Beyond politicianspeak: Politically influenced variation of loanwords in the general public

Hall-Lew et al. (2010) analyze the variable pronunciation of *Iraq* by members of the US House of Representatives, finding that Democrats favor the more source-like \([ə]\) variant and Republicans toward the less source-like \([æ]\) variant. They interpret this variation as an act of political identity. In this paper, I extend the examination of loanword variation to members of the general public and to loanwords of further source languages to see if this pattern still holds in a setting and subject pool for which the indexicality of partisanship may not play as crucial a role in the conveyance of some public persona. The goal of this study is to determine 1) if the political influence on loanword variation holds amongst members of the general public, and 2) if it holds for placenames with other types of variable pronunciation and of less political charge/salience than *Iraq*. Data suggest that these are both the case.

A rapid and anonymous survey (Labov 1972) was conducted in New York City, in which approximately 100 respondents (roughly balanced for gender and age) were asked to rank places from around the world according to their posited mean summertime temperatures. Researchers auditorily recorded which variant of each item a respondent uttered. Three placenames with variable pronunciations were targeted for analysis (listed with the more source-like variant first): *Iraq* (\([ə] \sim [æ]\)), *Quebec* (\([k] \sim [kw]\)), and *Chile* (second vowel \([e] \sim [i]\)). Data were also collected in a followup questionnaire regarding respondents’ self-reported political affiliations (liberal, moderate, conservative), linguistic background, and other demographic factors. In an Rbrul step-up/step-down logistic regression analysis (\(n = 246\)) performed on the binary pronunciation outcomes, political affiliation is identified as a significant predictor, along with the factors of word and interviewer. This effect is in the expected direction mirroring Hall-Lew et al.’s observed pattern, with those identifying as “liberal” more inclined toward the source-like pronunciations than those identifying as “conservative”. Other demographic factors expected to play a possible role, such as age and education level, are not identified as significant predictors.

The findings of this research suggest that political influence on loanword variation extends even to those who may not be indexing some public persona centered around political identity. The observation that this also extends beyond *Iraq* to other placenames of less political charge suggests that this may be indicative of a broader behavior of loanword nativization/unnativization reflecting general language contact ideologies. Had the effect held significantly stronger for *Iraq*, this could be interpreted as the result of language- or place-specific attitude (Weinreich 1979), considering that Republicans tend to hold more negative bias toward Arab Americans (Arab American Institute 2014). However, this suggests that
perhaps broader language contact ideology may be the cause behind this variation, more so than particular attitudes/biases or individual- or group/community-level contact intensity (Poplack et al. 1988). This pattern falls in line with US political party stances on language contact: e.g., bilingual education, official recognition of non-English languages. This politically influenced loanword variation appears to not merely be an act of political identity but to reflect parties’ and individuals’ espoused stances regarding language contact more broadly.

References


Labov, W., 1972. Some principles of linguistic methodology. Language in Society 1, 97–120.
