News Speak: Phonetic Variation in Broadcast Journalism Education and Expectation

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Since Allan Bell’s work with radio stations provided a foundation for audience-design approaches (1982, 1984), a body of studies has supported his conclusions that broadcasters shift among phonetic variables depending on presumed audiences. This adaptation to audiences may contribute to broadcasters sounding professional—studies suggest audiences are adept in differentiating between trained and untrained broadcasters, though they are unable to identify the speech choices that lead to perceptions of professionalism (Neil et al, 2003; Borrege et al, 2007).

This study seeks to provide additional insights on the phonetic shifts broadcasters make, the expectations audiences have for broadcast speech, and the role of formal education in training future broadcasters to speak accordingly. Eight broadcast journalism students recorded news stories as if they were “on the air.” For comparison, eight non-journalism students recorded the same script with the same instructions. Variables studied include intervocalic flapping, allegro features, consonant cluster reduction, and treatment of word-final (ing). A follow-up study attempts to measure audience reactions to the readings. Thirty students listened to recordings of the news stories and rated speakers for professionalism.

Results from the primary study show significant differences between experienced and inexperienced broadcasters, with the latter consistently producing more formal phonetic variants. In the secondary study, audiences are overwhelmingly able to identify experienced and inexperienced broadcasters, supporting previous findings. Evidence suggests that audiences are consistent in recognizing qualities of professional broadcast speech, but unable to produce them without training. The tendency among inexperienced broadcasters to formalize phonetic variants suggests that audiences perceive broadcast speech as more formal than it actually is. Findings also complicate notions of prestigious speech within American English, where professional speakers must negotiate between avoiding stigmatized variants on one hand and sounding stilted on the other.

References