

“They were still tryna find a way to destry me”
A case study of /str/ palatalization in the speech of Meghan Markle

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This paper focuses on the palatalization of /s/ in the idiolect of Meghan Markle. It has been argued that the relatively recent change from /s/ to /ʃ/ in the cluster /str/ in word-initial and medial positions, such as in the pronunciations *shtrong* and *indushtry*, is triggered, among other factors, by “long distance assimilation to the cluster-final /r/, making [s] become more retroflex and rounded” (Durian 2007).

Most previous studies focus on the influence of speaker age, social class and location of the sound cluster in the word (Durian 2007). In this study, we focus on one speaker: Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, née Markle, actress, and celebrity, who has been identified to palatalize /s/. We examine the syntactic and semantic factors which influence Meghan’s use of the variant /ʃtr/. We want to determine whether palatal /ʃtr/ is a consistent feature of her speech. In particular, we investigate the occurrence of palatalization when the cluster /ʃtr/ stretches across a word-boundary, as in *it’s^h true*, which has not received any attention from previous researchers. We further investigate the question whether Meghan, as a professional actress, can suppress her idiolect while she is in character.

To answer these questions, we analyze video material and transcripts of all six episodes of the 2022 Netflix documentary *Meghan and Harry*, as well as two seasons of *Suits*, a Netflix drama series with Meaghan Markle as the side character Rachel Zane.

Initial results support the hypothesis that /s/-palatalization to /ʃtr/ is not dependent on any specific syntactic or semantic factors. Meghan shows the phenomenon at almost every opportunity. There is thus almost no variation in her idiolect. Moreover, she does not differentiate between her idiolect and her character Rachel Zane.

References: • Durian, David. (2006) “Getting [ʃ]tronger Every Day?: More on Urbanization and the Sociogeographic Diffusion of (Str) in Columbus, OH.” *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 13(2): 65-79.