

*What to expect from “Clinton”**

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Paul de Lacy is editor of the *Cambridge Handbook of Phonology*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2007.

The *Handbook* contains more information on the topics mentioned on in this article.

See <http://handbookofphonology.rutgers.edu>.

I strongly recommend **listening** to this article rather than reading it:

<http://ling.rutgers.edu/~delacy/Clinton-delacy.mp3>

About a year ago I was meandering through a semi-rural central New Jersey town near where I live. As I got within view of [the old red mill](#), two young females walked past. One said to the other “No, I live in [klĩ:].” After several months of furious subconscious computation, I figured out that she was saying “I live in Clinton.” In hindsight it was obvious—after all—the town is called “[Clinton](#)”.

My New Zealand English pronunciation of “Clinton” is quite different: [kləntən], and occasionally [klənʔn]. But given American English phonology, [klĩ:] makes sense. I thought it would be worth talking about why it makes sense now that [Hillary Clinton](#) is one of the leading contenders for the US Democratic party’s presidential nomination. If she becomes president, how will Americans say her name? How should the world expect to hear her name pronounced? “President [klĩ:]”?

I should mention right from the start that I’m not claiming that every American says [klĩ:]. A lot of them might be headed in that direction, but there’s a *lot* of dialect variation. For example, my colleague Tom Stephens told me that people in his South Carolina hometown say [klinɪn]. This is phonologically unsurprising: there’s a phonological process in many American English dialects that actively eliminates /nt/ clusters (especially after stressed vowels). So, you hear [mənɛt] ‘internet’ and [wɪnə] ‘winter.’ The process is productive, too: I was told that a person who squints is a [skwɪnə], even though they said [skwɪntʰ], not *[skwɪn]; someone who hinted at the right answer too much was called a [hɪnə]. So, [klinɪn] makes sense; from what I hear it’s the usual way to say “Clinton” in the southern states.

* My thanks to Jonathan Wright, Tom Stephens, Catherine Kitto, and the long-suffering students in my undergraduate phonetics and “introduction to linguistics” classes.

So why doesn't everyone say [klɪnɪn]? All of my New Jersey students have the /nt/→[n] process (they'd all say [skwɪnə] if they had the chance). But none of them say [klɪnɪn].

Instead, some of them say [klɪnʔn] and others say [klɪʔn]. They even do this productively. I told a couple of students about a verb that means "to act like Clint Eastwood": to "clint." I then managed to maneuver them into saying "clinter" (with the suffix -er—someone who clints), and "clinting" (with the -ing suffix, which they say as [n]). They said [klɪntʔ] for "clint" and [klɪnə] "clinter", as expected (that's the /nt/→[n] process). But for "clinting" they said [klɪnʔn]/[klɪʔn], not *[klɪnɪn].

So what's going on? Well, the final [ɪn] sequence becomes a syllabic nasal: [klɪntɪ̃]; this process happens in all unstressed syllables with liquids and nasals (e.g. [ɹɹɹɹ] 'riddle'). The [t] obligatorily becomes a glottal stop before the syllabic nasal: [klɪnʔn]. The /t/→ʔ/_n process is completely productive, as in [mɪʔn] "mitten", [bʌʔn] "button", [waɪʔn] 'white+en', and even [bʌʔn] for "butt-in" (the nominal form "he's a butt-in" (i.e., someone who butts in); compared with the form when the stress is on the "in": [bʌrɪn]). The /t/→ʔ process inadvertently prevents the /nt/→[n] process from applying: there's no [t] left to be eliminated.

However, most people don't say [klɪnʔn], they say [klɪʔn]. My colleague Jonathan Wright reports that this pronunciation is common throughout the U.S. Even on TV, pundits like [Chris Matthews](#) and [Tim Russert](#) say "Clinton" this way, and participants at the recent Democratic national convention seemed to say this form almost exclusively. For these speakers, every /Vntn/ sequence emerges as [ʔn] (e.g., Jonathan says *mountain* [mãũʔn]). This process of [n]-elimination isn't really surprising. It's been a feature of African American English for a very long time, and word-final and syllable-final codas are especially susceptible to this process. More and more of my students seem to eliminate syllable-final /n/ wherever they can. They merge it with the preceding vowel to make a nasal vowel. There are now a lot of words that contrast just in vowel nasalization, like [hɪtʔ] "hit" vs. [hɪʔ] "hint."

We are getting closer to accounting for [klɪ̃:], believe it or not.

Glottal stops often induce creakiness on surrounding elements. So [klɪʔn] often comes out as [klɪ̃ʔn]. Exactly how much creak there is varies a lot with my students. In fact, I heard a great presentation by Phil Quick where he [observes](#) that the phonological /ʔ/ in the Indonesian language Pendau is often entirely phonetically realized as creak on a nearby vowel. So, it explains why I've heard [klɪ̃n]: the glottal stop is entirely realized as creaky voice.

For some speakers, the realization of /ʔ/ as creaky voice has become more than a process of phonetic realization: it has been 'phonologized' so that a glottal stop becomes creaky voice on a

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preceding vowel. This raises a problem for [kɫ̥ɪn]—it ends in a coda [n]. The [n] must be eliminated, so you might expect the result to be *[kɫ̥ɪ], but this form raises a problem: it's too short. English phonology doesn't permit words to have a single short vowel. For some speakers the solution seems to be to lengthen the vowel: [kɫ̥ɪː]. This lengthening is a bit perplexing since American English doesn't allow [ɪː], but I guess at this point the speaker's dialect is well on its way to developing contrastive nasal vowels, contrastive creaky vowels, and contrastive nasalized creaky vowels, so a long lax vowel isn't too much of a stretch. I've heard [kɫ̥ɪ̹̃], too, which has the virtue of avoiding a long [ɪː].

There's even another option. The African American students in my class said [kɫĩɹĩ] for "Clinton". In fact, there's a common expression in the US "No you didn't" which is properly (it seems) said in the African American dialect. The "didn't" comes out as [dɹĩ] (note that the final /t/ deletes entirely—there's no creak on the preceding vowel). The same kind of thing happens to *Clinton*, except that the first vowel is nasalized because of the following /n/: [kɫĩɹĩ]. I'd expect [kɫĩɹĩ] to go down the same path as for [kɫĩʔɹĩ]: the glottal stop will cause creakiness on the preceding vowel ([kɫḭ̃ɹĩ]), with the glottal stop ultimately eliminated as its own segment [kɫḭ̃], with the creak extending into the following vowel [kɫḭ̰̃]/[kɫḭ̃:]. It seems like all roads are leading inexorably to [kɫḭ̃].

So, how does this affect you? Well, if you're listening to the presidential nominee debates you might hear Hillary Clinton called [klɪnm], [klɪnʔn̩], [klɪʔn], [klɪʔɪ], [klɪn], [klɪ:], or [klɪ̃]. Surprisingly, none of these forms are unexpected depending on what kind of phonology and phonetic system the speaker has.

Of course, there's a lot about "Clinton" I didn't discuss here. There's the sociolinguistic side of things: who says which pronunciation? There's the diachronic point of view, which is tied in with issues of perception and articulation: how did learners come to actuate a phonological process /nt/→[n]? How about /t/→[ʔ]/_n, etc., etc. There's the phonetic interface point of view: how is phonological /ʔ/ realized phonetically as creaky voice? It's crucial to consider all of these aspects to fully explain "Clinton". My focus was on how productive processes in a person's phonological system could explain the range of dialect variation.

So, what will “Clinton” become in the US? The southern states’ [klɪnɪn] is probably at a fairly stable state; at most the next step would be to follow many other dialects and get rid of the final nasal: i.e., future [klɪnɪ̃]. As for the New Jersey dialect, and for many others, the [kɫɪ̃ŋ] form seems to be popular, but the more undergraduates I hear, the more that [kɫɪ̃ŋɪ] and even [kɫɪ̃ŋ̃] crops up. African American English seems to be following a different path, but will probably end up in the same place. “Clinton” is a herald of things to come: prepare to hear more and more creaky nasalized vowels emanating from the US.