

Gender and speech in Richmond, Virginia

A little while ago, during a casual conversation regarding his Richmond, Virginia accent, my boyfriend mentioned that his mother's accent was stronger than his. I thought he meant that he conformed his speech to the national standard more than his parents did. But he replied that most Virginia women have stronger accents than the men. In fact, their accents are so different that when they travel abroad, people frequently guess that he might be Scottish and his mother Australian. This paper will investigate specifically the vowels of Virginia, and whether they are used differently enough in men and women to create such a marked difference. More generally, I will also look at differences between male and female speech in standard English.

According to Frazer (1996), the main sound that differentiates between men and women [in Virginia](#) is the diphthong /aw/, found in words like 'out,' 'mouse,' 'loud,' and 'now.' This vowel can be pronounced as [æu], [au], and [əu], among other ways. The distinction between male and female speech lies in the [æu] [allophone](#). Frazer provides a more specific description of the vowel [æu], which for many decades has been considered nonstandard (Frazer 145): "a variant with a fronted first element which may be as high as [e] and [au]...with a low central (sometimes slightly fronted and sometimes not) nucleus" (Frazer 147). On the other hand, the standard interpretation of the Virginian pronunciation of /aw/ has a schwa nucleus (Frazer 145). In taped readings from "Arthur the rat," men and women pronounced this [allophone](#) with about equal frequency, with the

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men using this form 42% of the time and the women using it 44% of the time. Men use a diphthong with a slightly lower nucleus twice as often as women, however. (16% before a voiced consonant and 8% before an unvoiced one, vs. 9% before a voiced and 0% before an unvoiced for women) They also pronounce the more common [au] variant 26% of the time in unvoiced environments, and 56% of the time in voiced environments, compared with 12% in unvoiced environments and 41% in voiced environments for women. Women show a marked preference over men for the [æu] pronunciation, especially with a voiced consonant (59%), but even in an unvoiced situation (25%). Men use this variant 35% and 3% of the time, respectively. Frazer's work shows a clear difference in the distribution of the allomorphs of /aw/ between men and women.

Using the speech of my boyfriend (whose name is Tristan) and his mother, I investigated this data. Both of them are native to the city of Richmond, and describe their accent as largely quintessential of the region. Although I was able to confirm a difference in their pronunciation of /aw/, I do not know if this was the only distinguishing feature in their speech. His mother's pronunciation of the word 'how,' for example, was indeed flatter than his own (pronounced [hæu]). The [æ] in the [æu] diphthong was not quite the same as the [æ] in 'cat.' It wasn't quite as fronted, and sometimes even sounded a bit nasalized. Argus Tresidder also observed a nasalized pronunciation of the [æu] variant, in the word 'house' (Tresidder 115). (It should be noted that Tresidder analyzed the speech of 101 Virginian girls.) The [æ] was more distinct in her pronunciation of 'mountain,' [mæun?tn], with a nasalized [æ]. In this diphthong the [æ] was even more fronted than the [æ] of 'how.' Tristan's pronunciation of this sound was closer to the [au] variation, but more fronted than mine, for example. Using symbols from the book, I

would say the initial part of the diphthong [au] was somewhere between an [a] and an [æ]. I did not, like Frazer, hear a difference in his pronunciation of the diphthong in ‘house’ (an unvoiced environment) vs. ‘houses’ (a voiced environment). Of course, none of this data is free-standing. The analysis was unsystematic, and differences between Tristan’s speech and his mother’s could be generational, or even attributable to his living in Chicago for so long. Still, they certainly do not contradict the hypothesis that the distribution of allophones of /aw/ is gender-based.

Also, the vowel distribution described by Frazer accounts for only a small part of the difference between Tristan’s speech and that of his mother. For example, she pronounces words like ‘south’ and ‘about’ with a [ʌu] or [əu]; almost like the stereotypical Canadian. Shewmake (1943) mentions this pronunciation as “characteristic of most of the speakers tested” (34), but I’ve never once heard Tristan use this variant.

What makes these words different from the ones you described above (house, houses, mountain, etc.)? I’ve heard this “Canadian-like” pronunciation described for some speakers near Chesapeake Bay.

Second, she does not pronounce nearly as many [r]’s between vocalized particles [“particles”? what do you mean?] as he does. The word ‘prepared’ becomes [prəpɛjəd], and ‘Southern’ becomes [sʌðən]. I do not know if this variation is gender-based. It seems more likely that this disparity is the result of an age discrepancy, especially given that Shewmake’s study took place just before the time Tristan’s mother was born. However, although I was unable to interview her husband (also native to Richmond), I generally remember his speech to be more like Tristan’s than like hers. Since there is a perceptible difference in the sound of Virginian women’s speech as opposed to their male

counterparts, it is likely that some features in addition to the /aw/ phoneme distinguish them. The phoneme /aw/ does not even arise in conversation with great frequency, as I discovered while holding conversations with the purpose of research.

In general English, not just Virginian English or Richmond English, there are fairly well-known differences between male and female intonation. These extend beyond the use of different intonational devices than men for pragmatic reasons. McConnell-Ginet (1978) notes that female speech involves a greater range of pitches than male speech. For example, when answering a phone, both men and women might use a rising pitch in the second syllable of 'hello.' It is characteristic for women to raise this pitch more than men. Of course, if a man opts to use a falling tone on that syllable, he is using a different intonational contour which is not comparable with the woman's rising 'hello' (McConnell-Ginet 79). This study contends that "speech melodies are primary cues of speaker sex" (McConnell-Ginet 81), which might account for more of the difference in sound between the speech of men and women in Richmond. Although it is a generic distinction, it is also possible that the large number of vowels and diphthongs in Virginia speech makes intonational differences more palpable. [\[Hmm. I don't see how.\]](#)

Also, even the distinction between vowel sounds may be a more general phenomenon. McConnell-Ginet cites a study by Jaqueline Sachs (which I was unable to find) which found that "vowel formant structure differed significantly for voices judged most reliably as 'girl-like' or 'boy-like'" (74). The study used children's voices, and even controlled for the size of individual children to make sure that the difference was not vocal. No region was specified, which implies that the phenomenon is not regional, but characteristic of general American speech [\[or else that the study was done sloppily, or](#)

not reported well!. Nevertheless, vowel distinctions again may be more clearly distinguishable in Virginia speech simply because there are more vowel sounds of greater complexity in this dialect than in standard English.

In fact, it is not surprising that female speech should often sound different than male speech, considering that men and women play very different roles in conversation. According to Fishman (1978), women put forth more effort in conversation with men to retain the male's attention than men do to retain the female's attention. Women ask overwhelmingly more questions than men (94). Of the many topics introduced in the twelve hours of taped conversations in Fishman's study, the topics introduced by men were adopted nearly twice as frequently as those introduced by women. In the course of conversing, women were found to insert more understanding one-syllable "minimal-responses" to demonstrate attention than men. However, men did use the minimal-response to end a topic or demonstrate lack of interest. Basically, women modify their conversational strategy to maintain the attention of men. Perhaps this evidence could even reflect a more general style of attentiveness that makes it easier to listen to children. One of the effects of the fronted æ in the [æu] sound favored by women is that it tends to make syllables sound longer. It is possible that this device commands more attention than the slightly shorter diphthong [au].

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Whether or not the explanation for a difference in the /aw/ phoneme between men and women is pragmatic, historical, or both, such a difference indeed exists. It seems to me that, in fact, more differences exist between male and female speech than just the /aw/ phoneme. Although I have a sense of the variation between my boyfriend's speech and his mother's (and to some degree his father's), it would take further study of the

Richmond dialect to determine the exact nature of the difference between female and male speech.

Very interesting subject, and good observations

Chris' comments:

Was it Labov who said that females are often the innovators of linguistic change? I think there is a lot to be said about gender variation in sociolinguistic terms although there must be a phonetic basis as you point out. It is the utilization of such anatomical/articulatory differences (although I had thought of the main difference as one of F0, not formants as Sachs reports) that is a social process. In any case, it would be helpful to organize your data for the reader to see and then coment on it. Well done.