

Multiple Features, Multiple Identities: A Sociophonetic Profile of Condoleezza Rice

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Variationists sometimes treat dialects as stable over the lifecourse, under the assumption that phonological repertoires are largely geographically determined and fixed from the end of adolescence onwards. We argue that an individual's sociophonetic profile, characterized by multiple features, indexes a multifaceted identity reflecting potentially more than one geographic affiliation as well as ideological aspects of identity.

This paper examines the linguistic behavior of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during a speaking engagement in Northern California. The recordings consist of a speech and Q&A period totaling one hour. We employ a new methodology well-suited to investigating large numbers of phonetic features. Using Transcriber, Praat, and speech recognition technology, we have developed a fully-annotated (utterances, words, and sounds) and growing corpus from which phonetic features can be extracted automatically.

Although Rice grew up in Alabama, most stereotypical Southern features (monophthongal (ay); prenasal (ih)/(eh) merger) are absent from her speech. Rice does, however, delete unstressed (er), producing weaker variants in the Q&A than in the speech, as indicated by higher minimum F3s (by 79 Hz, $p=0.0036$) and shorter durations (by 16 ms, $p=0.0062$). This feature appears in both Southern varieties and AAVE (Pollock and Berni 1997). While Rice's speech lacks nearly all features of AAVE, she uses glottalized post-vocalic (-d) (Fasold 1981) 37% of the time in favored environments. Vowels preceding (-d) are shorter in the Q&A (by 10 ms, $p=0.048$), indicating compensatory shortening due to greater voicelessness in the glottalized variant.

Rice has spent the majority of her adult life in California as professor and provost at Stanford University. Although her speech lacks most stereotypical features of Californian speech (fronting of (uw), (ow); (ah)/(oh) merger), it exhibits (ae) backing before obstruents (Eckert and Staum 2003).

While (ae) backing constitutes a Californian feature, it may also be considered hyperstandard. In pre-lateral contexts, Rice backs (ae) further, sometimes as far as (ah). Backed pronunciations like P[a]lestine index a refined style, due to their ideological associations with British English (Hughes and Trudgill 1979). Rice's speech exhibits two additional hyperstandard features: First, sentence-final (ptk) are released 72% of the time, much more frequently than is typical in American English (Byrd 1992) and almost as frequent as the 100% typifying RP British English (Naughton 1979), and bursts are 31 ms longer in the more careful speech ($p=0.0000$). Second, the stressed vowel pronunciation in *because* is orthographically based, with a significantly longer (by 35 ms, $p=0.009$) and higher (by 115 Hz in F1, $p=0.000$) vowel than the average (uh).

In conclusion, Rice's use of some vernacular variables while employing several hyperstandard features enables her to maintain ties to multiple identities while simultaneously cultivating a hyperstandard public persona. The notion that linguistic variables index aspects of identity is not novel, but to progress from considering aspects of identities to the complexity of identities, variationists must examine multiple linguistic features. The methodology introduced in this paper provides one means of facilitating such a practice. Finally, the interpretation of Rice's results requires that synchronic patterns be situated in a diachronic frame.