

"Southern Accent" Features in Local News: Comparing Columbus, Georgia to Lexington, Kentucky

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Introduction

The present study is an exploration of regionalized, non-mainstream variants and their representation in the broadcast medium of local news in the U.S. South. Two different local news affiliates will be analyzed phonetically in order to quantify representation for what is commonly known as the “Southern accent”. This is a non-mainstream variety in the United States and is widely stigmatized, more so than any other regionalized U.S. variety (Lippi-Green 2012). Due to its status as a nationally stigmatized variety, the driving question of this study explores how prevalent Southern features are in these Southern markets. Due to several decades of Sunbelt Migration of non-Southern Americans moving to the South, these local audiences may comprise a large contingent of non-Southerners, which may bring national stigma of accent features to the South itself. Phonetic measurements allow for strong claims to be made for the presence or absence of Southern features among all the broadcasters in this sample of affiliates from Columbus, Georgia and Lexington, Kentucky, with the former being located in the “Deep South” and the latter being on the periphery of the region due to it being only a short drive to the Midwestern states of either Ohio or Indiana. Because neither market represents a major urban metropolitan center, does this mean that the non-mainstream, regionalized speech of Southern United States English (SUSE) will be prevalent among these broadcasters? Beyond geography, the speakers’ job title, gender, and age will also be explored.

The job title of the broadcasters offers an insightful perspective for how Southern variants pattern via results of which jobs are less likely to use SUSE forms. It is expected that the sports anchors among all job titles would have the highest rate of Southern forms due to the *covert prestige* of SUSE in that setting; non-standard forms historically tend to index masculinity (Trudgill 1972) and a male sports anchor is likely to be tied to those conceptions. The investigative reporters are expected to have the lowest rate of SUSE forms, due to that position being skewed younger. Age is expected to be a significant

predictor for all speakers, with those under age 40 to have a lower rate of Southern features. Studies have shown generational declines of SUSE features (Dodsworth & Benton 2017).

1 Literature Review

Rather than purely spontaneous speech, these data are read off a teleprompter. However, the fact that these data are performed does not make them a liability, but rather an asset here because this study examines the representation of a stigmatized variety when directed to a local audience. Queen (2013) advocates for the value in performed language, especially how the representation of features is a reflection of society’s ideology toward language. Additionally, Queen states that the more specified the intended audience, the more likely the variants used are authentic. As these two Southern markets are smaller in size than major markets in the U.S., they too have the opportunity to be more authentic in order to appeal to a more specialized audience. Regionalized speech does have positive aspects for ratings of friendliness, authenticity, and integrity (Edwards & Jacobsen 1987).

The South is a distinct region in the United States and is an area of the country with a strong regional identity, and because Columbus is in the “Deep South” (Rogers et al. 2018) while Lexington is on the region’s periphery, it is expected that the former will have a higher rate of Southern features. Representation of a more stigmatized accent, even in a local market, does carry social meaning. As this study examines both a central and a peripheral area of the region, Eckert argues how both groups are insightful for understanding how meaning can come from a localized variant: “the embedding of the study of variation within its socio-geographic context, most particularly, for the examination of the borders of communities in search of articulation of social meaning between the local and the extra-local” (Eckert 2018:68). Seeing how Southern forms pattern in a border area in comparison to an area centrally within the U.S. South may offer insight for how each region orients to the “extra-local” non-regionalized speech forms. In northern Kentucky specifically, long thought of as a dialect transition zone, Cramer (2013) found how participants were insecure or apprehensive about sounding too “Southern”.

The Southern forms that will be explored here are widely attested features associated with the South. In *The Atlas of North American English*, Labov, Ash & Boberg (2006) empirically found Southern forms in the South, albeit where the historically localized forms were less prevalent in the largest metropolises. Among the Southern vowel patterns theorized and found in that study were a monophthongal /aɪ/, the lowering of /e/

towards /ɛ/, and the conditioned merger of /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ before nasals, and a fronted /u/. The monophthongal /aɪ/ has long been thought of as the most salient feature of SUSE, but Allbritten (2011) found that it was the near merger of /e/ - /ɛ/ was the best predictor of participants stating that someone sounded “more Southern”.

The SUSE vowel patterns described are a consequence of the Southern Vowel Shift (SVS), a series of chain vowel shifts that largely cause the fronting of most vowels in the vowel space and consists of three stages of moderate, intermediate, and advanced (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006). In Stage I, the phoneme /aɪ/ is fronted with a weakened glide. The back vowels of /u/ and /o/ also move forward in the Southern vowel space. Stage II is the near merger of the mid front vowels of /e/ and /ɛ/, and Stage III is the less common near merger of the high front vowels of /i/ and /ɪ/. Stages I and II will be explored here to see if any stages of the Southern shift are present among the local broadcasters in this sample.

2 Methodology

All recordings from these two affiliates came in 2020, with Columbus broadcasts recorded from May-July and Lexington from September-November. Local affiliates stream their live broadcasts for free on their website and screen capture software¹ was used to record the live broadcasts. Each recording had to be edited so that each individual speaker had their own individual sound file for each broadcast. For anchors, meteorologists, and sports anchors, they each averaged approximately 30 minutes of speech per broadcaster analyzed phonetically. Three investigative reporters from each affiliate were also edited to create their own sound file per broadcaster, and all 20 speakers were analyzed with precise phonetic readings. However, each investigative reporter only typically spoke for between one and two minutes per broadcast during their segment and these speakers had the smallest sample size, with the reporters averaging about 15 minutes of speech data. For every job title, whichever persons were given the most airtime were the ones who were chosen to be featured in this study. This was not only for convenience, but because if the affiliate featured those speakers more, then those are who the audience would hear more often and thus make for better participants in the current study.

¹ <https://filmora.wondershare.com/>

In order for the 20 speakers to be analyzed phonetically, the edited sound files needed to be transcribed. Google Docs provides free transcription for voice to text that was used for all speakers, with the researcher double checking each transcription for fidelity. The transcriptions and corresponding sound files were uploaded to DARLA (Reddy & Stanford 2015) in order to ascertain the vowel formants for all stressed vowels. 47, 984 stressed vowel formants were provided by DARLA and allowed for precise measurements for not only the mean F1 and F2 frequencies, but duration and the trajectories at the 20%, 35%, 50%, 65%, and 80% mark of all vowels. All speakers had to be normalized in order to make apt comparisons for several different speakers, each with their own vocal tract. All speech was normalized using the NORM suite (Kendall & Thomas 2010) and done via the Labov ANAE (speaker extrinsic) method in order to best incorporate all 20 speakers.

3 Findings

3.1 Vowel Plots

The monophthong vowel plots in the charts below show a contrast between two news anchors. Figure 1 is a local news anchor (a pseudonym) in Columbus, GA who exhibits several features of the SVS. Anderson Cooper in Figure 2 represents a national news correspondent who lacks a perceivable regionalized accent and thus shows very different patterns when comparing these two broadcasters’ vowel profiles². The GA anchor has a near merger of /e/ and /ɛ/, a fronted /æ/, /u/, and /o/, as well as the resistance to the merger of /a/ and /ɔ/.

² The two speakers have a different range of pitch and thus have slightly different x and y axes for F1 and F2, but each speaker’s vowel phoneme proximities are indicative of dialect patterns

Figure 1 – A local news Anchor (GA)
Henry H, Anchor, White, under 40

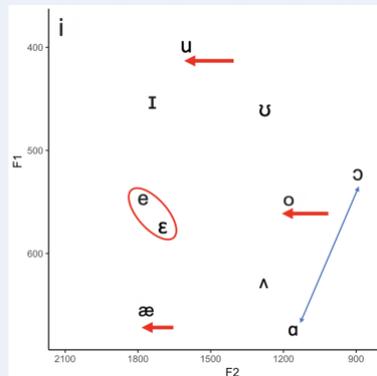
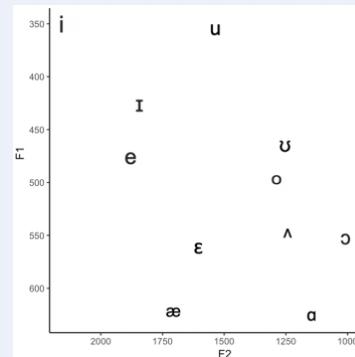


Figure 2 – A national news anchor
Anderson Cooper, CNN news correspondent



Figures 3 and 4 both represent a normalized, composite plot of 10 speakers each – four anchors, two meteorologists, one sports anchor, and three investigative reporters. These two composite plots are remarkably similar. Both cities’ composite plots generally show patterns of the SVS, including a close proximity for /e/ and /ε/, a fronted /æ/, /u/ and /o/. Going against the hypothesis, it was the KY broadcasters who have a closer /e/ and /ε/, outpacing their counterparts in the “Deep South” for this SUSE feature.

Figure 3 –Columbus, GA broadcasters

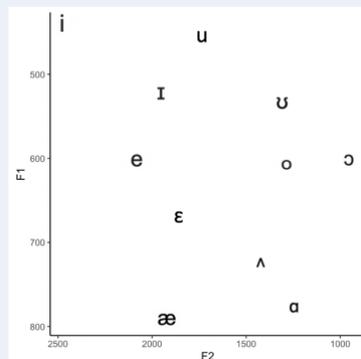
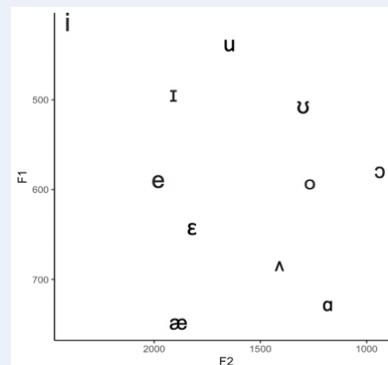
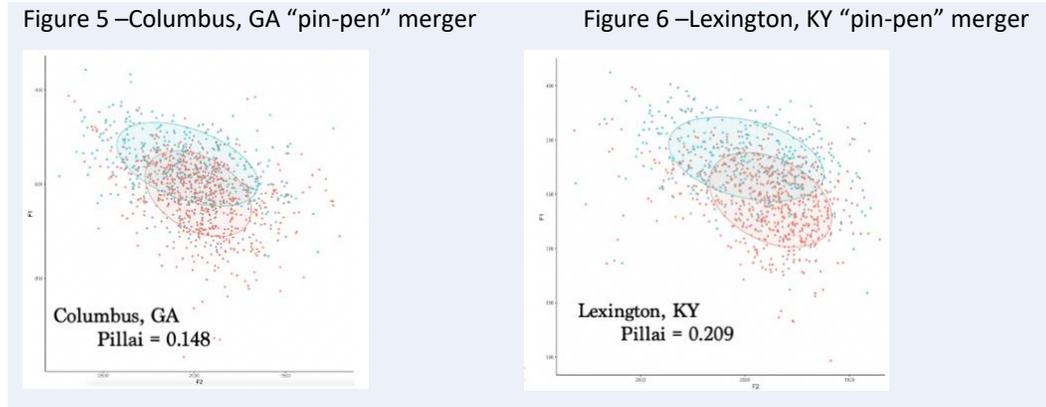


Figure 4 – Lexington, KY Broadcasters



Rather than examining an entire vowel space, the Figures below represent one phonetic feature that is indexed as Southern, the “pin-pen” merger (Labov et al. 2006). For the front vowels of /ɪ/ and /ɛ/, these phonemes preceding nasal sounds are realized more as [ɪ]. The green plots represent the /ɪ/ phoneme before nasals and the red are for the /ɛ/ phoneme. Notice how the Columbus speakers do have a more merged overlap via the ellipses graphed over the plots. While both groups show general overlap, it is the broadcasters in the “Deep South” who lead in this Southern feature, as quantified using the

Pillai score included in each Figure³. A lower Pillai score represents a higher degree of overlap. While there was no clear leader in general patterns of the SVS that was exhibited in Figures 3 and 4, the GA speakers do have a lower Pillai score at 0.148 to 0.209.



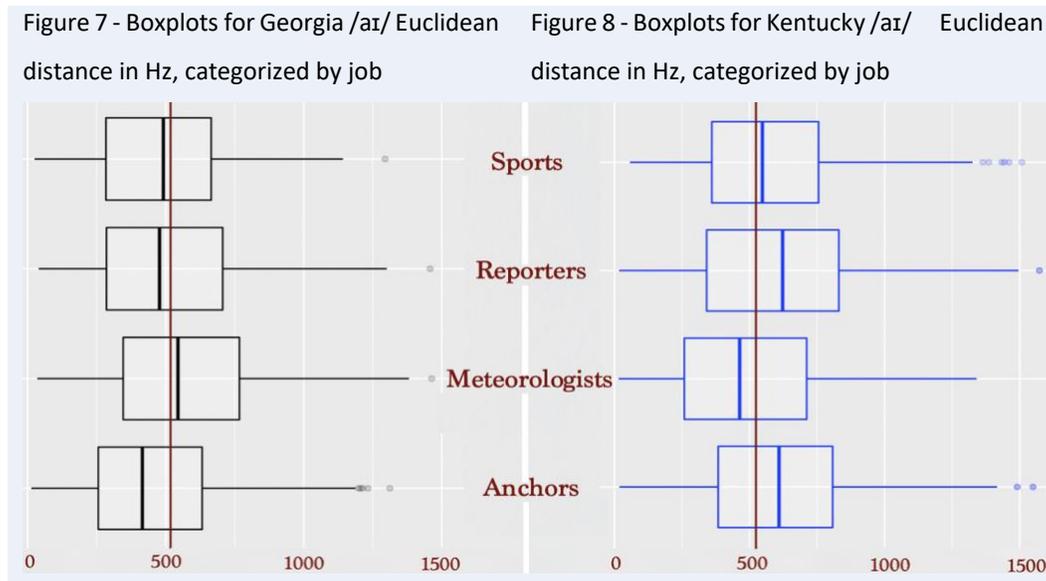
3.2 /aɪ/ Glide Weakening

Glide weakening of the prominent phoneme /aɪ/ is both a feature that covers the entire dialect region of the South and is also a socially indexed feature that regionally marks a speaker as “Southern” (Labov et al. 2006). Analyzing features of /aɪ/ glide weakening is especially warranted for sociolinguistic analysis due to both its frequency and its higher degree of social salience and will receive the most in depth analysis for this study. There were a sizeable 3,776 instances of /aɪ/ in this 20 speaker corpus. The “pin-pen” dataset above numbered 2,088. As done previously for this variant (Fox & Jacewicz 2009), the present analysis of glide weakening was done through the Euclidean distance (EuD) of the vowel space between the beginning and the end points of the duration of all /aɪ/ vowel realizations. Every /aɪ/ vowel was measured at its 20% and 80% duration mark, and a smaller distance measured in Hz indicates a more “Southern” pronunciation because a smaller Hz value measured in in EuD would indicate a more monophthongal pronunciation.

In comparison to their KY counterparts, it is clear that the GA broadcasters lead in this SUSE feature. The normalized data for all speakers show that the Columbus broadcasters have a EuD of 505.1 Hz and the Lexington broadcasters’ average is larger, at 580.3 Hz, and thus more of a diphthong. With 3,776 total observances of the /aɪ/ phoneme, the difference is highly significant, at the $p < 0.0001$ level ($t = -7.64$) via a two-tailed t-test. In the Figures below, a more monophthongal pronunciation means the boxplot quartiles

³ The Pillai score came via the *manova* (Multivariate Analysis of Variance) function in R

are towards the left side of the chart, and the GA speakers clearly are. The vertical red line on the Hz measurement represents the average of the GA speakers. For the KY speakers, only the meteorologists have a more monophthongal median pronunciation than the average GA broadcaster. For the GA broadcasters, it is the anchors who have the most monophthongal, (i.e., most “Southern”) pronunciation. The job titles and the rate of a glide weakened /aɪ/ do not align with each other when comparing the two subregions represented by each affiliate. GA anchors incorporate /aɪ/ glide weakening most often, but For KY Anchors, they use this feature *least* among their KY peers. Notably, it was never the sports anchor who averaged the most monophthongal /aɪ/, going against the hypothesis. Still, the fact that the prominent roles of either anchors (in GA) or meteorologists (in KY) led for their affiliate shows that Southern features are prominent on these local broadcasts.



The GA speakers in Figure 7 show a relative consistency for how /aɪ/ is realized among the four job titles, with one obvious outlier of the Anchors easily leading in glide weakening. Beyond observing job title as a predictor of glide weakening, Figure 9 below explores the /aɪ/ variable and age. There is a clear divide where the older GA speakers have a weakened glide for /aɪ/ more often. The average /aɪ/ EuD for broadcasters over 40 is 454.6 and those under 40 is 531.3 Hz, with the difference being highly significant via t-test at $p < 0.0001$ ($t = -6.13$). There is more of a generational divide among this 10 GA broadcaster sample. The four GA broadcasters who are over 40 have a more monophthongal /aɪ/ than the six under 40, revealing what appears to be a change in progress for this salient Southern feature. Figure 10, however, shows that the KY broadcasters have more similarities in their rate of /aɪ/ glide weakening when considering age. The mean /aɪ/

EuD for those over 40 is 570.4 and those under 40 is 608.4; statistical significance for mean /aɪ/ is narrowly present for the KY broadcasters due to the t-test showing a more marginal difference of only meeting the $p < 0.05$ threshold, with the KY p-value at 0.016 ($t = -2.42$). The boxplots in Figures 9 and 10 show the median pronunciation in bold. The KY speakers have a relatively closer median pronunciation that is less sensitive to outliers, where the median over 40 EuD is 562.3 Hz and the under 40 median is 585.1 Hz, with the KY broadcasters over 40 only having a 4% larger Hz measurement. The /aɪ/ EuD median for GA broadcasters over 40 is 415.1 Hz and those under 40 is 487.8 Hz, which equates to the under 40 pronunciation having a 18% larger median Hz measurement. This greater age divide both in mean and median pronunciation indicates that /aɪ/ glide weakening may be a receding feature generationally, and thus may be a change in progress, showing that this salient Southern feature may be receding in this ‘Deep South’ market, whereas the KY market indicates this feature has already receded across the older and younger age groups.

Figure 9 Euclidean distance 20% - 80% for /aɪ/ in Columbus, GA by age

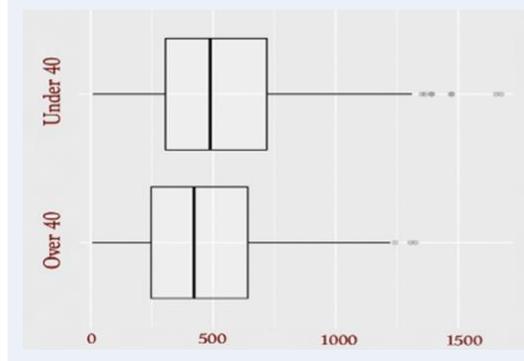
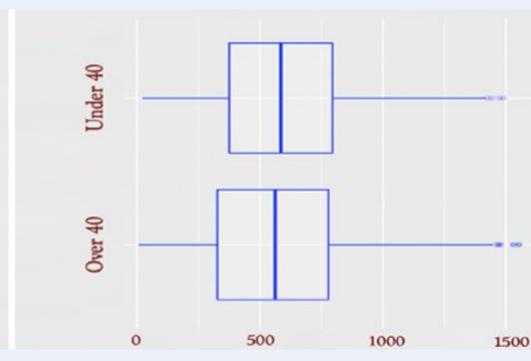


Figure 10 Euclidean distance 20% - 80% for /aɪ/ in Lexington, KY by age

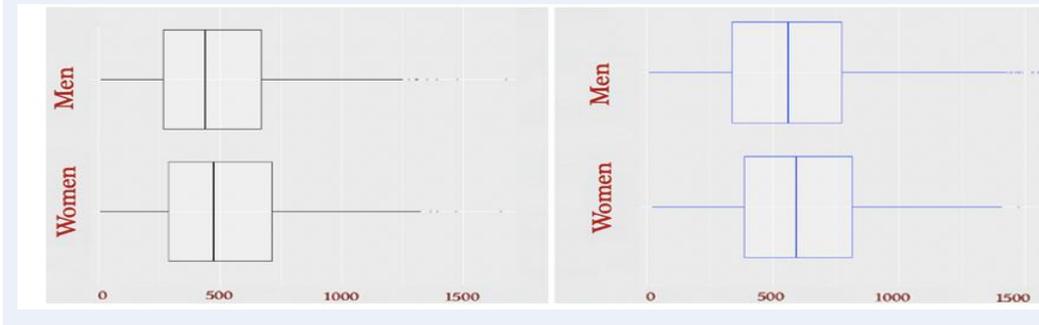


The exploration of /aɪ/ glide weakening and gender shows strong similarities between the two regions and corroborate their findings for the effect of gender and this salient Southern feature. As shown in Figures 11 and 12, both markets show that men incorporated a glide weakened /aɪ/ more often than women. Via t-tests, this difference is approximately equal for both markets, as both show a marginal level of statistical significance of $p > 0.05$, with the p-value for GA broadcasters as $p = 0.011$ ($t = 2.57$) and the p-value for the KY broadcasters as $p = 0.014$ ($t = 2.45$). The median pronunciation differences are also similar for both markets. The median EuD of /aɪ/ by GA women was 459.5 Hz and 437.9 Hz for the GA men, with the women’s median being only 5% greater distance in Hz. For the KY men, this value was 561.4 Hz and the KY women’s /aɪ/ EuD was 592.8 Hz, only 6% greater. These two markets patterning similarly for this variable

likely indicates that /aɪ/ glide weakening is a more stigmatized feature that women are more likely to avoid, but only slightly less so. Cross-linguistically and cross-culturally, women tend to avoid overtly stigmatized forms more than men do (Labov 2001), and that pattern is apparent here for the socially salient variable of /aɪ/ glide weakening.

Figure 11 Euclidean distance 20% - 80% for /aɪ/ in Columbus, GA by gender

Figure 12 Euclidean distance 20% - 80% for /aɪ/ in Lexington, KY by gender



Finally, there can only be an incomplete discussion for /aɪ/ glide weakening and race because the KY sample of ten broadcasters includes zero African Americans. The GA sample consists of three African Americans out of the ten GA speaker sample. In this limited look at race and /aɪ/ glide weakening, African Americans lead in the more “Southern” pronunciation of a smaller /aɪ/ EuD with 473.1 Hz and GA White broadcasters with 502.5 Hz. In this GA subset sample of 2,036 /aɪ/ tokens, this difference is not warranted as statistically significant using a t-test, where $p = 0.052$ ($t = -1.94$).

Discussion

The phonetic analyses carried out here were done to test assumptions for the representation of Southern forms in these two markets, as well as whether a city in the “Deep South” led in these forms. The exploration of the Southern features analyzed here did show a general adherence to the SVS, meaning that just because a “Southern accent” would be stigmatized nationally does not mean a dearth of Southern features would be found when reaching Southern audiences outside major metropolises. In fact, there were a preponderance of Southern forms, such as a closer /e/ and /ɛ/, and a fronted /æ/ and /u/. Even for the salient /aɪ/ glide weakening, there is representation for a purely monophthungal /aɪ/ at the left end of the boxplot whisker for all eight occupation groups of Figures 7 and 8. Southern pronunciations by broadcasters are alive and well from these two affiliates.

And, generally, these Southern features are more prevalent in a central area of the region rather than an area on the periphery of the U.S. South.

Surprisingly, it was a city on the Southern periphery that slightly led in the marked Southern feature of a closer /e/-/ɛ/ proximity. Still, a comparison of the salient “pin-pen” merger showed a quantifiable higher usage where the GA speakers would use this feature more often. The even more socially salient feature of /aɪ/ glide weakening painted an even clearer picture that the GA speakers clearly led the KY speakers overall for realization of a more monophthongal /aɪ/. The older and younger KY broadcasters grouped closer together in /aɪ/ pronunciation, whereas there was a sharper age divide for the GA broadcasters. That GA age divide is likely indicative of a generational change. Likewise, /aɪ/ glide weakening and gender among all broadcasters showed that women had less “Southern” pronunciations for this variable. Although SVS features were found among these broadcasts, more work needs to be done across more markets to test these patterns of social salience tied to age and gender in order to gauge how stigmatized SUSE forms may be here in the 2020s.

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