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“The Obligation of Newspeople is Not Only to Give the News Accurately; It is Also to Say It Correctly”: Production and Perception of “Broadcaster Speech”

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the popular belief among Americans that broadcasters speak a “correct” version of American English. Six broadcast journalism students and six non-journalism students recorded news stories as if they were “on radio or television.” Their readings are examined auditorily for intervocalic-/t/ flapping, coronal stop deletion, variable (ng), and allegro *gonna-wanna*. Samples of speech from interviews with the students are also examined for comparison between tasks. Results show that students being trained as broadcasters do not meet the popular expectation for producing prescriptively standard speech, suggesting that these sociolinguistic variables operate consistently across speakers and refuting folk perceptions about broadcaster speech. News readings are also ranked and commented on by listeners for perceived professionalism. Respondents are generally able to differentiate trained broadcasters from other speakers. Rankings do not reward prescriptivist productions. Respondents are also less consistent in ranking African American speakers for professionalism than they are white speakers.

KEYWORDS

broadcast media; “Standard American English”; prescriptivism; correctness; professionalism; coronal stop deletion; (ng); allegro; flapping

1. INTRODUCTION

The perceived connection in the United States between “correct” speech and the speech of broadcasters is well established. In his review of efforts to standardize broadcast pronunciations, Jimirro (1968:63) notes, “This habit of looking to the nation’s announcers for proper pronunciation is so natural that many people now presuppose special pronunciation insight to the radio announcer.” Tapping into the evidence of folk linguistic accounts, Niedzielski and Preston (2000) report a range of manifestations of this belief (transcription conventions are simplified here):

- 1) Television broadcasters are a model for upward mobility. One informant notes, “I think we try so hard to talk like the people do on television... I mean that is our measure....That is the kind of English that will get you promotions.” (151)
- 2) Linguistically “secure” speakers use broadcast media as evidence of the standardness of their local dialect: “Because that’s what you hear on the TV -- like newscasters. If you listen to national newscast of the national news...they sound like we do.” (98--99)
- 3) White respondents cite the speech of African American broadcasters to show that speakers of African American English are choosing not to speak “good” English. An interviewee suggests, “Look at on the news, all the news broadcasters and everything. They’re not talking, ‘Hey man, hybyayhubyhuby.’” (131)
- 4) Broadcasters are standardizing American English nationally: “Because of TV,” says an informant, “I think there’s a kind of standard English that’s evolving.” (101)

The perceived role of broadcast media as the standard bearer of American English is echoed at times by industry publications. *NBC Handbook of Pronunciation* compiler James Bender (1951:ix) is noted for his suggestion that “the broadcaster would be well advised to use a pronunciation widely known among phoneticians as ‘General American,’ the standard presented in this book” (cf. Donahue’s 1993 critique of Bender). Pat Kelly, NBC Supervisor of Announcers, describes the *Handbook* as an effort “to clarify our pronunciation problems, and still maintain the high standard of speech which is the desire of cultivated people” (iii). Kelly’s claim makes broadcaster speech not simply a matter of speaking so-called “General American,” but also a matter of speaking in a socially appropriate way.

In the most recent editions of the *NBC Handbook* (Ehrlich and Hand 1984/1991), Edwin Newman’s introduction makes even stronger claims for broadcaster speech as standard. Newman begins with an uncritical nod to the perceived role of broadcasters as models for proper speech: “An obligation does rest on people in my position to speak correctly, not only in matters of grammar and usage, but in pronunciation” (9). Later he writes that “a broadcaster also has an obligation. He -- or she -- is a teacher of sorts. The obligation of newspeople is not only to give the news accurately; it is also to say it correctly” (13). He provides several pages of anecdotes about lost credibility and embarrassment caused by mispronunciations. These include the “the usage of *gonna* for *going to* in advertisements” and the “dropped *g* at the end of *ing* words” (15).

Accounts of actual broadcaster speech offer less support for the idea of broadcast speech as setting (or following) prescriptivist norms. In the early days of radio, McCombs (1931) bemoaned that announcers needed to standardize regional pronunciations. Jimirro (1968:64) notes the error in turning to the media for “correct” pronunciations, because “the general broadcasting custom in the United States is to follow pronunciation, not lead it.” An important body of sociolinguistic studies (especially Bell 1982; Bell 1984; Bell 1991; but similarly Brunel

1970; Lipski 1985; and Kristiansen 2001) finds that broadcasters regularly adjust their speech to the perceived norms of their idealized audiences -- typically adopting less prescriptively correct or more innovative register and dialect varieties to accommodate to less socially prestigious or more locally oriented audiences.

While there is little evidence that broadcasters maintain the standard that the folk expect of them, audiences still appear to be consistently good at differentiating broadcaster speech from that of non-broadcasters. Neil, Worrall, Day, and Hickson (2003) studied perceptions of professionalism by asking auditors to identify professional broadcasters from recordings of professionals, broadcasting students, and untrained subjects. Results were conclusive as the “panel of judges identified the professional newsreaders with 100-percent accuracy” (11). Borrego, Gasparini, and Behlau (2007) similarly asked auditors to compare news readings by students taken at the beginning and end of a radio announcing course. Pre- and post-training readings were identified with 80-percent accuracy (431).

However, while audiences are adept at recognizing broadcaster speech, they are less successful at identifying which speech features indicate professionalism. Neil, Worrall, Day, and Hickson (2003:2) cite a generally accepted list of features for professional newsreaders that includes a preference for a deep voice and pausing. However, in Neil, Worrall, Day, and Hickson’s speech samples, professional broadcasters were found to speak faster than students and, in the case of female readers, to speak at “a significantly higher pitch” (11). In Borrego, Gasparini, and Behlau (2007), use of emphasis, pitch, resonance, and speech rate were listed by auditors as the factors contributing most to their evaluations. Acoustic analysis of these factors, however, revealed no significant changes overall in student productions between pre- and post-training readings (430--431). In contrast to the ease with which auditors identify trained broadcasters, the specific traits that define broadcaster speech appear difficult to identify.

The research presented here capitalizes on the folk perception of broadcaster-speech-as-standard to explore several levels of linguistic meaning. It presents connected studies of production and perception framed through the idea of “broadcaster speech,” using the widely held notion to probe what “broadcaster speech” reveals about language and attitudes toward it. Productively, the connection between broadcaster speech and prescriptively standard speech is used to test how subject variable linguistic forms are to prescriptivist norms. Perceptually, it cues listeners to evaluate speech performance and test whether broadcaster productions coincide with audience perceptions of professionalism.

2. METHODS

All work was conducted at the University of Missouri (MU), home to the first collegiate journalism school in the United States. The “J-School” holds a prominent role in the internal life of campus, and students both within and outside its curricula perceive it as a top journalism program internationally.

2.1. Production Study

Undergraduate students were recruited to participate in sociolinguistic interviews. Data from twelve female interviewees is included in this study. Table 1 lists pseudonyms for these twelve interviewees, as well as their race and academic class. They are categorized by “Group” in Table 1, representing relative training and interest levels in broadcasting. Group A interviewees claimed no interest in broadcast journalism and no training in speech or performance. Group B interviewees were not broadcasting students, but claimed expertise in

speech because of theater or other performance training. Group C interviewees had enrolled in the J-School, but had not begun broadcast coursework. Group D interviewees were completing the J-School broadcasting curriculum and were actively working as broadcast journalists on the university's television and radio stations (and, at the time of this writing, all Group D interviewees are indeed actively employed as on-air broadcasters).

Table 1
Interviewee Data

Group	Interviewee	Race	Academic class
A	Alyssa	White	Freshman
	Anise	African American	Freshman
	Ashley	White	Freshman
B	Beth	White	Sophomore
	Brenda	African American	Freshman
	Brittany	White	Freshman
C	Caitlin	White	Sophomore
	Caron	White	Sophomore
	Constance	African American	Freshman
D	Dana	White	Junior
	Darla	White	Senior
	Dionne	African American	Junior

Each subject participated in a loosely structured interview lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded for impressionistic analysis. Subjects were told that the interview was an attempt to elicit natural speech and given little additional detail about the focus of the study. After at least 30 minutes of interview talk, interviewees were given a contrived news story and asked to read it as if they were on the radio or television.¹ Interviewees were allowed as much preparation time as they wished to preview or practice the script, and were allowed to re-record their reading to their satisfaction. The news script was constructed to contain a number of features that are subject to stylistic variation in American speech. These included opportunities for intervocalic-/t/ flapping (e.g., *matter* as [mæɾə]), allegro substitution of *gonna* and *wanna* for *going to* and *want to*, coronal stop deletion (e.g., *communist country* as *communis' country*), and substitution of the alveolar nasal [n] in place of the velar nasal [ŋ] (e.g. *trying* as *tryin'*).

These features were chosen because their contextual variability in a number of dialects of English has been attested to in canonical works of sociolinguistic research (e.g., Fischer 1958; Labov 1966; Trudgill 1974 for variable [ng]; Wolfram 1969; Guy 1980; Bell 1984; Tagliamonte 2006 for coronal stop deletion; Bell 1991; Chambers 1995 for intervocalic-/t/ flapping; Preston 1985 for allegro *gonna*), but also because their prescriptively standard productions are explicitly indicated by orthography. For instance, although most dialects of American English produce the /t/ in *matter* as [r], the orthographic presence of <t> in a reading task might cue a person primed

to speak to prescriptivist norms to produce [t].² More generally, folk perceptions of several of these features -- including Newman bemoaning “dropped g” and “gonna” in the *NBC Handbook* (Ehrlich and Hand 1984/1991:15) -- attest to the popular salience of orthographic forms as “correct.”

Variables were auditorily coded for application of prescriptivist norms. In five potential occurrences of allegro *gonna/wanna* in the news script, *going to* and *want to* were coded as prescriptivist, and *gonna* and *wanna* as not. For variable (ng), ten instances of progressive verbs were coded for [ŋ] as prescriptivist against [n] as not. For coronal stop deletion, seven instances of orthographic <t> or <d> occurring in monomorphemic clusters with following consonants were analyzed (e.g., *communisT country*); these were coded for the presence of [t] or [d] as prescriptivist and the absence as not. For twenty occurrences of intervocalic-/t/, [t] was coded as prescriptivist and [r] as not.

The selection of variables reflects this study’s emphasis on hyper-standardness. Coronal stop deletion, for instance, is ubiquitous in American Englishes, but varies in its application by grammatical context, phonetic environment, and social factors. Broadly, though, the monomorphemic cluster with following consonant is the most favorable context for deletion for all speakers (e.g., Guy 1980). As such, a speaker who resists deletion in this context is arguably evincing the highest degree of resistance to deletion rules, and behaving in the least phonetically natural way for an American English speaker.

For comparison with news readings, a five-minute section of interview speech, taken from a point about halfway between the start of the interview and the beginning of the news reading task, was excerpted for each speaker. The same phonetic variables analyzed in news readings were analyzed in interview speech. Across the sample, five-minute excerpts best matched the number of occurrences of variables in the news script.

Results from the production study are measured as raw counts and by stepwise regression using Rbrul (Johnson 2008, 2009).

2.2. Perception Study

Undergraduate students at MU were asked to evaluate the “professionalism” of interviewees’ news readings. Respondents listened to the first paragraph from the news readings. The audio clips were organized into three sets of recordings, with four speakers per set. Each set contained one speaker from each training/interest group. Two sets contained only white interviewees, the third only African Americans.³ Respondents were told that speakers were enrolled in MU’s broadcast journalism program, and that each set consisted of a single student in each of the four years of the program’s progression. Respondents were asked to rank the professionalism of broadcasters in each set on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 representing the least professional broadcaster and 4 the most professional. (Speakers were labeled with different pseudonyms from those used in this paper to avoid cueing respondents to the A, B, C, and D groups.) Respondents were asked not to assign ties within a single set of broadcasters, and not to compare broadcasters across sets. Respondents were also asked to write characteristics that informed their judgments.

336 respondents provided ratings for the three sets. Forms with tie scores were omitted from analysis. This yielded 913 rating forms across the three sets, totaling 3,652 individual broadcaster rankings. Rankings were tabulated and averaged for intra-set comparison and for correlation with speakers’ actual levels of broadcasting training and interest. These rankings are

compared by two-sample t-test using built-in functions in R (R Core Team 2014).

Respondents provided 1,759 written comments. Frequency counts were generated in Simple Concordance Program (Reed 2003) to identify high-frequency descriptors. The twenty-five most frequent descriptors overall and in each set of broadcasters were tabulated. High-frequency types are used to guide qualitative discussion.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Production

Table 2⁴ presents production results for the four variables. They are divided by task. The number of times where a speaker produced the prescriptivist variant is shown as a count and percentage.

Table 2
Counts for All Variables, by Group and Task

Variable	Measure	Task	
		Interview	News
Intervocalic-/t/ Flapping	N	123	228
	[t]	3 (2.44%)	6 (2.63%)
Allegro <i>gonna/wanna</i>	N	31	61
	Full forms	1 (3.23%)	54 (88.52%)
Variable (ng)	N	113	120
	[ŋ]	78 (69.03%)	114 (95%)
Coronal Stop Deletion	N	118	95
	[t] or [d] maintained	56 (47.46%)	30 (31.58%)

Intervocalic-/t/ flapping shows effectively no movement toward prescriptivist productions between interview speech and news reading. In all but a few instances, speakers flap the intervocalic-/t/. The rate of [t] is basically identical between tasks.

In contrast, speakers nearly always use *gonna* and *wanna* in interview speech and heavily favor the prescriptivist variants *going to* and *want to* in news readings. Similarly, variable (ng) follows the prescriptivist preference for velar productions in news reading.

Coronal stop deletion is more challenging to interpret. Deletion rates are relatively high in both tasks. However, it is noteworthy that retention of the coronal stop is actually lower in news reading than in interview speech. Coronal stop deletion appears to move slightly against the prescriptivist norm.

Table 3 presents logistic regression results for allegro *gonna/wanna*. Results are given in factor weights familiar to sociolinguists from Varbrul (Sankoff, Tagliamonte and Smith 2005; Tagliamonte 2006), as well as the log odds generated in Rbrul (Johnson 2008, 2009). Log odds center on 0, with positive numbers favoring application of prescriptivist rules. Factor weights scale between 0 and 1, with results above 0.5 favoring application and results below 0.5 disfavoring. Calculations were performed in Rbrul, but log-likelihoods and overall model significance scores from Varbrul are also provided.

Table 3
Stepwise Regression of Significant Interactions for *Allegro gonna/wanna*

Application: <i>going to/want to</i>	Factor	Log Odds	Tokens	Response Portion	Factor Weight
Task p<0.001	Interview	-2.722	31	0.032	0.062
	News	2.722	61	0.885	0.938
Deviance: 52.309 AIC: 56.309 df: 2 Intercept: -0.679 R ² : 0.668 Overall proportion centered: 0.598 Centered input probability: 0.336					
Nonsignificant: Training (p=0.152); Interest (p=0.837); Race (p=0.846)					
Varbrul Input 0.552		Log likelihood = -26.154		p<0.001	

Allegro gonna/wanna shows task as the only significant interaction. If interview speech is excluded to focus more closely on the small amount of variation that occurs in news reading, no factor emerges as a significant predictor.

In Table 4, variable (ng) shows a significant interaction with training (p=0.027). Trained speakers favor velar productions more strongly. Interestingly, this appears to be a result of high velar (ng) frequency in interview speech among Group B and Group D speakers (who use [ŋ] at 81.8 and 80 percent, respectively) rather than a result of prescriptivist productions in news reading. In news reading, all groups perform at nearly identical levels of near-categorical velar (ng) (95 percent [ŋ] for all speakers), suggesting that training and interest play little role in setting production levels in the news reading task for variable (ng).

Table 4
Stepwise Regression of Significant Interactions for Variable (ng)

Application: [ŋ]	Factor	Log Odds	Tokens	Response Portion	Factor Weight
Task p<0.001	Interview	-1.103	113	0.69	0.249
	News	1.103	120	0.95	0.751
Race p=0.003	White	0.563	149	0.886	0.637
	African American	-0.563	84	0.714	0.363
Training p=0.027	Untrained	-0.428	117	0.769	0.395
	Trained	0.428	116	0.879	0.605
Deviance: 172.819 AIC: 180.819 df: 4 Intercept: 1.871 R ² : 0.35 Overall proportion centered: 0.824 Centered input probability: 0.867					
Nonsignificant: Interest (p=0.36)					
Varbrul Input 0.887		Log likelihood = -86.410		p=0.029	

Similarly, the high significance of race as an interaction with variable (ng) (p=0.003) results from African American speakers' higher preference for apical (ng) in interview speech

(52.2 percent [ŋ] for African Americans compared with 79.7 percent [ŋ] for white speakers). In news reading, the difference in variable (ng) is not significant (p=0.381), with African Americans producing 92.5 percent [ŋ] compared with 96.3 percent [ŋ] for white speakers. For variable (ng) -- as with *allegro gonna/wanna* -- all speakers produce [ŋ] at similar rates in news reading. In the case of variable (ng), this similarity holds even despite different production rates of [n] and [ŋ] in interview speech across interactions of training and race.

Regression results for coronal stop deletion are shown in Table 5. The increased deletion rates in the more formal task of news reading are reflected in task being selected as significant (p=0.018).

TABLE 5
Stepwise Regression of Significant Interactions for Coronal Stop Deletion

Application: stop retained	Factor	Log Odds	Tokens	Response Portion	Factor Weight
Task p=0.018	Interview	0.336	118	0.475	0.583
	News	-0.336	95	0.316	0.417
Deviance: 281.772 AIC: 285.772 df: 2 Intercept: -0.437 R ² : 0.033					
Overall proportion centered: 0.404 Centered input probability: 0.392					
Nonsignificant: Interest (p = 0.147); Race (p = 0.405); Training (p=0.708)					
Varbrul Input 0.401		Log likelihood = -140.886		p=0.019	
Coronal stop deletion – Training+Interest					
Application: stop retained	Factor	Log Odds	Tokens	Response Portion	Factor Weight
Group p=0.008	Group A	-0.295	54	0.333	0.427
	Group B	0.657	57	0.561	0.659
	Group C	0.248	47	0.447	0.562
	Group D	-0.609	55	0.273	0.352
Task p=0.014	Interview	0.362	118	0.475	0.59
	News	-0.362	95	0.316	0.41
Deviance: 269.901 AIC: 279.901 df: 5 Intercept: -0.46 R ² : 0.101					
Overall proportion centered: 0.404 Centered input probability: 0.387					
Nonsignificant: Race (p=0.543)					
Varbrul Input 0.396		Log likelihood = -134.951		p=0.015	

Table 5 also examines speaker group as an explanatory factor, and finds that this pairwise interaction of training and interest is also highly significant (p=0.008). This appears to be a result of high retention of coronal stops among Group B speakers in interview speech (63.6 percent of stops retained), and high deletion rates among Group D speakers in news reading (13.0 percent of stops retained). In other words, trained student broadcasters violate prescriptivist norms in news reading, while trained non-broadcasters follow prescriptivist norms even in interview

speech. Interestingly, Groups B, C, and D all delete coronal stops at higher rates in news reading than interview speech. Only the untrained and uninterested students of Group A maintain constant deletion rates in the two tasks, at 33.3 percent of stops retained.

Race is not a significant predictor in either model. However, raw counts suggest that African Americans apply prescriptivist norms more than white speakers do. African Americans in the sample retain 30.8 percent of coronal stops in interview speech and increase retention to 43.8 in news readings. White speakers drop from retaining 55.7 percent of coronal stops in interview speech to retaining 25.4 percent in news reading.

On the whole, findings for all variables suggest little influence from training and interest on productions of the variables studied here. Intervocalic-/t/ flapping appears to operate below speaker consciousness. Prescriptivist productions of *allegro gonna/wanna* and variable (ng) occur at roughly the same rates among all speakers in news reading. In coronal stop deletion, training and interest generally correlate with less application of prescriptivist norms in news reading. There is no support in results for these variables for the folk belief that trained broadcasters speak more “correctly.”

3.2. Perception Study

Table 6 shows mean ratings of professionalism that each speaker received from listeners. Within each set, speakers are arranged in ascending order of professionalism ratings.

Table 6

Professionalism Rankings (Arranged by Mean, from Least Professional to Most Professional in Each Set)

Set	Speaker	Number of ratings	Mean ratings	t-test for position	p-value	Number of comments
1	Ashley	310	1.309677			175
	Caron	310	2.245161	15.4166	<0.001	127
	Beth	310	2.86129	8.8401	<0.001	130
	Darla	310	3.577419	10.1058	<0.001	162
2	Alyssa	303	1.811881			175
	Dana	303	2.40264	5.6933	<0.001	165
	Brittany	303	2.435644	0.3292	0.7422	137
	Caitlin	303	3.333333	11.0876	<0.001	128
3	Anise	300	2.166667			153
	Brenda	300	2.556667	3.7672	<0.001	123
	Constance	300	2.593333	0.3243	0.7459	140
	Dionne	300	2.68	0.8431	0.3998	144

In Sets 1 and 3 listeners correctly distinguished students with interest and training in broadcasting from students without, with Group D speakers receiving the highest mean rankings and Group A speakers the lowest. In Set 2 the Group A speaker, Alyssa, also fits this pattern. Dana’s second-lowest score in the set violates it and merits more attention.

T-tests in Table 6 offer comparisons of speakers’ ratings within each set. A t-test is provided for each speaker and the speaker rated immediately below her. These give more confidence in the mean rankings for Set 1 than for those in Set 2, which in turn provide more confidence than those in Set 3. Set 1 shows high significance for the relative position of each broadcaster by ranking. In Set 2, Dana’s position is again problematic, as she is ranked statistically the same as Brittany. In Set 3, only Anise’s position as least professional is statistically significant.

Of note, in every set respondents correctly identified as least professional the speaker with no interest in becoming a broadcaster and no training for it. Table 7 reinforces this, showing a large statistical distance between Group A and Group B ($t=18.18, p<0.001$). Group D’s separation from Group C is also significant ($t=2.85, p=0.005$). When rankings are averaged by speaker training and interest, both factors are highly significant predictors of higher mean rankings. These findings support previous research that audiences can discriminate between speakers with and without broadcasting training. These findings add, though, that there is a similar effect from simply wanting to become a broadcaster.

Table 7
Mean Professionalism Rankings as Interactions of Group, Training, and Interest

	Mean	t-test for position	p-value
Group A (-training/ -interest)	1.757941		
Group B (+training/-interest)	2.619934	18.1826	<0.001
Group C (-training/+interest)	2.720701	2.1949	0.02843
Group D (+training/+interest)	2.892662	2.845	0.004541
+training	2.756298	13.1629	<0.001
-training	2.239321		
+interest	2.806681	16.3285	<0.001
-interest	2.188938		

Table 8 compares professionalism rankings against coronal stop deletion rates in the clips that perception study respondents heard. Coronal stop deletion is the only variable examined here, because it was the only to show inter-speaker differences in the brief clips that listeners heard. Three monomorphemic clusters were present for possible retention or deletion of [t].

Table 8
Mean Professionalism Rankings by Production of [t]

Stops retained	Number of speakers	Mean	t-test for difference	p-value
0	6	2.621651		

1	4	2.459016	3.9695	<0.001
2	2	2.200663	5.1301	<0.001

In Table 8, higher professionalism rankings actually correlate to increased deletion. Speakers who delete all three stops receive the highest mean rankings, speakers who produce one of three possible instances of [t] receive the second highest, and speakers who produce two of three possible instances of [t] receive the lowest. Differences are highly significant ($p < 0.001$). This finding intersects interestingly with findings in the production study. Not only do trained speakers not hold special province over prescriptively standard speech for this phonetic factor, prescriptivist forms correlate negatively with audience judgments of professionalism.

Finally, Table 9 counts the factors that respondents claimed they were evaluating. Emphasized words in the cumulative column appear in the top twenty-five for all three of the set columns. Fifteen of the twenty-five top cumulative descriptors appear in all three columns, suggesting a high level of agreement among respondents in these descriptors.

Table 9
Frequent Descriptors in Comments (Emphasized Words Occur in All Sets)

All		Set 1		Set 2		Set 3	
Word	N	Word	N	Word	N	Word	N
stumbled	120	pauses	35	quiet	66	fast	62
fast	105	stumbled	29	stumbled	47	stumbled	44
stuttered	88	monotone	25	stuttered	40	clear	28
quiet	83	enthusiastic	24	reading	32	stuttered	27
pauses	77	reading	23	confident	24	pauses	23
clear	68	fast	21	clear	22	accent	20
reading	57	stuttered	21	fast	22	enunciation	19
monotone	48	clear	18	slow	21	slow	19
slow	49	tone	17	pauses	19	messed up	14
confident	47	inflection	16	messed up	18	boring	13
enthusiastic	44	confident	15	boring	17	quiet	13
boring	42	boring	12	soft	17	enthusiastic	10
messed up	38	understandable	12	loud	14	awkward	9
tone	34	emphasis	11	monotone	14	emphasis	9
accent	33	smooth	11	enthusiastic	10	monotone	9
enunciation	33	hesitation	10	mistakes	9	confident	8
Loud	27	flow	9	rushed	9	rushed	8
emphasis	26	slow	9	tone	9	tone	8
awkward	25	enunciation	9	awkward	8	stammered	7
inflection	24	awkward	8	weird	8	choppy	6
smooth	22	choppy	7	accent	7	loud	6
choppy	20	laughing	7	choppy	7	mistakes	6
pace	20	loud	7	pace	7	pace	6
rushed	18	pace	7	said "uh"	7	weird	6
mistakes	17	accent	6	smooth	7	black	4

In fact, closer evaluations of descriptors suggest even greater agreement. The most frequent overall descriptor, *stumbled*, is the second most frequent term in all three sets. Other frequent descriptors like *stuttered*, *messed up*, *choppy*, *mistakes*, *smooth*, and, in Set 3, *stammered* may also reference reading fluency. A number of other descriptors may index reading fluency (e.g., *fast*, *quiet*, *monotone*, *slow*, *confident*, *enthusiastic*, *boring*), but could refer to characteristics like tone, pitch, and rate, too, which are beyond the scope of this paper.

The descriptors most closely related to phonetic characteristics appear to be *clear*, *enunciation*, and *accent*. It seems possible that, from a folk linguistic perspective, these descriptors might be used interchangeably by some respondents, and may refer either to issues related to dialect or listener beliefs that they are responding to articulatory precision.

Overall, the perception study suggests that audiences correctly distinguish speakers with training and interest in broadcasting from those without. Prescriptive correctness -- at least in the case of coronal stop deletion -- does not correlate to greater professionalism rankings. Respondents show a good deal of agreement on characteristics that lead to their evaluations, and especially privilege reading fluency in determining professionalism.

4. DISCUSSION

This research has suggested that training and interest in broadcasting do not correlate with more prescriptively standard speech, at least for phonetic factors studied here. At the same time, audiences accurately differentiate speakers according to training and interest. On both points, these findings coincide with similar conclusions in Neil, Worrall, Day and Hickson (2003) and Borrego, Gasparini and Behlau (2007). The differences between the folk perceptions of broadcaster-speech-as-standard and these findings for production and perception remain open for exploration. Qualitative evidence from interviews and from perception study comments offers some explanations.

4.1. Dana's *stumble* to Low Rankings

Dana is anomalous as the Group D speaker who is ranked as second least professional in her set in the perception study. Respondent comments on her performance help make sense of this result. Qualitatively, she receives a wide range of comments from respondents, ranging from very positive to very negative:

- enthusiastic and well-informed
- sounded best of them all
- She sucked.
- This was terrible.

Most typical of comments she received are those that appear to refer to reading errors:

- She could've been a 4 but she made mistakes.
- Stutters make her sound untrustworthy.
- She started off good, but began stuttering.
- She couldn't speak continuously. Breaks to repeat or repronounce words.

In fact, without much interpretative stretch, of the 165 comments Dana received, 145 can be understood to refer to reading errors -- especially prominent are the descriptors *stumbled*, *stutters*, and *mistakes*. A rough transcription of the last sentence of her perception study reading is:

In what is being called a long-sought victory for the Bush Administration, the team is going to beg- begin conducting core m- metal samples for air quality samples- for- for air quality tests sometime next month.

For a reasonably sympathetic listener, Dana's errors are short and her recovery is quick. Some respondents note this recovery:

- Even though she messed up in the end, she was the most confident and spoke most fluidly.

Many more do not interpret a recovery, though:

- very good -- slight mess-ups ruin the reading -- her confidence becomes shattered and doesn't recover

Ironically, the errors that seem to have driven down Dana's rankings arose, in a sense, from her actual experience as a working broadcast journalist. On receiving the script, Dana glanced at it and asked if there were any words that she was "supposed to" trip up on. She then said, "Well, I won't read through all of it. Because, in the real world, many times anchors don't get a lot of time. They get, like, a commercial to quickly read through their script." She also declined to re-record the script, noting that broadcasters present live and, often, make mistakes that they have to recover from. So, the reading error is a result of her realistic engagement with the task. Indeed, it seems very possible that Dana would have ranked higher had she maintained the production quality of her first sentence through the second one. While Dana receives the second most 1 ratings in her set (94; Alyssa received 144), she also receives the second most 4 ratings (69 to Caitlin's 168). So, even though she is punished for reading disfluencies, many respondents still rated Dana favorably.

This explanation strengthens the claim that audiences are able to distinguish broadcasters from non-broadcasters. Many respondents do seem to recognize Dana as a broadcaster, but reading disfluencies trump those reactions.

4.2. African American Speakers, *enunciation*, and *accent*

Means in Set 3 cluster tightly near 2.5. There is a relatively small statistical distance between each speaker in the set. It suggests that none of the Set 3 broadcasters really emerged for respondents as professional or unprofessional. In fact, Brenda, Constance, and Dionne receive almost identical numbers of ratings as "most professional," with 83, 86, and 86 scores of 4, respectively. Dionne emerges as most professional because she receives the most 3 ratings with 93. A selection of comments reflects disagreement in intra-set ratings:

- spoke too fast, accent too heavy (Anise)
- This one seemed slow and easy to understand. (Anise)
- stutters, talks too slow (Brenda)
- sounds better than the others; enunciates well, articulates (Brenda)
- pronounced words with weird accent (Constance)
- good strong pronunciation but sounds like reading (Constance)
- over-enunciation (Dionne)
- needs to be more articulate; has accent (Dionne)

Interestingly, in Table 9 comments with descriptors like *enunciation* and *accent* are much

more frequent for Set 3 speakers than for Sets 1 and 2. Comments for this set tend to match the understanding of “dialect” as a departure from “correct” English that is regularly found in perceptual dialectology and folk linguistic studies (Preston 1989; Lippi-Green 1997; Niedzielski & Preston 2000). The following comments, all taken from the same respondent, are typical of this understanding:

- dialect but very lively and could tell she was trained (Constance)
- strong dialect and no emphasis on pronunciation (Anise)
- very clearly pronounced but still trace of dialect (Dionne)
- no strong dialect but boring (Brenda)

Given the methodological decision to group all African American broadcasters in the study into the same set, the high incidence of comment on *enunciation* and *accent* is potentially relevant as an indicator that these descriptors are encoded for negative evaluations of African American speech. Such comments, importantly, may reveal negative evaluations even when respondents intend them positively. For instance, a comment that a speaker “enunciates well” may suggest that there is something noteworthy in the fact that the speaker is able to enunciate (cf. Alim and Smitherman 2012).

Several respondents made it clear that they were aware that the final set of broadcasters were African American. In at least one case, this was marked positively. One respondent rated Constance with a 4 and commented:

- because she’s black. I can tell. And I want her to succeed.

In more cases, the response was negative. One respondent wrote simply:

- sounds black (Constance)
- sounds black (Anise)
- sounds black (Dionne)

The respondent provided no comment for Brenda, who received the 4 rating. In other responses, variations on this theme include:

- too quiet and fast; ebonics (Anise)
- ghetto / stutter (Dionne)
- sounded ghetto and uneducated (Anise)

Outside of Set 3, each broadcaster receives at least one comment on *dialect* or *accent* (whether a remark on its presence or absence), but none is noted consistently with these descriptors. African American speakers draw more attention than white speakers do for not speaking with the right accent or level of enunciation for a broadcaster. Part of sounding like a broadcaster to listeners, then, seems to be sounding “white.” This bias may explain, in part, the broad disagreement in professionalism rankings for broadcasters who sound African American.

Brenda uncritically gives voice to this potential bias. She said:

When people would first look at us they’re like, “Oh, she’s black.” But then we open our

mouth and they're like, "Wait." They get really confused because we don't sound like the typical black kids in Dallas area. And I think it's just the way we were raised and how our parents wanted us to enunciate our words and talk right.

Brenda explicitly ties *enunciation* to not sounding African American. The evaluation of African American speech demonstrated in this type of comment sheds light on findings in the production study that African Americans produce phonetic variables in news reading at about the same levels as white speakers, even when there are production differences in interview speech. In adjusting their speech to sound like they are "on radio or television," African Americans may adjust their speech to the norms of white speech. Even as speakers made these adjustments, though, perception study respondents still struggled to assign them consistent professionalism rankings.

4.3. Broadcast Speech as Accent-Free Speech

During interviews, participants regularly attested that professional broadcasters should speak without regional accents. Caitlin, for instance, described her need to avoid her Boston accent based on social pressures and requirements of the broadcasting marketplace:

CAITLIN: I know...Harvard Yard jokes....So, yeah, it's just little words like that that I have to work on. Really my O-R's and my U's -- I don't do my U's very well. I have a friend with the last name B-U-R-I and I say "[bʌ ri]" and it's "[bɜːi]" -- I have to work on the [ɜː]. So yeah. Some words.

INTERVIEWER: How did you learn to control all that?

CAITLIN: How? People point it out. You know what? I don't notice it at home, but once I came out here people started pointing it out and I've...not become more conscious of it, but I know as a broadcast journalism major, once I go on the air I can't have it on certain words. So, I think about it like *order*. So say [ordə]. But my natural reaction is to be like [ɔːdə]. But I just can't- can't do it. People point it out, which is good. Which is good. Because I'm trying to work on it a little bit.

While she recognizes stigmas her native dialect might carry as she pursues a career, it is important to note that Caitlin is a Group C speaker, not Group D. She is enrolled in the J-School, but has not begun the broadcast-specific curriculum and is not making regular reports on television or radio. Her "correction" is self-imposed.

The interesting contrast is that among the Group D speakers, none identified any pressure within the J-School to identify or avoid regional dialects. Dionne, in fact, suggested that a regional dialect might be advantageous for a job-seeking reporter because it would make them stand out from other candidates. The idealism in her statement suggests that no systematic attention is paid to regional dialect in the J-School curriculum.⁵

Group D interviewees did indicate that extensive vocal coaching occurred in the J-School. In early coursework, this focuses on marking scripts for phrasing and breathing. At more advanced stages, students are paired with a faculty or professional mentor with whom they review video and audio of broadcasts. Darla described her coach working with her "to have a deeper quality voice, and not the high-pitched squeaky." Daren (a male interviewee who is not included in the data reported here) described the importance of pronunciation in the J-School, but

connected it only to pronunciation of names, places, and scientific and non-English terms. He claimed that he needed to “articulate better” (which he said with emphatic, fully stopped and released [t]’s), but explicitly said he had not received such coaching in the J-School.

So, whatever prescriptive correction occurs among students entering the J-School, it is not part of the curriculum. Broadcast students seem to share in the popular perception that they should be talking in a more standard way, but such “correction” is not part of their education and does not objectively manifest itself in their news readings for the variables studied here. When broadcast students follow prescriptivist standards, they are following the same norms as non-broadcasters.

4.4. Phonetic Variables and Prescriptivist Standards

The similar productions among all interviewees of the phonetic variables under study afford some conclusions about the variables themselves. [r] is an unstigmatized realization for intervocalic-/t/ in interview speech and news reading. Being directed to read as if “on the radio or television” does not cause manipulation of this variable to index standardness.

Coronal stop deletions in the favoring preconsonantal monomorphemic environment attract similarly little attention. The less prescriptively standard production of [t] or [d] may even be undesirable. When judged for professionalism, more deletion correlates with higher professionalism rankings.

Allegro gonna/wanna and variable (ng) remain salient for prescriptivism. In fact, it is perhaps less interesting to note that these are usually produced according to prescriptivist standards than it is to note that they are not always produced prescriptively. Perhaps this reflects speakers’ negotiations between the “substandard” and “superstandard” speech described by Wolfram and Fasold (1974:19) -- and also articulated in Newman’s claim that following the *NBC Handbook* will allow a person to “sound comfortably, but not oppressively, learned” (Erhlich and Hand 1984/1991:16). The need to avoid sounding “too correct” might create some flexibility for speakers, even in a formal task, to insert some apical (ng) and *allegro gonna/wanna*. A similar principle might explain the slight increase in coronal stop deletion in news reading, or the lack of variation between contexts for intervocalic-/t/ flapping.

5. CONCLUSION

This research presents findings from a very small study, especially in terms of the number of interviewees included and the phonetic variables examined. As such, the degree to which findings are generalizable is limited. Nevertheless, results present several interesting implications for sociolinguists and other researchers.

Phonetic variables in this study were produced basically the same among speakers asked to read news as if they were on radio or television, regardless of the speaker’s training or interest in broadcast journalism. Respondents evaluating news readings for professionalism correctly identified untrained, uninterested speakers as least professional and -- with some explanation from respondent comments -- also recognized trained broadcasters as most professional. Professionalism ratings did not correlate to prescriptivist standards.

Participants in this study -- interviewees and listeners -- believed that broadcasters speak a “correct” form of American English. Sociolinguists have famously operationalized this ubiquitous notion of broadcaster speech to capture social evaluations of variables -- for instance, in the subjective evaluation portion of Labov’s (1966) New York City study or Labov, Ash, Rabindranath, Weldon, Baranowski and Nagy’s (2011) experimentation to describe the

“sociolinguistic monitor.” Sociolinguists have also long noted the insidiousness of such standards in reflecting and perpetuating social prejudices (e.g., Labov 1972; Preston 1985, 1989; Donahue 1993; Lippi-Green 1997; Rickford and Rickford 2000; Hickey 2012).

In one sense, the research presented here offers a novel way to make use of the folk linguistic concept of broadcaster-speech-as-standard to study sociolinguistic variables, by directing speakers to perform their ideas of broadcaster speech, comparing those performances against formal training and professional interest, and checking listener responses to those performances. The finding that students enact similar performances of the variables under study - - regardless of their engagement with broadcast speech -- provides an indication of common evaluations of standardness for these variables.

It also raises another challenge to the problematic popular concepts of “standard” language. The touchstone of broadcaster speech as the standard for American English is not, strictly speaking, something achieved by training or interest in becoming a broadcaster. Training appears to play a role in being deemed professional, but comments on Dana’s reading disfluencies (and the high frequency of *stumbled* as a descriptor in all perception study sets) suggest that the important factor in training might be in helping a student gain comfort in reading a script aloud in order to avoid reading disfluencies. Simply wanting to be a broadcaster appears to have a similar effect to that of performance training -- perhaps students intent on becoming broadcasters are keyed to their professional need to read aloud fluently. Caitlin certainly gives attestation to the claim that some Group C speakers are working meta-critically on their speech based on perceived norms. Group D’s low level of prescriptivist precision with regard to consonant stop deletion suggests that the advantage they gain over other students in sounding “professional” is a matter of increased comfort with reading quickly and fluently, rather than speaking in a way that would be prescriptively correct or standard. Trained broadcasting students simply seem to have more practice reading a news script out loud, and audiences seem to recognize this.

So, “broadcaster speech” seems to be most connected with being able to read aloud without disfluencies. Crucially, though, this access to broadcaster speech appears to be limited to speakers who sound like they are white. In this study, listeners do not consistently recognize professional training or interest when speakers are African American. This, of course, offers another critique of prescriptivist norms. “Broadcaster speech” does not show up in this research as a way that people who read the news “say it correctly.” Rather, “broadcaster speech” appears to encode social prejudices.

These observations should give pause to educators in speech, communication, or other fields who might at some time employ the concept of broadcaster-speech-as-standard in curricula. Rather than being “standard” or “correct”, broadcaster speech may rely on or reify harmful social biases. For that reason, it should not be used as a norm or ideal uncritically.

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NOTES

1. The script that interviewees read is available at

http://catpages.nwmissouri.edu/m/cstrell/linguistics/broadcast_speech/.

2. Eckert (2005) highlights the salience of /t/ for this sort of study. She notes that “the hyper articulation of both intervocalic and final /t/ is a common resource for Americans imitating British English,” which provides Americans “a resource for signaling meanings associated with intelligence” (2005:27--28). Among other uses in various communities of practice, she identifies /t/ release being used by “geek girls” to index intelligence (citing Buchholtz 1996) and by African American school children to index Standard English (citing correspondence with Sweetland) (28--30). These appear to capitalize, albeit in idiosyncratic ways, on associations of [t] in consonant clusters and intervocalic contexts with prescriptivist standards.

3. The sets were divided by race in recognition that listeners judge speakers according to racial biases (Rickford & Rickford 2000:101--102; Baugh 2003). On one hand, in news speech, the folk linguistic disassociation described in Niedzielski and Preston (2000:131) between “broadcaster speech” and “African American speech” suggests that speakers who are identified as African American might tend to be ranked as less professional than speakers identified as white. On the other hand, it seemed possible that respondents might suspect the research was actually testing racism, and modify their rankings in response. Comments from respondents in the perception study attest to both possibilities.

4. The total counts for each variable in the news column reflect that not all speakers produced all possible instances of all variables. Speakers occasionally seemed to guess at the pronunciation of a word or simply skipped a word. Such cases were excluded from analysis.

5. I found this very surprising -- having been a communication major as an undergraduate, I took a class in voice and articulation, where I was corrected for the mergers in my native dialect of pairs like *pin-pen*, *cot-caught*, and *witch-which*. During interviews, all three Group B speakers mentioned having been corrected for their pronunciations of *pin* and *pen*. While such training seems to happen in performance training, it does not appear to occur in the J-School’s curriculum.

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