

Sociophonetic Variation in an Internet Place Name

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This study provides one of the first published accounts of sociophonetic variation in which the speech community under investigation exists online and text-based communication is the dominant mode of interaction. The abbreviated name of the Internet community weblog — *MeFi*, from *MetaFilter.com* — has at least eight recognized pronunciation variants. Quantitative analysis of surveys from over 2000 MetaFilter members reveals statistically significant variation in the distribution of members' preferred pronunciations for *MeFi* across four English-speaking countries. These results reflect dialectal and socio-cultural differences in naming preferences in spite of the fact that the speech channel is limited or non-primary.

KEYWORDS Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), sociophonetics, sociolinguistics, onomastics, MetaFilter, community

Introduction

New words and names that enter the language through the text-based medium of the Internet (i.e., “netologisms”) can sometimes be ambiguously pronounceable. This is often due to multiple spelling-to-sound correspondences that exist for many English letters (e.g., How do you pronounce the <e> and <i> in “MeFi”?) and the limitations of the medium to easily allow for the establishment of a spoken pronunciation standard. As such, these netologisms introduce new linguistic challenges and resources for speakers. We can learn a lot about the ways speakers overcome these challenges and capitalize on these resources by examining the pronunciation choices they make and the social factors that influence their decisions.

Previous sociolinguistic studies involving onomastics have focused on the names of geographically bounded places (Read, 1933; Shapiro, 1997; Hall-Lew et al., 2010), but no work to date has investigated the negotiation of the pronunciation or the collective meaning of the name of an online place. Research in this area is needed if we are to understand how micro-level processes in symbolic interactions such as a naming practices relate to macro-level changes in language variation in cultures where mixed online/offline networks of cross-modal (text- and speech-based) communication are becoming the norm.

This study reports on an eleven-year debate on the pronunciation of an Internet place name by members of the community weblog MetaFilter.com. *MeFi* — the abbreviated name for *MetaFilter* — is orthographically consistent but sociophonetically variable, with individual community members generally preferring one of eight possible variants. Through this shared history of debate about the pronunciation of their name, MetaFilter members (hereafter referred to as *MeFites*) use the variants as linguistic resources to do micro-level social work (e.g., taking stances, aligning with others) that is reflective of macro-level social processes (e.g., identity construction, language standardization).

Survey results show that differences in the distributions of preferred pronunciation variants achieve statistical significance in native English speakers living in four regions studied: Australia, Canada, the UK, and the US. These results help inform our understanding of geography and dialect as social factors in naming practices, even when the place names involved are not geographically bound.

Background and literature review

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) — A new environment to observe sociophonetic variation

One of the most notable differences between text-based CMC and face-to-face (F2F) interaction is CMC's heavier reliance on language in the absence of paralinguistic cues and the visual channel (Rheingold, 1993; Warnick, 2010; Greiffenstern, 2010). However, CMC social networks often have F2F components to them. In these *mixed online/offline networks*, social ties are made and maintained by some members in both speech domains (Bergs, 2006). It therefore becomes important to consider how social information that is traditionally conveyed in F2F communication, such as a speaker's geographic and linguistic background, might also be influencing CMC interactions.

Since text-based communication is the primary mode for most online interaction, standardized or common pronunciations (if they even exist) of names may not be heard by members within the communities that the names refer to. When these online names are used in their native CMC environments, it is primarily through explicit meta-referencing (often using common words or pseudo-words as guides, e.g., *me-fee* or *meh-fib*) that pronunciations become “hearable.” These can conflict with readers' preferred pronunciations, which are influenced by the grammatical constraints of their dialects and idiolects, their linguistic backgrounds, and other social factors such as age and gender. For many CMC participants, this meta-referencing is the moment of awareness that group name variation exists within their community. For others, it is not until they hear a pronunciation that differs from their own at an offline gathering or some other speech-mediated channel (e.g., podcast or audio interview) that they realize that such variation exists. Still, for many other community members there is no awareness of variation, as they have either not noticed or heard variants that differ from their own in text or speech.

For those participants who are aware of pronunciation variation in a group name, an opportunity arises for the direct and overt negotiation of a standard pronunciation, as well as for the observability of that dialogue by others. From this awareness,

group participants directly and indirectly take stances, align with other participants and authority figures (e.g., site moderators), and index their linguistic backgrounds with the pronunciation variant(s) that they choose.

Online communities of practice

A community of practice (CoP) is defined as a group coming together around a social endeavor in which participants are *mutually engaged* in a *joint enterprise* that is codified in a *shared repertoire* (Wenger, 1998). Studies that have applied this model to online settings have helped to demonstrate the legitimacy of CMC environments as meaningful and content-rich places for participants to carry out their social practices (Ali-Hasan, 2005; Stommel, 2008; Silva et al., 2008).

The three tenets of the CoP model — *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise*, and a *shared repertoire* — are very present in the MetaFilter community. While there is no set theme or topic for MetaFilter posts, members are invested and engaged in sharing links and participating in discussions that adhere to the quality standards self-regulated by its userbase. The community is reified through participants' use of social conventions, the codification of norms (e.g., help pages, wikis) and the creation of site tools or addition of features to improve the experiences of community members.

These community-building activities are of continued interest to MeFites, but are not the main focus of their interactions on MetaFilter. First and foremost, MeFites are preoccupied with socializing, learning, and being entertained online (Warnick, 2010). On MetaFilter, these objectives are often achieved through participation in ongoing community debates, often featuring wordplay and aggressive social banter. The pronunciation of MeFi is just one of many of these ongoing debates.

At the community level, the attitudes people have about the pronunciation of MeFi and how they express those attitudes reflects the community ethos (Warnick, 2010). At the sociolinguistic level, these attitudes are expressions of the co-created community identity and the standardization of their linguistic register. To be recognized by others at these levels positions MetaFilter within both the CMC and F2F spheres as a real community, with all of the features and “bugs” that both of those environments entail.

MetaFilter: community weblog

Established in July 1999, MetaFilter began as a place for website creator Matt Haughey and his friends to share and discuss interesting links from the web. Over the years, MetaFilter has maintained its primary focus for participants to share and discuss “the best of the web,” but it has also expanded with a highly successful Q&A subsite (AskMetaFilter), a site-related discussion area (MetaTalk), and five other smaller subsites: Projects, Music, Jobs, Podcast, and IRL — “In Real Life” — a place where MeFites can plan events or MetaFilter meetups, to gather and socialize offline.

MetaFilter is a closed community — even though anybody can read most sections of the site, there is a one-time \$5 fee to join and contribute content. This creates an important boundary between members and nonmembers and serves to reduce random, “drive-by” comments from those who do not have a vested interest in being a part of the community.

As a highly active member of MetaFilter since 2007, the author has extensive social knowledge of the community and can provide key insights about norms, topics of interest, linguistic trends and other factors that inform data analysis.

The MeFi variable

MetaFilter members often refer to themselves as MeFites — like MeFi, a term that has been the subject of pronunciation debate. The two terms together have been labeled the *M-Set*, which will be used throughout this paper where it is necessary to refer to MeFi, MeFite, and all of their pronunciation variants.¹

Although the pronunciations of the terms of the *M-Set* no doubt have influence on each other, the pronunciation of MeFi has generally been the main focus of the debate on MetaFilter. Additionally, it is the first syllable of MeFi that garners the most attention in community discussions. Owing to space constraints, only the pronunciation of the first syllable of MeFi will be reported on here.

Since it is difficult or unnecessary to convey pronunciation particulars in writing and many MeFites read the site without commenting, it is not easy to establish a consensus on pronunciation trends. It is reasonable to assume that MeFites do not frequently hear variants of the *M-Set*, other than instances from more prominent members of the community who are creating podcasts, conducting interviews, etc. This is a unique situation whereby a form that is high frequency² in its primary modality and domain (text in CMC) is low frequency and linguistically challenging in its non-primary modality and domain (speech in F2F communication).

MeFites who attend F2F meetups might hear instances of MeFi in spoken use, but it should be noted that the meetup participants are generally members who live in the same or neighboring geographic regions, so any assessments about the popularity of one form or another is a local distribution and may not be reflective of the distribution or popular stances of the community as a whole. Attendees at meetups are also self-selecting and are not necessarily representative of the demographics of the entire community.

Predictions about the more dominant pronunciations can be made based on what is known about English phonotactics, grammatical rules and dialect variation, as well as what MeFites share about their pronunciation of MeFi. Until the MeFi pronunciation survey reported on here, those predictions could not be empirically verified.

Several internal and structural linguistic factors influence the pronunciation of the *M-set*. These include, but are not limited to:

- The presence of CamelCase (mixed-case letters) in MeFi, which may visually prompt an open-syllable stressed vowel as in [mi-] or [meɪ-].³
- The frequency of words in English that have strong, consistent mappings of <e>→[ɛ] in a stressed syllable, such as *bet*, *belly*, *deli*, *menu*, *met*, *wet*.
- The frequency of the word “me” in English, perhaps prompting a [mi-] pronunciation; also the favorable semantic associations of “me” for many users in characterizing the site or their involvement with it.
- Consistency with the pronunciation of “MetaFilter,” from which the abbreviation MeFi originates, prompting a [mɛ-] or [meɪ-] pronunciation.

Personal associations people have and other social factors may also come into play. These serve to further complicate the picture, showing that pronunciation variation operates at multiple levels of linguistic structure, from mental organization of language in the mind to sociolinguistic features such as dialect, usage norms and peer influence.

Below is a table outlining the variants of the MeFi variable. Each variant has been given a number-letter label (i.e., 1a–3a, 1b–4b, 3c; see Table 1), which have been consistently used throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

TABLE 1
MEFI VARIANTS AND THEIR VOWEL CODES

1st vowel code	2nd vowel code	Variants of MeFi used by MeFites	Common “pronunciation guides” used by MeFites
1 = [mi-]	a = [-fi]	1a = [mifi]	me-fee
	b = [-fai]	1b = [mifai]	me-fai, me-fye
2 = [mei-]	a = [-fi]	2a = [meifi]	may-fee, meh-fee
	b = [-fai]	2b = [meifai]	may-fai, may-fye, meh-fye
3 = [me-]	a = [-fi]	3a = [mɛfi]	meh-fee, meffy
	b = [-fai]	3b = [mɛfai]	meh-fai, meffai, meh-fye
	c = [-fi]	3c = [mɛfi]	meh-fih, meffih
4 = [mai-]	b = [-fai]	4b = [maifai]	my-fai, myfy, my-fye

NOTES

- Vowel length variations are possible, but vowel length is not a salient feature in the pronunciation debate and therefore not marked here.
- 3c and 4b pronunciations are infrequently preferred. 3c–[mɛfi] violates a grammatical constraint in many Englishes (i.e., no lax vowel other than [ə] is allowed in open, unstressed syllables (Ladefoged 2006)). 4c–[maifai]: there are no words in English dictionaries with syllable-stressed <e> realized as [ai]. These speakers cite phonological analogy with *HiFi* and *WiFi*. 3c and 4b pronunciations were not included as options in the original survey; it was not known at the time that some speakers preferred them.
- “Pronunciation guides” are sometimes ambiguous, e.g., “meh” can refer to either a category 2 or category 3 pronunciation.

Methodology

A site-wide survey was made available for five days to all logged-in MetaFilter members from March 24–28 2010. The survey consisted of eighteen questions in total: sixteen were multiple choice (with some extended answer fill-ins) and two were free-form write-in questions. Questions ranged from site participation behaviors, thoughts about the pronunciation of the M-Set, and demographic background information.

MeFites were provided with six audio samples for the pronunciations of MeFi (1a–3a and 1b–3b pronunciations; see Table 1), and asked which ones they (would) prefer to use in speech. Audio samples were created using AT&T Natural Voices[®] Text-to-Speech Demo⁴ and modified in Praat where necessary to conform to English stress, pitch, and vowel targets that sounded natural to hearers. These audio samples were evaluated by several MeFites and linguists (including two phonologists) for naturalness and categorical discreteness.

Results from survey questions reported on in this study include participants' age, gender, and dialect, whether or not the participant is a native-English speaker, and the participant's current country of residence.

The site moderators coded the survey, as well as collected and provided the results from their database as a .csv file.⁵ This was imported into the researcher's Oracle SQL database and queried to sort demographic information from the survey participants and pronunciation data for MeFi. Only response data from participants who stated that they were currently living in Australia, Canada, the US, and the UK at the time of the survey are reported on in this study.

Demographic information was analyzed for these survey participants. Differences in the overall number of participants from each country is reflective of the distribution of the userbase — MetaFilter is a US-based site and therefore the majority of the topics are posted by US-members about US-centered topics, such as American politics, culture, and media.

All tests for significance between demographic categories, MeFi first-syllable pronunciations, and countries were computed with chi-squares for the entire distribution of possible value categories using online tools (Preacher, 2001). Pairwise interactions (2x2 chi-squares) were also calculated in all possible combinations.

Results and data analysis

Participant demographics — geography, age, and gender

Despite the non-physical locality of MetaFilter as a community weblog, each participant that belongs to it is more or less bound to a geographic region and speaks one or multiple dialects. These two social factors exert influence on participants' pronunciation choices and shape their individual identities. Each participant also has a stake in the co-creation of the group identity. It therefore becomes important to understand the basic demographics of the participants before analyzing their pronunciation choices for MeFi.

Geography

There were 15,762 active MetaFilter members⁶ from March 2009 to March 2010. All 2521 survey participants were active MetaFilter members (16% of the active MetaFilter userbase) across 50 self-reported current countries of residence;⁷ 34 survey participants did not state a current country of residence.

Of those surveys, 2310 were submitted by users currently living in the four countries studied: Australia, Canada, the UK (includes one survey from a resident of the "British Isles"), and the US. These 2310 surveys make up 92% of the total survey data and 15% of the active MetaFilter userbase.

Of the Australian, Canadian, UK, and US resident participants, 2250 were self-reported native English speakers (89% of the total survey data and 14% of the active MetaFilter userbase). These participants will be the focus of the remainder of this report.

Of this survey data, 72% comes from US MeFites. While this is heavily skewed, it is reflective of the actual geographic distribution of the MetaFilter userbase. Another potential issue to note is that each country is treated as a uniform entity, ignoring any

intra-regional variation. This is particularly problematic in the UK data, where there is considerable dialect variation across several national territories, each having their own distinct culture and language ideology. However, these broad geographic divisions provide a good starting point and baseline for analyzing variation in the pronunciation of MeFi.

TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS BY COUNTRY

	% OUT OF 4 COUNTRIES (N=2,250)	% OUT OF ALL SURVEYS (N=2,521)
AUS (N=54)	2%	2%
CAN (N=219)	10%	9%
UK (N=155)	7%	6%
US (N=1,822)	81%	72%
TOTAL (N= 2,250)	100%	89%

Age and gender

The average age for survey participants was 33 (with non-significant variances by country: the average age was 34 for Australians; 32 for UK participants).

Of the survey participants, 36% self-identified as Female, 62% as Male and 2% as Transgender, other, or declined to state.

The ratio of male vs. female survey participants in the UK (72% male; 27% female) and the US (62% male; 36% female) was statistically significant ($X^2 = 5.51, p = 0.019, df = 1$). This result suggests a gender-based difference in MetaFilter membership between the US and the UK, and may also be a confounding variable in the pronunciation of MeFi.

The pronunciation of MeFi

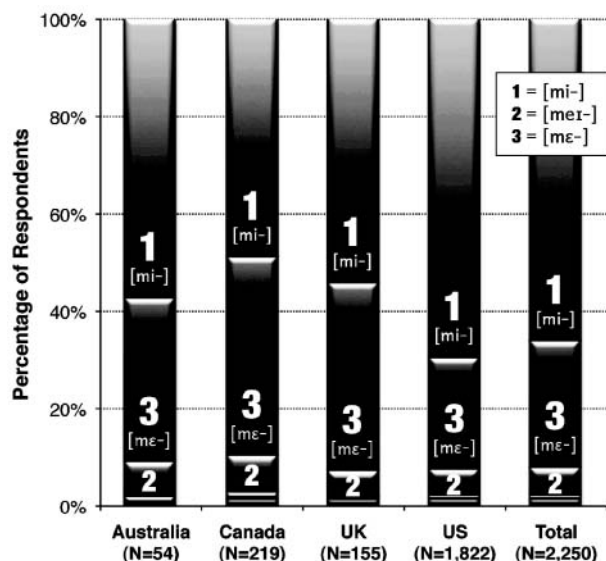


FIGURE 1 Distribution of the pronunciation of <Me> in MeFi by native-English speakers across four countries.

TABLE 3
DISTRIBUTION OF THE PRONUNCIATION OF <ME> IN MEFI BY NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS ACROSS FOUR COUNTRIES

MEFI VARIANT	AUS N=54		CAN N=219		UK N=155		US N=1,822		ALL N=2,250	
1 - [mi-]	31	(57%)	107	(49%)	84	(54%)	1,266	(69%)	1,488	(66%)
2 - [meɪ-]	4	(7%)	17	(8%)	8	(5%)	101	(6%)	130	(6%)
3 - [mɛ-]	18	(33%)	89	(41%)	60	(39%)	417	(23%)	584	(26%)
4 - [maɪ-]	0	(0%)	3	(1%)	1	(1%)	14	(1%)	18	(1%)
NO VARIANT CHOSEN	1	(2%)	3	(1%)	2	(1%)	24	(1%)	30	(1%)

Although the ranked order of preferred variants of MeFi was consistent across all four countries (in order of most to least preferred, by first syllable only: [mi-], [mɛ-], [meɪ-], [maɪ-]), the amounts by which the variants were preferred significantly varied by country ($X^2 = 54.741$, $p < 0.001$, $df = 6$).⁸

Category 1 pronunciations with the front, raised vowel [i], as in [mifaɪ] or [mifi], were most preferred across all four countries (66% of these survey participants). The next most frequent category was 3, the lax open-mid vowel [ɛ], as in [mɛfi], [mɛfaɪ], or [mɛfi], comprising 26% of these survey responses. The third most-preferred pronunciation was category 2, the close-mid vowel [e], usually realized as a diphthong [eɪ] in many Englishes (Ladefoged 2006). This pronunciation variant was chosen by 6% of survey participants. Categories 4-[maɪ-] and responses left blank made up the remaining 2% of the data.

Paired comparisons revealed that the distribution of pronunciations between the US and Canada and between the US and the UK were statistically significant (US-Canada: $X^2 = 39.077$, $p < 0.001$, $df = 2$; US-UK: $X^2 = 19.726$, $p < 0.001$, $df = 2$). No statistical significance was found for paired interactions involving speakers in Australia and any other country, or between Canada and the UK.

Discussion and further research

Explanations for the statistically significant results of this study are currently being explored using mixed-methods analysis. Of particular interest are the differences in pronunciation preferences between MeFites in the US and Canada.

Of the four countries studied, US and Canada had the biggest distributional difference with category 1-[mi-] pronunciation favored by 69% of US MeFites and by 49% of Canadian MeFites. Canadians preferred the category 3-[mɛ-] pronunciation considerably more than Americans (41% to 23% of survey participants).

These outcomes are surprising given the geographic proximity and the cultural influence the US has with Canada. Additionally, General Canadian English and General American English are relatively identical with respect to the vowels involved in this debate (Trudgill and Hannah, 2008: 53). Therefore, it is unlikely that the results can be explained on purely phonological grounds. Other possible explanations for this variation need to be explored.

Different orientations to cultural values involving diversity and language policy between the two countries might have influence on the linguistic choices of individuals. While Canada has less overall English dialect diversity than the US, French and British linguistic and cultural influences are much more present in Canada. Differences in mobility, population/urbanization, social networks, online behaviors, and language attitudes (e.g., exposure to or willingness to use “foreign” sounds) may also come into play (Boberg, 2000).

It is important to note that such factors are not entirely isolatable, but rather part of a geographic region’s co-created, collective history. From this perspective, seemingly tangential social influences such as education policies and political governance can have bearing on speakers’ linguistic choices. This was evident in recent work where it was shown that the pronunciation of *Iraq* is a linguistic resource for American politicians to index their sociopolitical persuasions (Hall-Lew et al., 2010). This research was supported by previous work on “foreign (a)” realizations (Shapiro, 1997; Boberg, 1997), claiming that attitudinal factors are more influential in American English than phonological factors for the foreign (a) variable, but that phonological factors are more influential than attitudinal factors on variant choice in British varieties. We may well see similar patterns emerge with MeFi variants across geographies, with differing sets of indexical associations having more or less influence on pronunciation choice than phonological factors and grammatical rules for certain regions.

In MeFi variation, attitudinal factors are unlikely to be sociopolitical and more likely to be influenced by other types of associations. Preliminary analysis of attitudes about the M-Set in survey comment data suggest that pronunciations that can be semantically associated with a “stereotypical” MeFite identity or with the MeFi community ethos are guiding factors in pronunciation choice for some speakers (e.g. because MeFites are perceived by many to be “fighty,” some may feel that MeFite should be pronounced [mifait]; some perceive “Meffy” pronunciations as cute and fun). Also frequently mentioned are appeals to the authority of grammatical rules or analogy by similar, commonly known forms (e.g., [mi-] as in “me”; [me-] from “MetaFilter”; [meɪ-] as in “may”). Further study will reveal whether or not comment data along these dimensions (i.e., identity-based or prescriptivism-oriented) is unevenly distributed across geographies. This will help determine whether attitudinal or phonological factors are more or less dominant across different countries.

For now, it is speculated that attitudinal factors are more dominant than rule-based factors (phonological and grammatical) for US MeFites, as they may be more actively engaged in individual and group identity construction due to their predominant and visible presence on the US-based site.

Canadian MeFites, while heavily influenced by American culture in general and in greater social proximity to American-centric topics on MetaFilter, are more linguistically influenced by historical and cultural affiliation with the British and the French than Americans are. This could result in a different set of indexical associations for the vowels in the M-Set for Canadians, and could motivate a divergence from US pronunciation choices.

UK MeFites have much more dialect variation in general than the other countries, as well as identifiable pronunciation rules that differ from American speech for the vowels involved here, which could result in more variation in pronunciation

preferences. This is reflected in the distribution of pronunciation choices, with 54% of UK MeFites preferring category 1 pronunciations compared to 69% of US MeFites and 39% of category 3 pronunciations compared to 23% of US MeFites.

The sample size for Australian MeFites is relatively quite small (and reflective of the active MetaFilter userbase), but worthy of further investigation. The survey results show that the Australian distribution of pronunciation choices is not as skewed as the US distribution, but no more diverse than the Canadian or UK distributions. It is likely that the explanation for this result involves several conflicting influential factors that will need to be examined separately. Australia is geographically distant from the countries studied here, but has cultural commonalities with all of them, with its historical roots in British culture, heavy influence from American culture and several other similarities with Canadian culture (demography, historical independence, government and healthcare systems, etc.).

As we can see, geography is an important social factor on the pronunciation of MeFi, but it cannot describe the whole picture. Continued research will explore M-Set naming practices with respect to other factors, including but not limited to, dialect, age, gender identity, and language attitudes.

Conclusion

The pronunciation of the abbreviated Internet place name, MeFi from MetaFilter, across four countries was investigated in this paper. Statistically significant differences in pronunciation choices were found between MetaFilter members in the US and the UK as well as between the US and Canada. The Australian pronunciation distribution was not statistically significant.

The results here show that geography (and therefore, dialect) is an important influential factor in linguistic variation online, even though the speech channel is not present and the notions of community and identity that participants are co-constructing are not defined by physical boundaries.

Notes

¹ The M-Set is a term coined by the author to allow for ease of reference, particularly in spoken discourse contexts.

² MeFi was the 452nd most frequently used word on MetaFilter, according to the MetaFilter Corpus Tables; data from 1999 through 2009 (Millard, 2010). MeFi was immediately preceded by *human*, *company*, *add*, *based*; immediately followed by *past*, *definitely*, *black*, *ok*.

³ The terms of the M-Set are most commonly represented in text on MetaFilter using CamelCase. However, variations in capitalization are not noticed and discussed by MeFites in the same way that pronunciations are. The use and effects of CamelCase on pronunciation will be explored in a later report.

⁴ AT&T Natural Voices Text-to-Speech Demo used with explicit permission from AT&T Labs. <<http://www2.research.att.com/~ttsweb/tts/demo.php>> — top © 2011 AT&T Intellectual Property.

⁵ A special thank you goes to the site moderators for their help with the survey and their continued support with this research.

⁶ An active user is defined as any MetaFilter member who made at least one comment or one post within the prior year. A special thanks to MetaFilter member FishBike for calculating this result.

⁷ Answers from participants currently living the UK and the British Isles (not including the Republic of Ireland) were counted as one country in this result.

⁸ Category 4—[ma-] pronunciations were not included in the chi-square test due to insufficient tokens to yield an accurate result.

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