

A rapid and anonymous study of r-vocalization in an r-pronouncing city

An anomaly in the speech pattern of native Philadelphians concerning r-vocalization has been discovered.

Dialectological studies such as Kurath & McDavid (1961) have reported that Philadelphia is an r-pronouncing city. There have also been findings different from those of such reports. Labov (2001) found variable r-vocalization according to ethnicity, with a high frequency of /r/ vocalization specifically among Italians. It has also been found that in Philadelphia, African Americans tend to vocalize post-vocalic /r/, correlated with their degree of integration into the AAVE speech community (Myhill 1988).

For the past two years, research has confirmed these findings and revealed that in Philadelphia the African American population showed a significantly different organization of /r/ vocalization from the rest of the community.

The method we used for our data collection was the rapid and anonymous survey (Labov 1966). We traveled to different regions of Philadelphia (West Philly, North Philly, Center City, Italian Market, etc.) and asked residents, merchants, and service people for directions to either Girard Avenue or Market Street. The former was chosen as an example of a dissimilating word, in which the frequency of r-vocalization is likely to be elevated. The questions were posed with wrong street labels: (*Do you know the way to Girard Street? Do you know the way to Market Avenue?*) in order to increase the likelihood that the subject would pronounce either Market or Girard. We then recorded whether or not there had been r-vocalization in the words *Market* and *Girard*. Other social factors that could be determined, such as ethnicity, approximate age, and local status (resident, merchant, or service person), were also noted. We found that this method produced a greater chance of recording regular speech patterns rather than the more formal patterns that would be recorded by direct questioning.

R-vocalization was favored more by service workers than merchants or residents, and more by African-Americans than other groups, and more in the Italian community than elsewhere.

It has been the general consensus among linguists that internal and external factors are independent of each other in the course of linguistic change. However, the effect of dissimilation (an internal factor) interacted with race (an external factor) in that African Americans, compared to other ethnicities, showed a much greater difference in vocalization for *Girard* than *Market*. This raises the possibility that the underlying form for *Girard* has become r-less for some speakers in the AAVE community.

References:

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