

# Chranna? Turono? Toe-ron-toe? Sociophonetic perception in the pronunciation of “Toronto”

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**Background:** Listeners are sensitive to linguistic features that are associated with different social groups (e.g., [1]). These linguistic features can influence perception of speaker identity by indexing gender, ethnicity, region of origin, etc. (e.g., [2]). Lenition provides an opportunity for sociophonetic variation, which previous research has found to carry social meaning (e.g., [3]). Anecdotal evidence from popular media and the Internet suggests that the pronunciation of city names could index a variety of social characteristics. This study explores how variations in the pronunciation of *Toronto* index speaker origin.

**Research Questions:** This study investigates the following: i) which pronunciation(s) do Torontonians perceive to indicate in-group and out-group membership? and ii) do social characteristics of the survey respondents influence their perceptions of variations in *Toronto*?

**Methodology:** 2740 participants responded to a Qualtrics survey that captured participant perceptions of 7 pronunciations of *Toronto*. Participants heard an audio clip of a variant being spoken aloud and were asked 3 perception questions: 1. Where would a person who says *Toronto* this way be from?, 2. How old would a person who says *Toronto* this way be?, and 3. Would you personally say *Toronto* this way? The seven variants ([tɔ.ɹɑnto], [tə.ɹɑnto], [tə.ɹɑn:o], [tə.ɹɑn:ə], [tɹɑn:o], [tʃɹɑn:o], [tʃɹɑn:ə]) capture lenition of the consonants and vowels and represent plausible attested variants. Variants were presented in a random order for each participant.

**Findings:** According to Torontonian respondents, [tʃɹɑn:o] is the variant most likely to be produced by someone from Toronto (62%), followed by [tə.ɹɑn:o] (49%). Torontonians also scored these variants highest when asked if they would personally use them (58% for [tə.ɹɑn:o]; 59% for [tʃɹɑn:o]). These findings suggest that [tə.ɹɑn:o] and [tʃɹɑn:o] signal being local to Toronto, or in-group membership. On the other hand, Torontonians selected [tɔ.ɹɑnto] and [tə.ɹɑnto] to be most likely used by someone from the United States or elsewhere in Canada (53% for [tɔ.ɹɑnto] and 49% for [tə.ɹɑnto]). Additionally, when asked if they would say [tɔ.ɹɑnto] or [tə.ɹɑnto], 89% and 84% (respectively) selected “No,” suggesting that these variants signal out-group membership. Age and gender of the respondents also influenced the findings. The variants [tə.ɹɑn:o], [tɹɑn:o], and [tʃɹɑn:o] became less acceptable the older the participant was. On the other hand, the variants [tɔ.ɹɑnto] and [tə.ɹɑnto] became more acceptable the older the participant was. The remaining two variants ([tə.ɹɑn:ə] and [tʃɹɑn:ə]) were the only two variants containing a final schwa and, while these variants were dispreferred by Torontonians generally, female participants appeared to dislike them slightly more than males.

**Significance:** Results demonstrate that Torontonians ascribe group membership using the pronunciation of their city’s name. While previous research has investigated group membership and sociolinguistic variation, little to no sociophonetic research has connected variation stemming from lenition to group membership. This study provides a first look at how variation stemming from lenition in the pronunciation of city names can be co-opted to signal social information, especially region of origin. This study has the potential to be replicated in other cities whose names experience similar lenition (e.g., Atlanta, Calgary, Edmonton, Sacramento, New Orleans) to investigate lenition and group membership.

## References

- [1] Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- [2] Mack, S. (2010). A sociophonetic analysis of perception of sexual orientation in Puerto Rican Spanish. *Laboratory Psychology*, (1)1, 41-63.
- [3] Mansfield, J. (2015). Consonant lenition as a sociophonetic variable in Murrinh Patha (Australia). *Language Variation and Change*, 27(2), 203-225.