

Do You Speak Presidential?
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The language used by President Barack Obama during his speech on race of March 18, 2008 contained a number of interesting features, particularly phonological ones, some of which I have observed in other instances of his speech from publicized public events. The grammar and lexicon used by Mr. Obama in the speech consistently conformed to the dictates of Standard English, with only very minor, occasional lapses (such as the use of the prescriptively dispreferred periphrastic comparatives *more free* and *more just* in place of the “correct” forms *freer*¹ and *juster*², although use of the latter appears to be waning even among prescriptivists; this avoidance of the synthetic comparative even for monosyllabic adjectives is a grammatical change in progress and based on my own observation appears to be especially robust in the speech of younger speakers). Despite his frequent use of contractions (e.g., *we’ve*, *I’m*, *I’ve*, *it’s*), the president used a high (literary) register during the speech, employing collocations such as *in unequivocal terms* and *set forth* and complex syntactic structures including subject-verb inversion in the clause *in no other country on Earth is my story even possible* that are typically not present in lower-register, everyday speech.

One of the most noticeable non-standard phonological features of Mr. Obama’s speech is the complete absence of the tense high front vowel [i] in word-final position in favor of the lax high front vowel [ɪ] (or, as the process is often referred to in the literature, the lack of “happy tensing,” a sound change that has taken place in Standard American English and several other English varieties, such as South African, New Zealand and Australian English, but is typically

¹ See <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/free>

² See <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/juster>

absent in Southern American English and African American English³). Mr. Obama consistently pronounces words such as *ultimately*, *decency*, *generosity*, and *unity* with the lax high front vowel [ɪ], which based on my analysis of Mr. Obama's speech is the only clear-cut feature of African American English (AAE) that appears consistently throughout his speech. I have noticed the presence of this particular phonological feature in Mr. Obama's speech on many other occasions and find it intriguing, especially in light of the facts that, as far as I am aware, Mr. Obama is not a native speaker of AAE and this feature is not typically present in the speech of other native English speakers from Hawaii. One might conjecture that Mr. Obama deliberately includes this feature in his speech as a means of demonstrating solidarity with the African American community in a way that is not significantly stereotyped (or perhaps even noticed at all) by speakers of most other varieties of American English. In addition to his lack of "happy tensing," Mr. Obama sometimes monophthongizes [aj] to [a:], as in [sr-'va:vd] for [sr-'vajvd] in the word *survived* and ['li-gə-la:zd] for ['li-gə-lajzd] in the word *legalized*, although he failed to do the same in the word *arrived*, suggesting that this feature characteristic of AAE and Southern American English⁴ is not consistently present in his speech.

Finally, Mr. Obama's speech includes at least two phonological features characteristic of the speech of other speakers from Chicago: devoicing (or delayed voicing) of /z/, especially in word-final position, and raising and tensing of /æ/, the first step of the Northern cities vowel shift.⁵ The first trait can be heard in his pronunciation of words such as *ideals*, *chose*, *years*, *flies*, etc., in which the final sibilant is either partially devoiced or completely devoiced and realized as

³ Wells, John C. (1982). *Accents of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ See Anderson, B. L. (2002), Dialect leveling and /ai/ monophthongization among African American Detroiters. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6: 86–98. doi: 10.1111/1467-9481.00178. Available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9481.00178/abstract> (retrieved on January 27, 2012).

⁵ <http://www.pbs.org/speak/ahead/change/changin/summary/>

[s]. This process is sometimes evident in non-final intervocalic position, as in the word *citizenship*, although in this environment the sibilant appears to be only partially devoiced. Raising and tensing of /æ/, which is a widely-recognized feature of American English varieties affected by the North cities vowel shift, can be heard in Mr. Obama's articulation of the words *scattered* and some instances of *past*, although Mr. Obama's raising and tensing of /æ/ is moderate compared to that of many other speakers from Chicago and other regions affected by the vowel shift.