then presented randomly in a matched-guise procedure.

The results are based on 175 African-American and European-American respondents native to Memphis, TN, who were asked to rate each 'speaker' on a semantic differential scale for three different factors (administered separately in three different tests); degree of Southernness and levels of education and pleasantness. Initial results suggest that local vowel variants are rated both less educated and less pleasant than Northern-based variants, with most strongly shifted Southern variants rated as least educated and pleasant. The vowel variants that are most perceptually salient as "southern" variants according to results from the 'Southernness' accuracy portion of the test were also rated least educated and least pleasant in the subsequent education and pleasantness tests. In contrast, fronted /uw/ variants, found productively in a variety of regional varieties, were not rated lower in education and pleasantness than backed variants. What is striking about the results is the degree of sensitivity listeners show to very low-level phonetic changes. Participants were not only able to perceive differences in formant structure but were adept at using this information to make strong judgments about the speakers' personality and intellect. While experimental in design, this study provides a unique and innovative method of measuring speakers' sensitivity to slight changes in formant position and how such subtle phonetic changes are indeed used as socially salient categorization cues by speakers.