

Variation in the ‘Iraq’ Vowel: Conservatives vs. Liberals

Lauren Hall-Lew Elizabeth Coppock
Rebecca Starr
Stanford University

Do conservatives use different vowels than liberals? Work in political psychology suggests that political views are a critical aspect of an individual’s identity (Brewer 2001; Conover and Feldman 1981; De Graaf et al. 1995; Huddy 2001; Huddy and Khatib 2007; Mackenzie 1978). The present study suggests that phonological variables are a potential resource for the expression of a political identity.

The “foreign (a)” variable, as in *plaza*, is often realized as /ah/ in US English due to attitudinal factors rather than phonological factors (Boberg 1997, 1999). According to Boberg (1999:49), US English speakers evaluate /ah/ to be “more correct, educated, and sophisticated than /æ/ as a nativization of foreign (a).” The present study investigates another attitudinal factor with potential importance for the social interpretation of “foreign (a).” We argue that the /æ/ variant particular to the word *Iraq* may be perceived as politically conservative, with the /ah/ variant indexing political liberalism.

To understand the national media soundscape in which *Iraq* exists, and to ensure a variety of political opinions, we included pronunciations from two popular yet politically different news sources. The majority of listeners of National Public Radio (NPR) are liberal whereas the majority of Fox News listeners are conservative (The Pew Research Center 2004). Our analysis was limited to national broadcasts from both stations specifically discussing the Iraq war. Rather than limiting the analysis to particular individual speakers, we collected all tokens of *Iraq* that occurred for each station regardless of speakers’ regional or otherwise demographic affiliations. Data came from reports accessible online (via YouTube.com and NPR.com) and from a continuous stream of radio data over one 48-hour period in Spring 2007 (Fox

News Radio and NPR affiliate KQED).

The total corpus consisted of 686 tokens from 248 speakers: 112 from NPR and 136 from Fox News. Among all speakers across networks, 44 are publicly conservative, 32 are publicly liberal, and 172 were classified as unknown. 35 of the speakers were politicians. The other speakers were anchors, reporters, or political pundits. Among the conservatives, 15 were military personnel. One military colonel was explicitly anti-war. Our samples from both networks showed very similar frequencies for the number of conservatives and liberals represented, so the analysis is collapsed across networks.

Our results confirm that the use of /æ/ in *Iraq* does index conservative politics, while the use of /ah/ indexes liberal politics ($\chi = 17.7$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.0001$). Overall, 83% of conservatives had at least one occurrence of /æ/ while only 31% of liberals ever used /æ/. Regardless of their stance on the war, all 15 military personnel categorically used /æ/, suggesting a stronger bias toward using /æ/ than conservatives on a whole. Furthermore, 14 of the 15 military personnel used /aj/ for the first vowel in *Iraq*, while all non-military speakers and the one anti-war colonel used /I/ for the first vowel, suggesting that both vowels may index political orientation or stance.

While the political weight of *Iraq* is particularly strong for a single lexical item, and while the choice of the *Iraq* vowel is certainly contingent on numerous factors, the results of the present study encourage further analyses of the possible correlation between phonological variables and political views.

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