

# Real Housewives: Audience Design and the Effect of Confessionals on Speech

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## 1 Introduction

The Real Housewives of Melbourne (RHOM) is a reality TV show that started in 2014. Each episode typically follows the lives of a group of affluent women in Melbourne, showcasing their lavish lifestyles. In this paper, I will analyse intraspeaker variation of phrase-final post vocalic /t/ in five main cast members of RHOM season 4 (Washington et al., 2017). Post-vocalic /t/ is a variable that has been the subject of many sociolinguistic studies in recent years across a number of English varieties. In Australian English, /t/ frication appears to be associated with females of higher socioeconomic class (Jones & McDougall, 2009; Loakes & McDougall, 2007) and formal rather than informal speech (Tollfree et al., 2001). In this study, I will examine the possible existence of style-shifting between two settings in reality TV: the ‘confessional’ and ‘on set’. Here, I define ‘confessional’ as scenes where the housewives narrate over what is happening in the episode. This is filmed at a different time and in a different location. On the other hand, I define ‘on set’ as all other scenes, i.e. actual scenes following the housewives’ lives and their interactions with others. With two distinct settings, I will analyse variation through the lens of frameworks that have been created to explain the motivations behind style-shifting, namely Attention to Speech (Labov, 1966) and Audience Design (Bell, 1984). With greater focus on Audience Design, I hope to examine the potential effect of different audiences on intraspeaker variation, and how the same audience can have more influence in one context than in others.

## 2 Background

Many theories have been proposed to explain intraspeaker variation and style-shifting. In his New York City English study (1966), Labov proposed that style is affected by the amount of attention paid to one’s own speech. Under this model, we would expect that more standard variants are uttered when someone is more conscious of their own language use (Schilling-Estes, 2013), e.g. when they are reading out a list of words rather than speaking casually to a friend. However, this model has been highly criticized due to its one-dimensional view on intraspeaker variation, where stylistic variation is only based on socioeconomic class in a one way standard-to-non-standard spectrum (Schilling-Estes, 2013). Thus, other explanations such as Bell’s 1984 Audience Design model have been developed to account for a more nuanced approach to stylistic variation. While Labov’s theory predicts that different speech activities

elicit different styles, Bell's sees style shifting as a response to an audience (Schilling-Estes, 2013). Developed from Accommodation Theory (Giles & Powesland, 1975), Audience Design similarly holds that we attune our speech depending on our audience. As he hypothesises that our speech is primarily affected by audience members who hold more importance in a conversation, Bell (2001; 1984) separates audience members into 4 different types. "Addressees" are directly addressed, "auditors" are ratified (i.e. their existence is acknowledged), "overhearers" are known and "eavesdroppers" are unknown. Within the framework of Audience Design however, one's speech may not necessarily converge to the audience's own speech (Schilling-Estes, 2013). Instead, one's speech is shifted more to what is expected by the audience. For instance, in his study on the speech of New Zealand radio announcers, Bell (1984) found that the announcers shifted to British Received Pronunciation on more prestigious radio stations rather than to the actual speech of audience members.

Furthermore, variation in phrase or word-final post-vocalic /t/ has been an area of increased focus in sociolinguistic study across English varieties. It is highly variable, being realised as multiple variants in Australian English (Loakes et al., 2018). Wider sociolinguistic literature of world Englishes have typically analysed released versus unreleased stops (Docherty et al., 2006; Podesva, 2008; Podesva et al., 2015), yet in recent years, especially in Australia, focus has been put on the nature of fricated /t/ (Jones & McDougall, 2009). /t/ frication seems to be a marker of female speakers and high socioeconomic class (Jones & McDougall, 2009; Loakes & McDougall, 2007). Similarly, Tollfree et al. (2001) found that /t/ release was more frequent in the middle socioeconomic group (compared to the lower socioeconomic group), and more frequent in formal interview style (as opposed to conversational interview style). Similar trends can be found in other varieties of English, such as New Zealand English where it was found that female and professional speakers were more likely to use released forms of /t/ than males and non-professionals (Docherty et al., 2006). In American English varieties, /t/ release is perceived to be more related to articulate speech (Podesva et al., 2015) and formal speech (Podesva, 2008). Moreover, /t/ release and frication has even been stereotyped in popular media such as "Kath and Kim", where caricatures of two women of high socioeconomic class exaggerate /t/ frication for comedic purposes (Jones & McDougall, 2009).

Taking all of this into account, there is still much to learn about the nature of style-shifting and how it relates to the Audience Design framework in specific circumstances. Focusing on style within reality TV, my research questions are the following: Do reality TV contestants style-shift when narrating in 'confessionals' compared to speaking 'on set'? And if so, how can the Audience Design framework be used to examine intraspeaker variation in reality TV?

### 3 Method

The aim of this study is to investigate variation of phrase-final post-vocalic /t/ in five housewives from RHOM season 4 (Washington et al., 2017). Intraspeaker variation will be analysed using proposed explanations for style-shifting, with a focus on the Audience Design framework. I expect that there will be a large amount of variation in phrase-final post vocalic /t/ as previous studies have demonstrated (Loakes et al., 2018; Loakes & McDougall, 2007; Tollfree et al., 2001). This is in part due to the identity of my participants – females of high socioeco-

nomic class. Here, I judge socioeconomic status by the fact that they are contestants on this show. The Real Housewives series is known for showcasing the extravagant lifestyles of rich women, thus it is expected that only women of high socioeconomic status are cast.

In this study, I watched the first four episodes of the fourth season of the show, focusing on five of the seven housewives: Jackie Gillies, Gina Liano, Janet Roach, Lydia Schiavello and Gamble Breaux. All these participants are white, female, have high socioeconomic class, have English as their native languages, grew up in Australia and are currently living in Melbourne. Across the five, I collected 382 tokens, tallying each token in an Excel spreadsheet (see Appendix A) while watching the show with captions. Each token was also transcribed and timestamped, e.g. “E3 6:54 what” (see Appendix B). 48 tokens were collected from Jackie, 111 from Gina, 59 from Janet, 61 from Lydia and 103 from Gamble. This is perhaps somewhat reflective of the uneven screen time afforded to the cast members.

I narrowed down the variable of focus to intonation phrase-final post-vocalic /t/ similar to Docherty et al. (2006) to reduce the prevalence of phonologically-conditioned variation. For instance, alveolar tap [ɾ] is a variant of Australian English /t/ that frequently occurs intervocalically (Loakes et al., 2018), but rarely if at all phrase or word finally (Tollfree et al., 2001). Given the constraints of this paper, I decided to follow the wider sociolinguistic tradition of comparing released versus unreleased stops. For my unreleased category, I included the following /t/ allophones: pre-glottalised [ʔt], glottal [ʔ] and no audible release [ɾ]. For my released category, I included the following: plosive [t], canonical [t<sup>h</sup>], spirantized/affricate [t<sup>s</sup>] and fricated [t̤]. This is similar to past literature (Docherty et al., 2006; Tollfree et al., 2001) but I account for more variants that have been noted in Australian English in Loakes et al. (2018) and that appeared in my study.

Furthermore, I split each phonetic category into the settings in which they appear, thus having four categories for each speaker’s tokens: unreleased on set, unreleased confessional, released on set, and released confessional. As mentioned previously, the ‘confessional’ setting are scenes filmed separately from the main scenes of the episode where the housewives narrate over top of what is happening. ‘On set’ designates all other scenes where the women are typically interacting with each other or other characters. Therefore, if for example Gina said “We had fun last [naet<sup>s</sup>]” in the confessional, it would be counted as “Gina - Released - Confessional”. To analyse my data, I divided the total number of released variants in each separate setting for each speaker by the total number of tokens (released and unreleased) that appeared in that setting. I then converted the values into percentages and formed Figure 1.

Thus, given previous literature, I expect more released variants in the “confessional” setting than in the “on set” setting. As Tollfree’s 2001 study found, released /t/ variants, especially fricated /t/s, are found more often in formal interview settings than in conversational settings. As a confessional is likely to be more controlled and perhaps more scripted, I would expect it to be perceived as a more formal setting than the speech elicited on set which is perhaps more spontaneous and less scripted.

## 4 Results

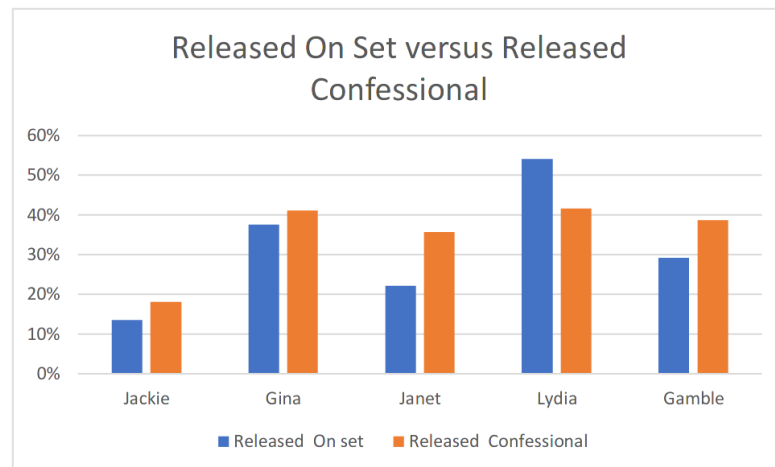


Figure 1: Percentage of phrase-final post-vocalic /t/ released variants on set (blue) compared to released variants in confessionals (orange) across RHOM cast.

On average, four out of the five speakers used released variants more often than unreleased variants in confessionals, as opposed to on set. Jackie had the lowest percentage of released variants out of all the speakers, with only 14% released on set and 18% released in the confessional. Gina had the least amount of variation, with 38% released on set and 41% released in the confessional. Janet had the largest amount of variation between the two settings, releasing her /t/s 22% of the time on set and 36% of the time in the confessional. Lydia was the only housewife who released her /t/s more often on set (54%) than in the confessional (42%). Lastly, Gamble released her /t/s 29% of the time on set and 39% of the time in the confessional.

## 5 Discussion

From the results of this study, we see that to an extent, all speakers varied in their frequency of /t/ release between the two settings. Jackie and Gina had very slight variation, while Janet, Lydia and Gamble had a larger percentage of variation. Lydia was an anomaly as she was the only housewife who used released variants more often on set than in the confessional. She also had the highest percentage of released variants in both settings. This is interesting because, in the episodes that I watched, Lydia was often the target of ridicule due to the way that she spoke. For example, Janet says “I never understand her, you know? She speaks in gobbledegook anyway” (Washington et al., 2017)(Season 4, Episode 3).

Analysing their style shifting through Labov’s Attention to Speech model, we would have expected a higher number of prestige variants in the confessionals than on set. The confessional scenes are much more controlled, less spontaneous and are presumably more scripted than the on set scenes. Released /t/ has been argued to signal formality and competence in American English (Podesva, 2008), and seems to be related to socioeconomic class in Australian English

(Loakes & McDougall, 2007), thus we would expect it to be more frequent in confessionals where speakers are more conscious of their own speech. Similarly, in Tollfree et al. (2001), /t/ release was more frequent in the more formal setting than the casual setting. Yet as was noted, Lydia does not follow the expected stylistic shift, and Gina and Jackie only do so slightly. Thus, Labov's Attention to Speech model cannot completely explain the motivations for style shifting between on set and confessional style.

As previous literature has suggested, we must go further than Attention to Speech to have a better picture of the motivations for style-shifting. Using the Audience Design framework, we can seek to more accurately explain these individual motivations. While we do not know the exact audience demographic of RHOM, we can speculate that it would typically be middle class women who perhaps aspire to have higher socio-economic class. The show is not available on free to air television, thus it is less accessible to the wider population, perhaps creating a feeling of exclusivity. Yet as Bell (1984) notes, the actual audience for mass communication is not what will affect the speaker – it is who they perceive the audience members to be. Thus, this can account for Lydia's anomaly – perhaps the audience she perceives is different to that of the other housewives. Furthermore, as Schilling-Estes (2013) has noted, Bell's Audience Design does not mean to say that the speaker will converge towards the speech of their audience. They instead converge towards the audience's "expectations" (p. 338). Perhaps this is a situation of dialect leveling, since Lydia's /t/ release is already high while on set. Therefore, while Lydia must lower her /t/ release frequency to attune it to her audience's expectations while addressing them, while the other women must raise it.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the Audience Design framework to this study is the different levels of audience members, and their varying affects on the speaker. In a confessional, I would argue that the TV audience fills the addressee category. Speakers face the camera to directly address the audience, with potential producers being auditors, and other people on the set such as production staff being overhearers. On set, the role of the TV audience shifts from addressee to auditor, as the speakers do not directly address them but they are definitely known and acknowledged due to the nature of reality TV shows. It could be argued that the TV audience remains an addressee as all the interactions are specifically made with the TV audience in mind, but I would argue that no matter what, the TV audience plays a larger role in influencing style in the confessional rather than on set.

While the TV audience may expect the housewives to project their prestige through their speech using more prestigious variables like released /t/, the effect of this expectation varies depending on the role of the TV audience. In the confessional, the housewives would be more conscious of this expectation. Alternatively, while on set and communicating with others, they would be less conscious of it. This is not to say that they are not aware of the TV audience on set however – as it is a reality TV show, they would be very aware and conscious of their speech choices. Yet in a confessional, the direct address would bring this to the forefront of their minds. Thus, for Janet and Gamble in particular, perhaps they use more released variants in the confessional as they are more conscious of their audience and therefore would like to appear more articulate to them. Yet the shifting role of the TV audience seems to have little effect on the speech of Gina and Jackie, at least for this specific variable. Perhaps this is because Gina and Jackie perceive the TV audience to have similar expectations of their speech to that

of the on set addressees, thus demonstrating little style shift. More variables would need to be analysed to see if this lack of style-shift is variable specific or setting and audience-specific.

## 6 Conclusion

Ultimately, it appears that speakers on reality TV shows shift in style between confessionals and on set to varying extents. While some speakers varied minutely between the two settings, others demonstrated a shift which in part can be explained using the Audience Design framework developed by Bell (2001; 1984). Audience Design has proved to be a useful lens to analyse the importance of audience in different situations, and how a TV audience has potentially more influence in confessional style rather than on set style. Further research could also seek to analyse the effect of confessionals in reality TV on one's stylistic variation as they create a clear, narrative style that is straight forward to separate from on set interactions. Due to the nature of confessionals, they can be used to analyse style-shifting applying either Labov's Attention to Speech model or Bell's Audience Design framework. By doing so, we can better understand the motivations surrounding intraspeaker variation, not only in the context of a real audience, but a perceived one.

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## A Excel spreadsheet for data collection and coding

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1		<b>Variants of phrase-final post-vocalic /t/</b>				
2		<b>Unreleased</b>		<b>Released</b>		
3		On set	Confessional	On set	Confessional	Total
4	Jackie	32	9	5	2	48
5	Gina	48	20	29	14	111
6	Janet	35	9	10	5	59
7	Lydia	17	14	20	10	61
8	Gamble	51	19	21	12	103
9	Total	183	71	85	43	382
10	Total (rel/un)	254		128		
11						
12						
13		<b>Episode/Timestamp/Example (S4)</b>				
14		<b>Unreleased</b>		<b>Released</b>		
15		On set	Confessional	On set	Confessional	
16	Jackie	E1 -36:08 what	E1 -26:37 Janet	E1 -53:21 light	E4 -10:12 shit	
17	Gina	E1 -48:58 out	E1 -37:40 Janet	E1 -54:45 that	E1 -57:14 apart	
18	Janet	E1 -52:20 it	E1 -44:47 admit	E1 2:17 right	E1 -21:36 it	
19	Lydia	E1 -48:23 not	E1 -46:42 that	E1 -48:31 that	E1 -47:11 eat	
20	Gamble	E1 -42:39 that	E1 -28:47 carpet	E1 -42:55 fruit	E1 -20:07 diet	
21						
22						
23						
24		<b>Token %</b>				
25		<b>Unreleased</b>		<b>Released</b>		
26		On set	Confessional	On set	Confessional	
27	Jackie	86%	82%	14%	18%	
28	Gina	62%	59%	38%	41%	
29	Janet	78%	64%	22%	36%	
30	Lydia	46%	58%	54%	42%	
31	Gamble	71%	61%	29%	39%	
32	Total (#)	68%	62%	32%	38%	



## B Example of expanded token list for Gamble Unreleased On Set

					Episode/Timestamp/Example (S4)		
		Unreleased		Released			
		On set	Confessional	On set	Confessional		
16	Jackie	E1 -36:08 what	E1 -26:37 Janet	E1 -53:21 light	E4 -10:12 shit		
17	Gina	E1 -48:58 out	E1 -37:40 Janet	E1 -54:45 that	E1 -57:14 apart		
18	Janet	E1 -52:20 it	E1 -44:47 admit	E1 2:17 right	E1 -21:36 it		
19	Lydia	E1 -48:23 not	E1 -46:42 that	E1 -48:31 that	E1 -47:11 eat		
20	Gamble	E2 -3:30 it	E1 -28:47 carpet	E1 -42:55 fruit	E1 -20:07 diet		
21		E2 -2:51 part					
22		E2 -1:45 it					
23		E2 -1:40 it					
24		E3 -38:53 it			<b>Token %</b>		
25		E3 -38:12 cute			<b>Released</b>		
26		E3 -38:07 it	Confessional	On set	Confessional		
27	Jackie	E3 -33:43 that	82%	14%	18%		
28	Gina	E3 -32:47 not	59%	38%	41%		
29	Janet	E3 -27:17 not	64%	22%	36%		
30	Lydia	E3 -26:53 about	58%	54%	42%		
31	Gamble	E3 -24:25 it	61%	29%	39%		
32	Total (#)	E3 -23:46 night	62%	32%	38%		
33	Total (%)	E3 -23:32 bullshit	325%	157%	175%		
34	Total (%/5)	E3 -23:22 it	65%	31%	35%		
35		E3 -22:10 that					
36		E3 -16:39 tonight					
37		E3 -10:09 it					
38		E3 -6:54 what					
39		E3 -5:51 that					
40		E3 -1:50 delete					
41		E4 -42:39 it					
42		E4 -42:23 alright					
43		E4 -39:23 it					
44		E4 -34:31 Burnett					
45		E4 -33:00 sweet					