

“Words, wuds, woids”: Variation in BIRD realization in Southern Louisiana

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This study examines the highly variable BIRD-realization for an area of rural southern Louisiana where local varieties of French were previously dominant, and where a relatively high rate of English/French bilingualism still exists. This study combines demographic and linguistic variables in the statistical analysis of BIRD-realization in the socially-occurring speech of three generations (born 1911-1981) of African American, white, and Native American men from southern Louisiana. We focus particularly on the marked diphthongal variant, [ʌi], a feature that bears some resemblance to the historically stereotyped and often-caricatured NYC-area “toidy-toid” (for *thirty-third*).

Based on analysis using GoldVarb we find patterned variation of the r-ful, r-less, and diphthongal ([ʌi]) realizations of BIRD, in which race/ethnicity, age, and education are all highly significant demographic variables influencing BIRD-realization, as are the linguistic variables of number of syllables, stress, and position in word. Surrounding phonetic environment also appears to affect BIRD-realization, though less significantly.

In our data, we find regular use of the diphthongal variant, [ʌi]. The diphthongal variant is produced only in stressed syllables, more often in one- and two-syllable words, and never word-finally. According to our findings, African American Creole men born prior to WWII with less than high school education are most likely to produce the diphthongal ([ʌi]) variant, while white and Native American men rarely realize BIRD as [ʌi]. Our study thus suggests further consideration of this varying realization of BIRD as a feature distinguishing African American English dialects of Southern Louisiana from other Southern varieties and as a variable that indexes both race and age in the region. Furthermore, our results underscore the importance of considering the BIRD vowel separately in future studies of r-lessness.