



2020

## Breksit or Bregzit: When Political Ideology Drives Language Ideology

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### Recommended Citation

Hall-Lew, Lauren and Trousdale, Graeme (2020) "Breksit or Bregzit: When Political Ideology Drives Language Ideology," *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/pwpl/vol26/iss2/11>

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## Breksit or Bregzit: When Political Ideology Drives Language Ideology

### Abstract

The portmanteau Brexit was coined in the lead up to the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership in the European Union. The issue, central to contemporary British politics, is politically interesting in that support for or against Brexit does not so much correspond to "a divide between left and right" as much as "a deepening divide between cosmopolitans and patriots" (Wheatley 2019), better known as 'Remainers' and 'Leavers'. We present an analysis of variation in the pronunciation of Brexit, where one variant has a word-medial voiceless stop-fricative cluster, and the other a voiced cluster, and how that contrast has been ideologized as indexical of this political divide (cf. Hall 2017). We consider Twitter metacommentary, production data from televised sources, and perception data from a Matched Guise Test. In contrast to variables that are ideologized as political because they are loanwords (Hall-Lew et al. 2010, 2012), or because of an existing indexical order within a regional dialect (Hall-Lew et al. 2017), we find that variation in Brexit is ideologized by virtue of the political issue, itself. In other words, we find no evidence from production that variation in Brexit patterns with political ideology, identity, or stance (Zhang 2019), and we find no evidence from perception that variation in Brexit is reliably associated with any political meanings (Shen 2019). Rather, the rich indexical field attributed to the marked variant in metalinguistic Twitter discourse appears to arise from the indexical potential of the phonetic markedness, itself, in combination with a highly divisive social issue.

# Breksit or Bregzit: When Political Ideology Drives Language Ideology

Lauren Hall-Lew and Graeme Trousdale

## 1 Introduction

The portmanteau *Brexit* (“British” and “exit”) was coined in the lead up to the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom (UK)’s membership in the European Union (EU). It refers to the process of withdrawal that is still in progress at the time of writing this paper. The process has been politically interesting in that support for or against Brexit corresponds less to “a divide between left and right” than to “a deepening divide between cosmopolitans and patriots” (Wheatley 2019).

## 2 Background

Since the mid-twentieth century, the UK’s ambivalent engagement with increasing social, political and economic union across the rest of Europe has cut across traditional political lines. It was a Conservative government that made the first decision to seek UK membership of the EEC in 1961, while the leader of the more left-leaning Labour Party was concerned about the dangers of a federal Europe (Buckledee 2018:130), a position associated with both right- and left-wing Leavers in the 2016 Brexit campaign. A Labour administration again sought EEC membership in the late 1960s; a Conservative government secured it in 1972. Yet within three years, there was a referendum on whether the UK should remain in the EEC; in the 1975 referendum, the Remainers won, in a campaign that was supported by newspapers whose position in the 2016 referendum was strongly in favor of leaving the EU. This complex political network of alignment across the traditional right vs. left divide is significant for understanding the linguistic variation we investigated.

In this paper we present an analysis of variation in the pronunciation of the word *Brexit*, between [brɛksɪt], with a voiceless medial stop-fricative cluster, and [brɛgzɪt] with a voiced cluster, and how that contrast has been ideologized as indexical of the political divide between leaving and remaining in the EU (cf. Hall 2017). The two corresponding variants of the word *exit* ([ɛksɪt] and [ɛgzɪt]) are equally likely to occur in UK English (Wells 1990), and this variation is not known to “differentiate UK accents, social classes or the sexes” (Hall 2017). The current research builds on previous work exploring the possibility of political stance or political identity as a predictor of phonetic variation, while also investigating any other social correlates of variation for this particular variable. While several studies have shown that speakers’ political leanings can be a reliable predictor above and beyond other social factors, in each case the specific explanation for that correlation draws on a pre-existing indexical order. Here, we will argue that the primary difference between these examples and variation in *Brexit* is that the latter is indexically impoverished, perhaps by virtue of the recency of its coining, such that any political indexicality arises directly from the political ideologies themselves.

### 2.1 Phonetic Variation & Political Indexicality

Hall-Lew, Coppock, and Starr (2010) found that, among members of the US House of Representatives in January 2007, a speaker’s political party<sup>1</sup> was the strongest social predictor of their realization of the ‘a’ vowel in *Iraq*, even when controlling for gender, race, and dialect region. Their results showed that, while most Representatives favored the more nativized /æ/, some Democratic Party members only ever used the /ɑ/ variant. The authors posited that this was due to the ideologies already established by “foreign-a” variable of which *Iraq* is but one example, namely that /ɑ/ is seen as being more “correct” (Boberg 1999) with respect to the source language’s pronunciation. The Republican and Democratic parties were broadly aligned to different “ideological representations” and “social value systems” that were indexed by variation in foreign-(a), more generally (Hall-Lew et al. 2010:94; see also Jagers 2018). A follow-up study on the same dataset (Hall-Lew, Starr, and Coppock 2012) found that speakers who varied between /æ/ and /ɑ/ included those whose political

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<sup>1</sup>A speaker’s political party and a speaker’s level of economic liberalism were indistinguishable statistically.

identities did not easily fit in one or the other party, and who appeared to draw on the indexical possibilities of sociophonetic variation as a resource for negotiating or constructing their liminal positionality.

Kirkham and Moore (2016) analyzed /t/ realization in the speech of former Labour Party leader Ed Miliband, and found that his production of /t/ glottal replacement occurred specifically in lexis and discourse frames that indexed a ‘New Labour’ identity. This was evidenced by his variable production towards two different kinds of audiences, both Labour leaning, but one less ‘New’ (trade unionists) than the other (the Labour Party Conference). In other words, the political indexicality of Miliband’s /t/ production was made possible by the pre-existing indexical order of /t/ variation in British English and the pre-existing indexical order of New Labour discourse in British politics.

Hall-Lew, Friskney, and Scobbie (2017) analyzed Scottish members of the UK Parliament in 2011 and 2012, comparing members of the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish National Party. They found that variation in the height of the Scottish CAT lexical set (Stuart-Smith 2004; TRAP + BATH, Wells 1982) correlated with a speaker’s political party membership, and not with the speaker’s social class or dialect region (these factors correlating instead with variation in the anteriority of CAT, as has been found in previous work). The authors again posited that the political correlation was an extension of the existing indexical order in Scots and Scottish English, namely the link between a low CAT vowel and an anti-establishment stance (Lawson 2011).

Blas Arroyo (2019) analyzed variation between alveolar and velar productions of word-final /l/ in Catalan Spanish. Blas Arroyo compared speeches given by 16 Catalan politicians, half of them in favor of Catalan independence and half of them opposed, from a range of political parties and other factors: political ideology (“the traditional right-left axis”; Blas Arroyo 2019:8), ‘origen social’ (social class), birthplace, sex, age, and speech year. The speaker’s stance on Catalan independence was the only significant social predictor of lateral variation; pro-nationalist politicians were much more likely to produce the velar variant. This correlation seems to be a direct result of a pre-existing indexical relationship between the velar variant and Catalan, then extended to Catalan identity, and then ideologized further to index being in favor of Catalan independence.

The previous literature on phonetic variation and political identity indicates that these correlations arise out of from a pre-existing field of social meanings. We argue that variation in *Brexit* does not.

## 2.2 Phonetic Variation & Brexit

Taking Twitter as a site for the construction and negotiation of ideology, and spelling variation as an indicator of phonetic variation, we can trace a timeline of how phonetic variation in the word *Brexit* acquired indexical meaning. The referendum took place on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016. The oldest tweets we can find (using the Twitter API) that use *Brexit* to refer to that referendum are around May 15<sup>th</sup> 2012.<sup>2</sup> The oldest (English Language) tweet with *Bregzit* is from February 19<sup>th</sup> 2016, around the time when the media’s focus on the upcoming referendum was increasing. On August 11<sup>th</sup> 2017, Damien Hall observed that, “‘Bregzit’ is now associated with those who support leaving the [EU], with ‘Breksit’ being the pronunciation for those who wanted to remain in the union. Some Remainers even use the spelling ‘Bregzit’ as shorthand for ‘stupid, annoying, wrongheaded Brexit’” (Hall 2017). Hall further noted that “it’s even possible that writing ‘Bregzit’ evokes ‘Brexit, but wrong’” (Hall 2017).

## 2.3 Overview

What is the evidence for this political association? In this paper we consider evidence from Twitter metacommentary, production data from televised sources, and perception data from a Matched Guise Test. In what follows, we will show that we find no evidence that this variation is predicted by the speaker’s political position on Brexit. In contrast to variables that are ideologized because, e.g., they are loanwords (Hall-Lew et al. 2010; 2012), or because of an existing indexical order within a regional dialect (Hall-Lew et al. 2017), we argue that variation in *Brexit* is ideologized by virtue of the political issue itself. Variation in *Brexit* appears to have undergone rapid ideologization

<sup>2</sup><https://twitter.com/AdamsonPaul/status/202773644714328066> Date accessed: 21 February 2020

from the indexical potential of phonetic markedness combined with a divisive political issue, particularly one which transcends a traditional political demarcation of ‘left’ and ‘right’. Therefore, there is no ‘real world’ empirical pattern by which speakers have experientially acquired any particular indexes; such indexes are entirely acquired via political ideology alone.

### 3 Folk Linguistics: Metalinguistic Commentary on Twitter

To get a flavor for the what people say about the [bɹɛgzɪt] pronunciation of *Brexit*, we follow Hall (2017) in examining commentary on the social media platform, Twitter.

#### 3.1 Metalinguistics: Methods

The set of tweets used for the analysis of metalinguistic commentary was collected on May 26<sup>th</sup> 2019 by Yihua Zhang (Zhang 2019), who employed Twitter’s own search function rather than a bespoke API. The search terms included all forms of (#)Breg(g)z(z)it, excluding forms with more than two instances of ‘g’ or ‘z’ and more than one instance of any other letters. We did not consider spelling indicating mixed voicing, e.g., *Brekzit* or *Bregsit*, as the focus of the current paper is on the indexicality of the cluster as a whole. Tweets with mixed-voice spellings do exist and are left for future analysis.

From the initial list of tweets, Zhang (2019) analyzed only those that provided insight into the social meaning of the *Bregzit* variant, discounting those (few) where valence was unclear from the text alone (e.g., “My dad says Bregzit.”). Most of the tweets excluded were those written in a non-English language. Future work might employ the computational detection of political stance through other information in the tweet (e.g., Tatman 2017), as well as considering demographic factors about the author of the tweet (e.g., Eisenstein 2015). For the current study, tweets were subject to a thematic analysis (Agar 1983).

#### 3.2 Metalinguistics: Results

More detailed results are reported in Zhang (2019). The overall patterns observed indicate that there is no single consistent political meaning for the voiced variant vis-à-vis the voiceless variant. This is the case regardless of how ‘political meaning’ is conceptualized (e.g. with respect to political party, iconic political figures, or being for or against the UK’s withdrawal from the EU). However, the authors of the tweets themselves strongly assert that the voiced variant indexes some kind of social meaning, and often one that is political. The ascription of particular political views to people who use the voiced variant is, in part, a reflection of how the debate on the UK’s membership of the EU cuts across a range of traditional political categories.

With respect to political meanings, we see cases where tweet authors who seem to be Remainers attribute the voiced variant to Leavers (or ‘Brexiters’; Figure 1), and vice versa (Figure 2). We see other cases where the voiced variant is attributed to members of specific political parties, but this is similarly inconsistent. For example, the voiced variant is associated both with the Conservative Party (who were mainly, but not exclusively, associated with Leavers) and the Liberal Democrats (who were mainly associated with Remainers). Empirically, we see no agreed-upon political valence aligned with the *Bregzit* pronunciation spelling.

What is agreed upon, however, is a core meaning or ‘kernel of similarity’ (Podesva 2008) that is made political: WRONG. Without exception, tweets that present *Bregzit* with any affective frame take a stance of stigmatizing the voice variant. There are no tweets in our dataset defending the voiced variant, beyond the occasional observation that it is the variant used by the author of tweet (and these do not seem defensive, e.g., do not appear in response to a stigmatizing tweet). The widespread pejoration of the voiced variant as the non-standard or WRONG pronunciation (Figures 3, 4) is then extended ( $n+1$ ; Silverstein 2003) to a political meaning: WRONG POLITICS. Posting a metalinguistic tweet about *Bregzit* thus becomes a device for simultaneously performing ones’ grammatical and (therefore!) political superiority vis-à-vis Others, i.e., those who use the voiced variant (Figures 1-5). We explain this further in Section 6.



Figure 1: Attributing the voiced variant to Leavers



Figure 2: Attributing the voiced variant to Remainers



Figure 3: Negative framing the voiced variant.



Figure 4: Framing the voiced variant with negative affect and the Other

The variable's indexical order includes other meanings that are seen to construct an opposition between the tweet's author and the group alleged to use the voiced variant. Various tweets frame, for example, Americans, Scots,<sup>3</sup> 'rich/posh people', 'journalists', 'MPs', and the media/BBC as speakers of the voiced variant (see also Hall 2017). These uses are nearly always evaluated as, for example, annoying, degenerate, idiotic, untrustworthy or wrong. Although we don't know the backgrounds of the tweet authors, these contrasts all draw on a well-established language ideologies. The regional remarks draw on discourses of Southern Standard British English (SSBE) as 'good' or 'correct' and US and Scottish Englishes as, at best, marked.<sup>4</sup> The other contrasts position the 'average person' against those public actors who are often framed as speaking in inauthentic and disingenuous ways (see Kirkham and Moore 2016). This indexing is evidence, for example, in live tweets made during the viewing of BBC's political debate show, *Question Time* (QT) (indicated by the hashtag #bbqt; Figure 4). An analysis of speech on QT is given in the next section.

#### 4 Variation in Production

This section investigates variation in the production of the *Brexit* variable, allowing for the possibility of a speaker's political identity or stance as a predictor. The initial analysis was conducted by Yihua Wendy Zhang (2019), who was supervised by the authors and who has given the authors permission to present and methods and analysis here.

<sup>3</sup>One tweet from an author who is clearly Scottish frames 'Bregzit' as indexing 'England' and 'English people.'

<sup>4</sup>There may be a preference for some US English speakers to produce the voiced variant in the word *exit* (59%) over non-Scottish UK English speakers (50%; Wells 1990). Statistics are unknown for Scottish English.



Figure 5: Framing the voiced variant with the political Other while watching QT

#### 4.1 Production: Methods

Production data were primarily collected from episodes of QT, and supplemented with episodes of *Prime Minister's Questions* (PMQs). QT is a weekly political debate show with five 'expert' panelists and a live studio audience. Episodes of QT are held in different cities around the UK and audiences and panelists normally come from the surrounding areas. The audience members are chosen to represent variation with respect to demographics, party affiliation, and voting history, and the audience members are given chances to ask the panelists questions. PMQs is a convention in the UK's House of Commons to allow MPs to ask questions of the Prime Minister during a fixed slot in parliamentary business. Any MP has the opportunity to ask questions. Because the political alignment of speakers on QT was often not known (especially for audience members but even for panelists), we included the PMQ data because their stance on Brexit is a matter of public record. However, the PMQ data are less demographically diverse than the QT data.

We coded for all tokens of *Brexit* that were uttered by any speaker from 31 episodes of QT. This included all episodes that aired between January and May 2019, supplemented with others between 2016-2018. (Date of broadcast was included as a predictive factor but did not emerge as significant.) We also coded six broadcasts of PMQs from the same time period.

Variable coding was done auditorily, with acoustic information used to determine borderline cases. All instances of the lexemes *Brexit* were coded in a binary fashion as either having a voiced or voiceless medial consonant cluster. Instances of phonetically ambiguous tokens, /kz/ or /gs/ rather than /ks/ or /gz/, were all coded as voiceless here, with that level of analysis left for future work. Coding was conducted by three independent coders, with most of the coding conducted by two native speakers of Mandarin and some coding by a speaker of Western US English (the first author). Interrater reliability checks were performed on a subset of the data by a fourth coder, a speaker of Northern English English (the second author).

The combined dataset included 921 tokens of *Brexit* produced by 257 different speakers. Most of these are from QT (226 speakers, 781 tokens), but these data were highly imbalanced in terms of speaker representation in the data: panelists talk a lot more than audience members, and audience members' social factors are often unclear. As a result, we operationalized social factors very broadly.

Gender was treated as binary, age was given three levels (18-34, 35-54, 55+), region four levels (Southeastern England, Northern England, Scotland, Other), political party five levels (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National, Other), and Brexit stance three levels: pro-, anti-, or Other. Tokens with ‘Unknown’ values for any of these factors were excluded in statistical analysis. The PMQ data was operationalized the same way. Speaker occupation and race were also coded, for when possible, but are not modeled here.

Statistical modeling was conducted on the overall dataset (‘All’) as well as separately for the two datasets (QT; PMQ) and then again for all three datasets with all speakers removed who produced only one token of *Brexit*. The QT dataset contained 127 speakers and 682 tokens of *Brexit*. The PMQ dataset contained 13 speakers and 80 tokens of *Brexit*. To obtain best-fit models in each case a drop-one and model comparison method was employed taking the following as the maximal model in each case:

$$\text{GLMER}(\text{VARIANT} \sim \text{GENDER} + \text{REGION} + \text{AGE} + \text{PARTY} + \text{BREXITSTANCE} + (1|\text{SPEAKER}))$$

#### 4.2 Production: Results

Regardless of the dataset, we found no effect of the speaker’s age, their political party, or their stance on Brexit on their pronunciation of *Brexit*. There was also no significant difference between the QT data and the PMQ data. However, we do see some correlations with region and binary gender. In this dataset, men are overall more likely than women, and Scots are more likely than speakers from other regions, to use the voiced medial consonant cluster, [brægʒɪt] (Figure 6). Although the descriptive data are suggestive of a region-by-gender interaction effect, the dataset was not large or balanced enough to test for interactions (Table 1). Furthermore, the region ‘Other’ is far too diverse to interpret meaningfully, so these findings are left for future research.

Contrary to the language ideologies expressed on Twitter, speakers appear not to index political stance, either generally or about Brexit in particular, through their pronunciation of the medial consonant cluster in the word *Brexit*. But since metalinguistic commentary describes variation in what speakers perceive, rather than what they produce, we also decided to investigate political indexicality by means of a Matched Guise Study.

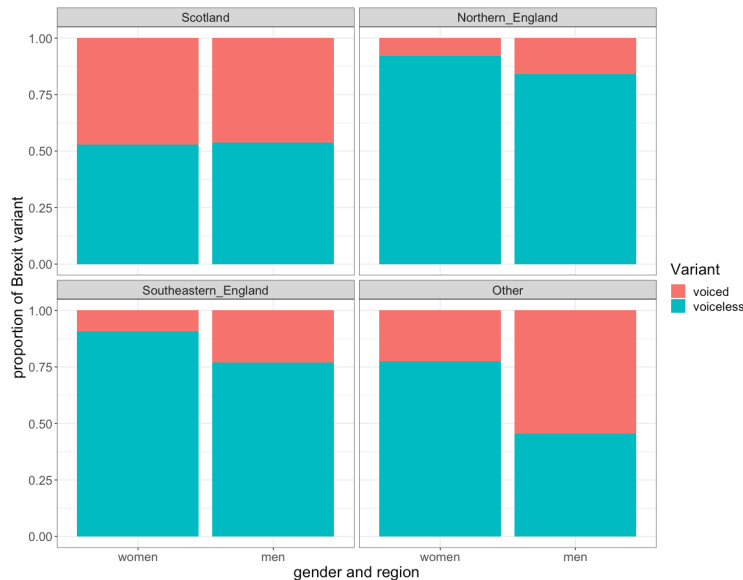


Figure 6: Proportion of *Brexit* variant by broad REGION classification and broad GENDER classification



	women	men
Scotland	11 (51)	14 (67)
Northern England	16 (50)	24 (113)
Southeastern England	14 (107)	35 (191)
Other	11 (115)	16 (68)

Table 1: Number of speakers and (tokens) by broad REGION classification and broad GENDER classification

## 5 Variation in Perception

This section investigates variation in the perception of the *Brexit* variable, testing for the possibility of a listener’s political identity or stance as a predictor. The initial analysis was conducted by Julian Shen (2019), who was supervised by the authors and who has given the authors permission to present and methods and analysis here.

### 5.1 Perception: Methods

Perception data were obtained from an online Matched Guise Test (MGT). The stimuli set consisted of the sentences in (1), the first three featuring words varying in terms of the voicing of the medial ‘x’ consonant cluster (i.e., *Brexit*, *exit*, *exiled*), and the fillers featuring words varying in terms of medial voicing but of a singleton, /s/ or /z/. To distract slightly from the word *Brexit* being the obvious point of the study, one of the fillers was also more political than the others (in the sense that Muslim identity is a politically contested identity in the UK). All key words were sentence-final to semi-control for prosodic variation.

(1) MGT Stimuli

a. All anyone’s talking about is	Bre[ks]it	~	Bre[gz]it.
b. She really made a quick	e[ks]it	~	e[gz]it.
c. I heard that she was	e[ks]iled	~	e[gz]iled.
d. Maybe it’s because he’s	Mu[s]lim	~	Mu[z]lim.
e. I was thinking just the	oppo[s]ite	~	oppo[z]ite.
f. He liked to watch the moon in	tran[s]it	~	tran[z]it.

All three speakers were adult men from the Greater London area who speak similar versions of SSBE. Each speaker first listened to a recording of the sentences read aloud by the first author, and were then asked to match the prosody of the recording as best as possible. Each speaker spoke each sentence twice, once with the voiceless variant, once with voiced variant. The stimuli were presented to speakers as shown in (1), with explicit instruction to say the sentences the same other than pronunciation of the final word.

The recorded stimuli were evenly distributed across three different versions of the MGT created on Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>) and distributed to three different listener groups of UK citizens in the UK, using Prolific Academic (<https://www.prolific.co/>). For each MGT, no voice was heard saying the same sentence twice. The order of presentation was counter-balanced. Listeners responded to single-word Likert scales using slider-bar responses for four attributes: ‘Educated’, ‘Proper’, ‘Friendly’, ‘Honest’. Listeners also provided information about their listening conditions (headphones, speakers) and their demographic details: BIRTH YEAR, BIRTHPLACE, CURRENT LOCATION (narrowly & broadly operationalized), GENDER (self-reported), CURRENT JOB, RELIGION, EDUCATION LEVEL, and their POLITICAL STANCE defined as how ‘Remainer’ or ‘Leaver’ they identified as. 123 useable responses were collected on July 11<sup>th</sup> 2019. Slider bar responses were converted to a 0-100 scale.

### 5.2 Perception: Results

Overall, we find no meaningful correlations between the phonetic variation of *Brexit* and any social meaning. There is, in fact, more difference between every *other* pair of variants than for the *Brexit*

pair of variants, including the filler pairs. Figure 7 demonstrates this, with *Brexit* showing a nearly flat line relative to the participants' stance on Brexit, and nearly overlapping lines between the voiced and voiceless variant. In contrast, the voiced variant of the word *opposite* seems to elicit lower ratings of educatedness than the voiceless variant, possibly more so for 'Leavers' than 'Remainers'.

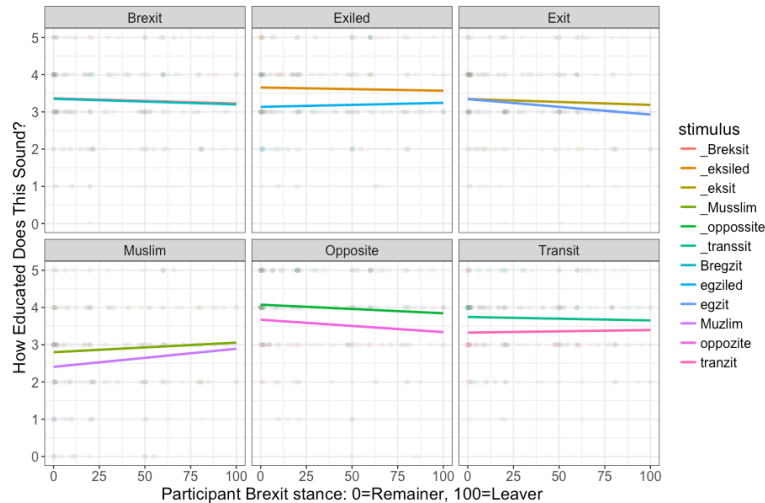


Figure 7: Correlations between the self-reported stance of a participant on Brexit and their educatedness ratings of each stimulus.

There are also no differences by any logical subsets of participants, nor with social factors operationalized in different ways. For example, if we look closely at only those responses that rated any stimuli as either '0' or '1' (i.e., very low) for 'Educated', i.e., those responses that best match the attitudes expressed in the Twitter data, we find 10 instances for the stimuli with the word *Brexit*, five for each variant.

Participants' free-response comments indicated that they expected the MGT to be testing for the perception of regional dialect variation. The comments mostly focused on how all the speakers were male (asking why females weren't included) and commenting that the speakers seemed to all be from the Southeast of England. There were three comments (out of 123 responses) that focused on variation in the word *Brexit*, shown in (2).

- (2) Free-response comments about variation in *Brexit*
- a. "I couldn't possibly tell people's thoughts on Brexit by a few words out of context."
  - b. "The link between voice, phrase and Brexit or remain felt very naive and pointless with no other context involved."
  - c. "In my opinion I do not feel that listening to somebody's voice is a way to know if they voted Brexit or not, people all have differing opinions."

These three responses are interesting for several reasons. First, all frame the point of the experiment around its actual goal of testing the indexical link between sociophonetic variation and a speaker's stance towards Brexit. However, all have inferred this goal from something other than the design of the study itself. Recall that the study only asked for responses towards four personal traits, none of which were related to the politics of Brexit. Rather than asking about "people's thoughts on Brexit" or "if they voted Brexit or not," the experiment asked for judgements of personality. These listeners seem to be drawing on metapragmatic knowledge from outside the experiment itself. In other words, these three respondents, in decrying the lack of a link between phonetic variation and Brexit politics, are drawing on previous knowledge of that link, and thereby reifying the link itself.

Second, the three responses are united in decrying the possibility of an indexical link between the pronunciation of *Brexit* and the stance towards Brexit. This is striking in contrast the vitriol on

Twitter as summarized in Section 3. In lieu of being able to administer an MGT with the same people who post on Twitter, the results of this listener sample indicate that the average UK citizen in the UK either does not notice the variation in *Brexit* enough to comment on it (120 or 123 responses) or adamantly does not attribute any political or affective valence to either of its variants (3 of 123 responses).

## 6 Discussion

Neither the production study nor the perception study revealed the same social meanings for *Bregzit* that are found in metalinguistic commentary on Twitter. On Twitter, the social meanings indexed by the voiced variant, [bɹɛgzɪt], are emotionally strong but highly varied. Any ‘kernel of similarity’ (Podesva 2008) seems to be an indexing of the (political) Other, rather than a specific political stance. In contrast, variation in production resembles a classic sociolinguistic variable, with a non-standard variant used significantly more by men than women, and in this case used significantly more by Scottish speakers than non-Scottish speakers, with no correlation with any political factors. Finally, variation in perception shows no significant correlations at all. Open-ended responses to the perception study showed attitudes strongly at odds with the attitudes expressed on Twitter, namely, emotionally strong statements that the mere idea of any correlation between phonetic variation in *Brexit* and political stance is “native and pointless”. How should we think about these disparate results?

The word *Brexit* was formed from the words *British* and *exit*, and the variable in question was inherited from the variation already attested for *exit*. We posit that *Brexit* also inherited some of the indexical associations attached to the variation in *exit*, associations which might be more generally attributed to all variation between /ks/ or /gz/ for ‘x’ in all *ex-* Latin borrowings into English (e.g., *exile*, *exude*). While not the subject of much overt commentary, it is possible that the voiceless variant is widely regarded as the unmarked and ‘correct’ variant, namely because the citation form of the letter ‘x’ is /eks/. Citation forms, as associated with the ideological state apparatus of early schooling (see Althusser 1971), are the most likely indexes of standardness. Furthermore, the citation form would never vary with the voiced variant, since /egz/ is the word *eggs*.

This scenario sets up a first-order indexical, with /ks/ being unmarked and indexing ‘correct’, and /gz/ being marked and indexing ‘incorrect’.  $n+1^{\text{st}}$  order indexicals follow based on a British and global standard language ideology that positions SSBE as ‘correct’ and all other varieties as ‘incorrect’. This ideological process erases (Irvine and Gal 2000) the actual 50/50 variation existing within SSBE (Wells 1990), and iconizes the /ks/ variant as standard. Regional non-standard varieties are then ideologically linked with the voiced variant, especially if they are otherwise saliently different from SSBE, whether they actually show different patterns of variation in production (e.g., Scottish) or not (e.g., American; see Wells 1990).

We hypothesize that all of this predates the coinage of *Brexit*, and that it lay the foundation for the political indexicalities expressed in the Twitter metacommentary about the pronunciation, [bɹɛgzɪt]. Here we make an argument similar to that made by Woschitz and Yağlı (2019) about the indexical order of the word *hayır* in the context of the 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum, which ranges from its original use (as a borrowing from Arabic, meaning either ‘good’ or ‘no’) to contemporary significations associated with religion and political affiliations. The exploitation of apparently contrasting meanings (including the indexing of pro- and anti-Neo Ottoman ideology) is critical for an understanding of the use of *hayır* in contemporary Turkish: “By engaging with the indexical past of *hayır*, political activists *projected other speakers* who use the word in their second or third order meaning into their own usage of the term *to create a contrast*” (Woschitz and Yağlı 2019:130; emphasis added). The word *Brexit* does not have the same time depth, but the parallel is nevertheless important. The *Brexit* variation ranges from indexing ‘other’ in some neutral cases, to ‘incorrect and therefore other’ in some more politically charged cases. Furthermore, the word *Brexit* is not only political relevant; its very existence is as a reference to an ideologically fraught political process. We posit that any latent  $n+1^{\text{st}}$  indexicals were amplified and extended to  $n+1+1^{\text{st}}$  indexicals in that particular political climate. In a context where one variant indexes ‘correct’ at the  $n+1^{\text{st}}$  level of standard language ideology, that same variant is prime for ideologizing as ‘correct’ at the  $n+1+1^{\text{st}}$  level of political ideology. In this way, the voiceless variant, /ks/, comes to index ‘the correct political stance’, while /gz/ indexes its opposite, ‘the incorrect political stance’, *regardless of the actual stance itself*. It is in this way that a Remainer can say that Leavers say [bɹɛgzɪt], and Leavers can

say that Remainers say [brɛgzɪt]. The *n*+1+1st indexical is driven entirely by ideology, and is not driven by any empirical correlation with speaker group membership or social practice. These correlations do exist, as evidenced by the production study, but they do not actively enter into the ideologization process linked to the politics of Brexit.

## 7 Conclusion

In contrast to variables that become politicized via non-political indexicalities (e.g., Hall-Lew et al. 2010; 2012; 2017), variation in *Brexit* appears to have undergone rapid ideologization from the indexical potential of phonetic markedness combined with a divisive political issue. Therefore, there is no ‘real world’ empirical pattern by which speakers have experientially acquired any particular indexes; such indexes are entirely acquired via political ideology itself.

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