Indexing Political Persuasion: Variation in the *Iraq* Vowels

Political persuasion can be an important facet of identity (Brewer 2001; Huddy 2001; Green *et al.* 2002). There is a large body of work on the use of linguistic resources to construct aspects of identity such as geographical region and gender, but to what extent can linguistic features be used to express one's *political* identity? Krivoruchko (2008) argues that variation in Russian between the prepositional phrases *na Ukraine* and *v Ukraine* has become "indexical of socio-cultural identities" in the the context of Ukraine's independence from Russia since 1991. However, we do not know of any studies documenting the existence of linguistic variables as resources for the expression of political identity in American speech. In this note, we present evidence that the pronunciation of the place name *Iraq* carries such significance.

The second vowel in *Iraq* can be realized either as /a:/ or as /æ/, and it is an example of what Boberg (1997; 1999) labelled 'foreign (a)'. According to (Boberg 1999:49), "when foreign words spelled with <a> (e.g., *llama*, *Mazda*, *pasta*, *spa*, *tobacco*) are phonologically nativized in modern English, the foreign vowel (a) is variably realized as one of two English phonemes: short /æ/ (as in *fat*) or long /a:/ (as in *father*)." Boberg (1999) argues that this variation is due to attitudinal factors rather than phonological factors in American English, the latter determining pronunciation only in British English varieties.[1] According to Boberg (1999:49), U.S. English speakers evaluate /a:/ to be "more correct, educated, and sophisticated than /æ/ as a nativization of foreign (a)" and suggests that Americans ascribe general social prestige to the /a:/ variant because of "the stereotypical social attributes of speakers of dialects in which it does occur, most notably British Received Pronunciation and the speech of Boston 'Brahmins"' (Boberg 1999:57).

Consistent with the claim that the pronunciation of foreign (a) is related to attitudinal factors, Shapiro (1997:437) writes that although the /ae/ variant of words such as *Iran, Iraq,* and *Milan* is "traditional," "American speech in modern times seems to favor pronunciations that speakers likely construe as approximating the donor/original language's sounds." Weinreich *et al.* (1968) offer a possible explanation for this in terms of *respect*: "respect engenders imitation [retention of foreign sounds]; disrespect integration [full nativization]" (cited in Boberg 1999, 51). In other words, Americans' inclination to more closely imitate the native phonology of foreign place names makes them favor /a:/[2] over /æ/.

Discussion in the American popular press and in online discussion boards and blogs

indicates that /ihra:hk/ is indeed generally perceived as the 'correct' and therefore more 'respectful' or 'empathetic' pronunciation of *Iraq*. In the following blog comment,[3] the author associates the /a:/ variant with empathy, and the /æ/ variant with a violent, anti-terrorist (or anti-Iraqi) sentiment.

> I say ee-raq-ee when I'm talking about the helpless children there. I say Eye-rack-ee when discussing the dead, or soon to be dead, shitheels. But that's just me. [Posted by 'Velociman']

The following comment on the same blog illustrates the connection between empathy and correctness:

> Having lived in the Middle East for six-plus years and been an Ottoman and Middle Eastern Studies graduate student to boot, I can assure you it is pronounced ear-ROCK, not eye-RACK, ear-RACK, or any other way. Listen to Cheney [conservative U.S. Vice President at the time] say it, with the emphasis on the RACK, and you know he is deliberately mispronouncing it just to be the prick we all know he is. [Posted by 'tim2']

Here, 'tim2' argues that the "correct pronunciation" has /a:/ in the second syllable on grounds of its similarity to how it is pronounced in "the Middle East". He explains Cheney's emphatic "mispronunciation" as a conscious expression of a lack of empathy for the Iraqi people (being a "prick"). In this way, he displays agreement with the notion that "respect engenders imitation [retention of foreign sounds]; disrespect integration [full nativization]."

The two major political parties in America – Democratic and Republican – differ with respect to attitudes (Green *et al.* 2002), ideological representations (Abramowitz & Saunders 2006), and social value systems (Conover & Feldman 1981; Farwell & Weiner 2000). In addition, demographic differences suggest that members of these two parties may orient differently to foreign (a). In a study by the Pew Research Center comparing Republican dominant counties with Democratic dominant counties (Doherty 2006), the proportion of foreign-born residents differs significantly between counties with different dominant political parties. In the overall population of Republican counties, 7% of the residents are foreign-born, versus 17% of the residents in Democratic counties. Living in an area with a higher proportion of foreign-born residents renders one more likely to encounter non-native speech varieties. In addition to increased linguistic exposure, correlations have been found between open-mindedness and political positioning, including studies indicating that politically left-oriented people may be more open to new experiences (Trapnell 1994; McCrae 1996, but see van Hiel *et al.* 2000). Research on the attitudes that self-identified liberals and conservatives hold towards one another has found that both groups adhere to the notion that liberals are more generous than judicious (Farwell & Weiner 2000).

These differences in exposure and attitudes lead us to expect Democrats to favor the phonological variants closer to the foreign source vowels and Republicans to favor the more

nativized variants. With respect to *Iraq,* the prediction is that Republicans will be significantly more likely to use the /æ/ variant than Democrats, controlling for other factors.

In February 2007, the House of Representatives held three days of open floor debate on a resolution to oppose a proposal from President George W. Bush to increase the number of combat troops in Iraq. The floor was open to any representative who wanted to make a speech. 304 out of 435 members of the House gave at least one speech, and each was filmed by C-SPAN and made available online at `http://iraq.armyofone.org`. Because the resolution concerned the country whose name is of interest, and because the members of the House represent all geographic regions of the United States, this debate provided an ideal source of data to test our prediction.

For each speaker who uttered *Iraq* at least three times, we classified him or her as an /æ/-user or an /a:/-user, depending on whether they pronounced *Iraq* with /æ/ or /a:/ more frequently. This methodological choice is justified by the fact that 85% of the speakers were completely consistent in their pronunciation one way or another, so the distribution was U-shaped. We ended up with 259 speakers, and a mean of eight tokens per speaker.

We categorized speakers by political stance in several ways. Political party, Republican or Democratic, was the most straightforward of these measures.[4] There were 152 Democrats and 107 Republicans in our sample. We also coded the speaker's actual stance on the resolution under debate (pro-surge or anti-surge). These two measures were extremely highly correlated ($r = 0.91$); only one out of 152 Democrats in our sample voted pro-surge, and ten out of 107 Republicans voted anti-surge. We calculated a second, more general Iraq war stance measure by tallying votes from four key Iraq-related bills, including the original 2002 authorization-of-force vote. Congresspeople fell into one of three categories in this measure: consistently anti-war, consistently pro-war, and mixed record.

Finally, we included quantitative measures of economic liberalism and social liberalism based on voting record, speeches, and press releases, as calculated by the website OnTheIssues.org in 2007. The economic liberalism score was based on issues including social security, energy policy, and taxes. Social liberalism issues included abortion, gay marriage, and school prayer. A higher economic liberalism score is associated with with conservative politics and the tendency to identify as Republican, whereas a higher social liberalism score indicates liberal politics and identification with the Democratic party (Weisberg & Rusk 1970, Conover & Feldman 1981).

To establish an effect of political identity, we must control for other aspects of identity that may also influence pronunciation of foreign (a). One potentially confounding factor is regional speech variety; it could be, for example, that the /æ/ variant is associated with Southern speech, and Southerners are more likely to be Republicans. We therefore categorized speakers according to whether they had a 'Southern accent' using auditory coding for /ay/-monophthongization in closed syllables (Labov *et al.* 2006:146, 246). This variable had three levels: 'yes' (56 speakers), 'sometimes' (4 speakers), and 'no' (199 speakers).

We also coded speakers for the geographical region containing the state they represented, in accordance with the divisions given by the U.S. Census.[5] Each state was also categorized

as a 'red state' or a 'blue state' based their electoral votes in the 2004 presidential election.[6]

Finally, we coded for the speakers' gender, age, and ethnicity based on publicly available data.[7] To analyze age, we grouped the speakers into four categories of approximately 65 speakers each: born before 1944, born between 1945 and 1949, born between 1950 and 1957, and born in 1958 or later. Gender was coded straightforwardly (14.6% of the speakers were female). We coded for the potential influence of ethnicity in two ways: by group affiliation and by 'ethnolect'. There were 42 non-White members in the House of Representatives in our sample: 25 African American, 12 Hispanic, four Asian American and one American Indian (vs. 217 White). We identified speakers of any clearly marked variety of African American English (AAE) through perceptual coding of phonological variables. 23 of 259 (8.8%) speakers were coded as AAE speakers.

We analyzed the data using logistic regression models of vowel pronunciation, with one observation per speaker. The models were constructed using the LRM package of the DESIGN library within the R statistical package (Harrell 2001).

The results corroborated our hypothesis. Political party (Democrat vs. Republican) was a significant predictor of the pronunciation of the second vowel in *Iraq* ($p < 0.05$) as a main effect in the expected direction: Republicans are more likely to use /æ/ than Democrats are. War stance (*i.e.* vote on the resolution, pro-surge or anti-surge) was also a significant predictor of vowel choice as a main effect ($p < 0.05$), as one would expect given the high correlation between political party and vote.

Examining our quantitative measures of political identity, we find that speakers with high economic liberalism scores (conservatives) are significantly more likely than speakers with low economic liberalism scores (liberals) to say /æ/ in Iraq ($p < 0.05$). The direction of this result is consistent with our findings for political party. Interestingly, the social liberalism score was not a significant predictor of pronunciation ($p = 0.08$). This is surprising, since social liberalism is calculated by OnTheIssues.org partially on the basis of position on the Iraq war. Overall war stance as measured by votes on Iraq-related bills was also not a significant factor ($p = 0.13$). These results suggest that although the pronunciation of *Iraq* may have political significance, it is not one's position on the Iraq war *per se* that it indexes.

Other demographic identifiers were not significant predictors of whether a given speaker was an /a:/-user or an /æ/-user. We found no significant difference across ethnicities ($p = 0.9$) or between speakers of African American English varieties and other varieties ($p = 0.6$). As for gender, women favored /a:/ in comparison to men, but this trend was not significant ($p = 0.07$). Age was also not a significant factor.

We tested each of the regional factors independently for its relation to the production of the second vowel in *Iraq*. We found no significant regional effect under any of the methods we used for defining region: U.S. census region ($p > 0.4$ for all dummy-coded factors); red vs. blue state ($p = 0.77$); and Southern *vs.* non-Southern accent, both broadly coded (at least one occurrence of monophthongal /ay/ in closed syllables; $p = 0.80$) and narrowly coded (every production of /ay/ is monophthongized; $p = 0.41$). These findings are consistent with those of Boberg (1997), who found no dialect differences for /æ/ *vs.* /a:/ across loanwords

more generally.

Thus, as a main effect, political party is the *only* factor among a wide range of social characteristics that is a significant predictor of the pronunciation of the second vowel in *Iraq*. Furthermore, political party remains significant even when controlling for region, southern accent, gender, ethnicity and age. The full model is given in Table 1.

– Insert Table 1 here –

We conclude that the pronunciation of *Iraq* is indeed a resource for indexing political identity in American speech. At least on the floor of Congress, where a wide variety of speakers work to present themselves linguistically in a highly political environment, the choice between /a:/ and /æ/ variants is a linguistic resource that aids in the construction of party affiliation.

As Nunberg (2002) points out, the first vowel in *Iraq* is also variable; it can be realized as /i/, /ɪ/, or /ay/. While the /i/ and /ɪ/ variants of the first vowel are among English's closest approximations of the native Arabic vowel, /ay/ is quite different. We would therefore expect /i/ and /ɪ/ to pattern with the /a:/ variant of the second vowel, and /ay/ with /æ/. Consistent with this, we observed in our dataset that the production of /ay/ generally went with /æ/, as in /ayræk/, although two speakers consistently produced /ayra:k/. However, we did not happen to find any significant predictors of variation in the first vowel in this study. Looking into this issue further may reveal that the first vowel is in fact politically significant.

The ongoing variation in the pronunciation of foreign (a) is still ripe for investigation. For example, what is the pattern of vowel production for the ethnonymic or adjectival form *Iraqi*, or for the phonologically parallel forms *Iran* and *Iranian*, or thematically related items such as *Al-Qaida*? Preliminary data suggests that some intriguing patterns may emerge; while coding data for the present analysis, we noticed that some speakers use /a:/ for the second vowel in *Iran* even when they use /æ/ in *Iraq*. Given the phonological and semantic similarity of the two place names, this asymmetry is unexpected and merits further study.

Boberg (1999:56) argues that "/a:/ has become the default vowel in American nativization" and that "/a:/ nativizations will become even more common in the future than they are now." The question then arises: given that there are no significant age-based differences among the Congressional pronunciations of *Iraq*, does the Republican retention of the /æ/ vowel indicate a 'conservatism' even at the level of linguistic change? The answer, we suspect, must be a highly complex one: conservative attitudes towards economic policy are inherently orthogonal to conservative productions of vocalic variables, and any connections will be certainly mitigated by numerous social and linguistic forces at various levels of influence. Still, there may be a connection between linguistic change and political change. The production of last vowel in *Vietnam* was variable during war time but has leveled out to the /a:/ variant for the majority of U.S. English speakers (Boberg 1999) – as the war in Iraq progresses, what will be the fate of the vowels in *Iraq*?

Notes

1. "In British nativization, prosodic factors dominate: /ae/ is the default vowel, appearing regularly in closed syllables, while /a:/ appears in open syllables. The most striking feature of American nativization is a diachronic trend toward /a:/, which has taken over from /ae/ as the default vowel, appearing in closed and open syllables indiscriminately. The difference between these patterns is explained in terms of the phonological properties of the competing outcomes in each dialect: /ae/ and /a:/ are differentiated primarily in terms of quantity in British English and quality in American... The qualitative nature of American nativization allows for substantial variation between /ae/ and /a:/ in individual words." (Boberg 1997)
2. Our use of /a:/ here represents both /o/ in 'wad' and /ah/ in 'father', a distinction that is merged for most U.S. English speakers.
3. `http://keyissues.mu.nu/archives/051679.php`, October 25, 2004.
4. `http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/cong.html`, February 25, 2008.
5. U.S. Census Bureau website, `http://www.census.gov/geo/www/us_regdiv.pdf`, March 4, 2008.
6. `http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mejn/election`, November 17, 2004.
7. `http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_current_members_of_the_United_States_House_of_Representatives` and `http://www.ethnicmajority.com/congress.htm`, February 4, 2008.

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	Coef.	S.E.	Wald Z	P
Intercept	1.31980	1.3309	0.99	0.3214
party = Republican	0.69545	0.3154	2.20	0.0275
sex = male	0.50339	0.3883	1.30	0.1948
agecat = $>$1950	-0.29509	0.4163	-0.71	0.4784
agecat = $>$1944	-0.09108	0.4421	-0.21	0.8368
agecat = $\leq$1944	-0.60042	0.4152	-1.45	0.1482
region = northeast	-0.01628	0.4142	-0.04	0.9687
region = south	0.29188	0.5272	0.55	0.5798
region = west	-0.26041	0.4377	-0.60	0.5518
ethnicity = Black	-0.40522	1.3010	-0.31	0.7554
ethnicity = Hispanic	-0.30796	1.3826	-0.22	0.8237
ethnicity = Indian	4.20870	24.9354	0.17	0.8660
ethnicity = White	-0.91168	1.2299	-0.74	0.4585
southern accent = yes	-0.50162	0.5141	-0.98	0.3292

Table 1: Full logistic regression model for /æ/-user