INDEXING POLITICAL PERSUASION: VARIATION IN THE *IRAQ* VOWELS

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ABSTRACT: To determine whether phonological variables are a potential resource for the expression of political identity, this article examines the second vowel of *Iraq*. In addition to being part of a politically significant place-name, *Iraq* is particularly well-suited to index political identity due in part to the ideological association between the "foreign (a)" variable with correctness and educatedness in U.S. English (Boberg 1997). Specifically, *Iraq*'s second vowel appears to index political conservatism when produced as /æ/ and political liberalism when produced as /a:/. Results from an analysis of the U.S. House of Representatives show that Republicans are significantly more likely than Democrats to use /æ/, even controlling for regional accent.

POLITICAL PERSUASION CAN be an important facet of identity (Brewer 2001; Huddy 2001; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). A large body of work in sociolinguistics has examined how linguistic variables may index aspects of identity such as ethnicity or gender, but to what extent can linguistic features be used to express one's POLITICAL identity? This question has not received much attention; we begin to address that here.

In one of the few studies of linguistic variation and political identity, Krivoruchko (2008) argues that variation in Russian between the prepositions *na* and *v* (both variably corresponding to English *on* and *in*) has become "indexical of socio-cultural identities" in the context of Ukraine's independence from Russia since 1991 (206). Specifically, the phrase *na Ukraïni* for 'in Ukraine' now connotes "traditional, purist and nationalist discourse" while the construction *v Ukraïni* for 'in Ukraine' connotes "bureaucratic newspeak, an anti-nationalist stance and 'political correctness.'" The use of *na* carries a linguistically "conservative" meaning and, while not necessarily a politically conservative one, nonetheless indexes a speaker's stance with respect to nationalist ideologies (204).

Krivoruchko's study suggests that place-names like *Ukraine* are likely sites for the linguistic construction of political ideology. In this article, we address attitudes expressed in current American popular discourse about the politi-

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cal ideologies associated with particular pronunciations of the place-name *Iraq*. The two vowels in *Iraq* are both variable in their pronunciation, leading to at least four logically possible and attested variants for nativization in U.S. English: /aɪræk/, /aɪrɑːk/, /ɪræk/, and /ɪrɑːk/ (with two more possibilities including /iræk/ and /irɑːk/, depending on the salience of the /ɪ/-/i/ difference, which is less often a topic of popular discussion).[1] Although variation in the first vowel is a topic worth investigating in the future, variation in the second vowel is the focus of the present study. Using a corpus of overtly political speech, we will show that the /ɑː/ variant is statistically associated with liberal political persuasion.

The second vowel in *Iraq* is an example of the variable Boberg (1997, 1999) labeled "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 [ɑ] is variably realized as one of two English phonemes: short /æ/ (as in *fat*) or long /aː/ (as in *father*)." Boberg 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. According to Boberg, U.S. English speakers evaluate /aː/ to be "more correct, educated, and sophisticated than /æ/ as a nativization of foreign (a)" (49), and Boberg suggests that Americans ascribe a kind of general social prestige to the /aː/ 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'" (57). Janda, Joseph, and Jacobs's (1994) discussion of hyperforeignisms also points out that Americans may associate /ɑ/ rather than /æ/ with foreign languages due to /ɑ/'s presence in the vowel inventories of those foreign languages most frequently studied in the United States (Spanish, French, etc.).

Consistent with the claim that the pronunciation of foreign (a) is related to attitudinal factors, Shapiro (1997, 437) also noted that although the /æ/ variant is the "traditional" nativization for foreign place-names such as *Iran*, *Iraq*, and the Italian city of *Milan*: "American speech in modern times seems to favor pronunciations that speakers likely construe as approximating the donor/original language's sounds," preferring and shifting to /ɑː/. Weinreich (1968, 27) argued that "the speaker's attitude toward the source language" may motivate this shift, hypothesizing that loanwords that originate in source languages with greater "cultural or social prestige" may be produced with increased attention to the source language phonology. Although Weinreich's argument was based on the prestige attributed to particular languages, this point can also be seen from the perspective of the individual speaker—a speaker's level of attention to the source language phonology of a loanword may index that speaker's desire to convey respect for that source language. Since the foreign (a) variable applies to multiple loanwords from multiple

source languages, its use does not necessarily index that a given speaker holds esteem for a given language; rather, an Americans' favoring of /ɑː/ over /æ/ may index the more general quality of a person who holds foreign languages—and, by extension, speakers of foreign languages—in high esteem. Crucially, the political indexicality of the variable is not necessarily predicted to hold for domestic place-names, such as *Milan*, Michigan (pronounced /maílən/).

Discussion in the American popular press and in online discussion boards and blogs indicates that /ɪrɑːk/ is indeed generally perceived as the "correct" and therefore more "respectful" or "empathetic" pronunciation of *Iraq*. In the following blog comment, the author associates the /ɑː/ variant (along with /i/ for the first vowel) with empathy, and the /æ/ variant (along with /aɪ/ for the first vowel) with a violent, antiterrorist (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. [Velociman, http://keyissues.mu.nu/archives/051679.php, Nov. 3, 2004]

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. [tim2, http://keyissues.mu.nu/archives/051679.php, Nov. 7, 2005]

Here, tim2 argues that the "correct pronunciation" has /ɑː/ 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. Together, these two anonymous blog comments are indicative of a widespread discourse about the social meanings of the vowels in *Iraq*. Both quite bluntly provide evidence for the ideology that loanword nativization indexes a lack of respect for foreign languages and their speakers.

The two major political parties in America—Democratic and Republican—differ with respect to attitudes (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), ideological representations (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006), and social value systems (Conover and Feldman 1981; Farwell and 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 according to the dominant political party. 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 nonnative 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, Kossowska, and Mervielde 2000). Research on the attitudes that self-identified liberals and conservatives hold toward one another has found that both groups adhere to the notion that liberals are more generous than judicious (Farwell and Weiner 2000).

These differences in both 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.

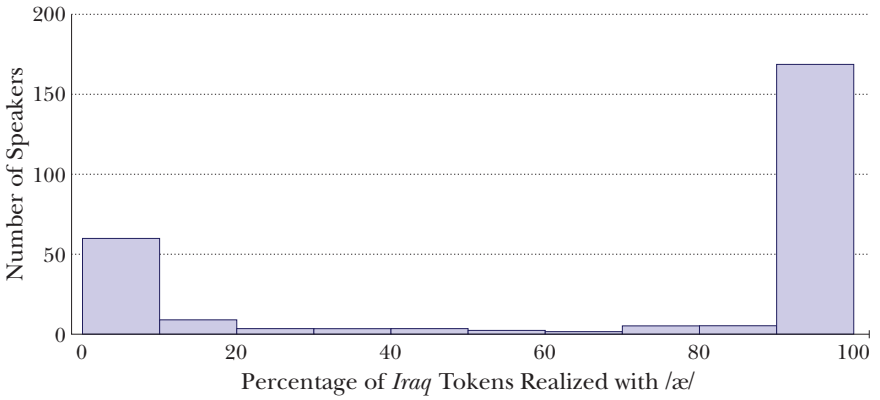
STUDY

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, each of which was filmed by C-SPAN and made available online at http://www.youtube.com/user/armyofOne0001. 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.

METHODS. For each speaker who uttered *Iraq* at least three times, we classified him or her as an /æ/-user or an /ɑ:/-user, depending on whether the speaker pronounced *Iraq* with /æ/ or /ɑ:/ 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, as shown in figure 1. We ended up with 259 speakers, with 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 (Office of the Clerk 2008). There were 152 Democrats and 107

FIGURE 1
Percentage of /æ/ Tokens per Speaker



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 1 out of 152 Democrats in our sample voted pro-surge, and 10 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. Congressional representatives 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 Web site OnTheIssues.org in 2007. A higher ECONOMIC liberalism score, indicating strong support of free market economic policy, is associated (potentially counterintuitively) with conservative politics and the tendency to identify as Republican. In contrast, a higher SOCIAL liberalism score indicates liberal politics and identification with the Democratic Party (Weisberg and Rusk 1970; Conover and Feldman 1981). The economic liberalism score for each representative was calculated based on issues including Social Security, energy policy, and taxes. Social liberalism issues included abortion, gay marriage, and school prayer. Some issues were listed as "dual" issues, contributing to both liberalism scores.

To establish an effect of political identity on the pronunciation of foreign (a), it was necessary to statistically control for other measurable aspects of identity that may also interact with vowel production. One potentially confounding factor is regional speech variety; it could be, for example, that the /æ/ variant is associated with Southern speech and that Southerners are

more likely to be Republicans. We therefore categorized speakers according to whether they had a "Southern accent" using as our primary cue auditory coding for /aɪ/-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). Any questions about coding for this variable were checked by at least two of the three authors.

We also coded speakers for the geographical region containing the state they represented, in accordance with the divisions given by the U.S. Census Bureau (2008). Each state was also further categorized as a "red state" or a "blue state" based on their electoral votes in the 2004 presidential election (i.e., whether the state went to the Republican candidate or the Democratic candidate) (Gastner, Shalizi, and Newman 2004). Finally, we coded for the speakers' gender, age, and ethnicity based on publicly available data (Ethnic Majority 2008; Wikipedia 2008). To operationalize the assessment of age, we grouped the speakers into four categories of approximately 65 speakers each, based on the demographic distribution of the House of Representatives: those born before 1944, those born between 1945 and 1949, those born between 1950 and 1957, and those 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 on record and by auditory coding of linguistic features known to correlate with ethnic identities in U.S. English, specifically as found in varieties of African American English (AAE). There were 42 non-White members in the House of Representatives in our sample: 25 African American, 12 Hispanic, 4 Asian American, and 1 American Indian (vs. 217 White). Based on the auditory coding of speakers who produced a regular occurrence of phonological variables associated with any variety of AAE, 23 of 259 (8.8%) speakers were coded as AAE speakers.[2]

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 2007).

RESULTS. The results corroborated our hypothesis. Political party (Democrat vs. Republican) was a significant predictor of the pronunciation of the second vowel in *Iraq* ($p < .05$) 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 ($p < .05$), 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 use /æ/ in *Iraq* ($p < .05$). 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 ($p = .08$). 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 ($p = .13$). 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 /ɑː/-user or an /æ/-user. We found no significant difference across ethnicities ($p = .90$) or between speakers of African American English varieties and other varieties ($p = .60$). As for gender, women favored /ɑː/ in comparison to men, but this trend was not significant ($p = .07$). 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 ($p > .04$ for all dummy-coded factors); red versus blue state ($p = .77$); and Southern versus non-Southern accent, both broadly coded (at least one occurrence of monophthongal /aɪ/ in closed syllables; $p = .80$) and narrowly coded (every production of /aɪ/ is monophthongized; $p = .41$). These findings

TABLE 1
Full Logistic Regression Model of Variation in the Second Vowel in *Iraq* by Members of the U.S. House of Representatives

	Coef.	*S.E.*	*Wald Z*	*p*
Intercept	1.31980	1.3309	0.99	.3214
party = Republican	0.69545	0.3154	2.20	.0275
sex = male	0.50339	0.3883	1.30	.1948
agecat = >1950	–0.29509	0.4163	–0.71	.4784
agecat = >1944	–0.09108	0.4421	–0.21	.8368
agecat = 1944	–0.60042	0.4152	–1.45	.1482
region = Northeast	–0.01628	0.4142	–0.04	.9687
region = South	0.29188	0.5272	0.55	.5798
region = West	–0.26041	0.4377	–0.60	.5518
ethnicity = Black/AA	–0.40522	1.3010	–0.31	.7554
ethnicity = Hisp/Lat	–0.30796	1.3826	–0.22	.8237
ethnicity = AmerInd	4.20870	24.9354	0.17	.8660
ethnicity = White	–0.91168	1.2299	–0.74	.4585
Southern accent?	–0.50162	0.5141	–0.98	.3292

are consistent with those of Boberg (1997), who found no dialect differences for /æ/ versus /ɑ:/ 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.

DISCUSSION AND OUTLOOK

We conclude that the pronunciation of *Iraq* is 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 /ɑ:/ and /æ/ variants is a linguistic resource that aids in the construction of party affiliation and political identity.

This claim raises important questions for sociolinguistic analysis. How, if at all, is political persuasion a different kind of social variable than those traditionally considered in sociolinguistics, such as age, gender, socioeconomic class, or ethnicity? An individual's political views are arguably more flexible and idiosyncratic—with respect to particular political issues, one's stance may shift dramatically over the course of a lifetime or even within a few years (such as the shift in many Americans' attitudes toward the war in Iraq since 2003; see Hulse and Connelly 2006). Furthermore, as political parties' group identities shift over time, presenting variable and changing public positions on any number of social issues, one's identification with those party identities is also likely to shift. This fluidity raises questions about the nature of the relationship between a given linguistic variable and a given political position. For example, is the pronunciation of *Iraq* more strongly correlated with the Iraq war, specifically, than it is correlated with a broader political identity? The present results actually suggest otherwise, but why this would be the case is not entirely clear. Certainly, the social construction of a particular political identity would be a larger social project, receiving more attention and effort overall than the construction of a stance toward a single political issue. Norms of behavior and identity performance within the U.S. House of Representatives appear to be quite strongly correlated with the binary opposition between Democrats and Republicans, and further insights may be gained through an analysis of those speakers who do not so clearly identify with either major party (see Hall-Lew, Starr, and Coppock forthcoming).

Like other social variables we examine in sociolinguistics, the importance of political party affiliation to a person's construction of self will also vary

considerably between individuals, and between various stages of a person's life. While the present study examined the speech of individuals whose lives and public identities are defined by the political stances they take, do nonpoliticians also use linguistic variables to index political persuasion? And among nonpoliticians there is again a wide range between individuals with respect to political interest, participation, and identification—indeed, the line between politicians and nonpoliticians is not necessarily clear. Attention to the construction of a political identity, like any social identity, varies greatly from person to person. This article has examined the speech of those Americans who are most actively engaged in presenting a political identity to a public audience. In contrast, what might apolitical individuals' use of variables like foreign (a) tell us about processes of phonological nativization and the activation of indexical meaning?

Another question raised by the operationalization of political persuasion (as with other social variables) is the issue of agency: how free are speakers to index themselves linguistically, and is that linguistic freedom dependent on and constrained by the range of available meanings for a given variable? Introducing the variable of political persuasion into a larger model of the social correlates of linguistic variation allows us to explore these questions from a new angle, bringing us closer to understanding the range and scope of influence on variation in language.

Considering the word *Iraq*, specifically, Nunberg (2004, 72–74) rightly points out that the first vowel is also variable; it can be realized as /i/, /ɪ/, or /aɪ/. While the /i/ and /ɪ/ variants of the first vowel are among English's closest approximations of the native Arabic sound (and, even then, quite far from it), the /aɪ/ diphthong is arguably quite different. We would therefore expect /i/ and /ɪ/ to pattern with the /ɑ:/ variant of the second vowel, and /aɪ/ with /æ/. Consistent with this, we observed in our data set that the production of /aɪ/ generally co-occurred with /æ/, as in /aɪræk/, although two speakers did consistently produce /aɪyrɑ:k/. However, in this analysis we did not find any significant social predictors of variation in the first vowel. 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 for thematically related items such as *Al-Qaida*? Preliminary analysis suggests that some intriguing patterns may emerge; while coding data for the present analysis, we noticed that some speakers use /ɑ:/ 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.

In online discussions of language use by politicians, for example, both professional linguists and lay observers have commented on the realization of foreign (a) in a number of lexical contexts. One example is Republican president George H. W. Bush's pronunciation of Saddam Hussein's first name as /sædəm/, as opposed to /sadam/ or /sədɑm/ (see Anand 2003).[3] More recently, many people have commented on Democratic president Barack Obama's pronunciation of the *a* vowels in *Afghanistan* and *Pakistan*, noting that he uses /ɑ:/ where many Americans use /æ/—indeed, the president's own name offers several sites for foreign (a) variation (Partee 2009; see also Baković 2009). Thus, this variability is clearly relevant in the realization of names other than those connected to Middle Eastern conflict areas; one such example is the pronunciation of *Cannes* ("How Do You Pronounce 'Cannes'?" 2009), the French city that hosts the international Cannes Film Festival. Examples abound, offering the sociophonetician a wealth of data to explore the indexical meanings of each of these and other related variants, which may be more or less related to the variability we have found, here, for *Iraq*.

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 toward economic policy are inherently orthogonal to conservative productions of vocalic variables, and any connections will certainly be 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 the 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

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1. Our use of /ɑ:/ here represents both the rounded [ɒ] in *wad* and the unrounded [ɑ] in *father*, a distinction that is merged for most U.S. English speakers.
2. Coding a representative's speech as (related to) African American English was based on a co-occurrence of a subset of the following phonological features: /ay/-monophthongization, *pin-pen* merger, *feel-fill* merger, vowel nasalization with coda nasal deletion, consonant cluster reduction, and the deletion, lenition, or glottalization of final /t/ and /d/.
3. Conformity to the Germanic Stress Rule is another relevant factor in the direction of foreign place-name nativization.

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