

The Return of R

Naomi Nagy and Patricia Irwin
University of New Hampshire New York University

Irwin & Nagy (2007) established that (R) is undergoing a change in the speech of white Bostonians: younger speakers and more educated speakers have higher rates of retention of post-vocalic [r]. This paper compares the production of (R) between white and African American (AA) Bostonians, and white speakers from two small cities in nearby New Hampshire. The same internal patterns are replicated.

Using a corpus of ~10,000 tokens, we compare patterns among lifetime residents of Boston and NH who vary in age, sex, occupation, and level of education. These 56 speakers were recorded reading a light-hearted story containing 224 words with post-vocalic /r/. The recordings were first analyzed auditorily, with binary judgments made about the presence or absence of [r]. Environments were categorized according to morphological position, phonological context (following Feagin 1990), as well as the interacting factors of word class (functional/lexical), word length, and lexical frequency. The factors were submitted to multivariate analysis. All the linguistic factors except word class proved significant. The strongest predictor of post-vocalic [r] in all communities, however, was the combined variable of age/sex, with young women leading the change in the white community, and young men leading the change in the AA community.

Given that Boston is popularly recognized as a highly segregated city whose majority population is white, we were curious to determine whether the patterning of (R) among its AAs was due more to contact with white Bostonian English or to the historical non-rhoticity of AAE (cf. Hinton & Pollock 2000). Two pieces of evidence suggest the former. First, the ordering of phonological contexts in which [r] is being re-introduced is virtually identical between white and AA speakers. Second, we coded each AA speaker's use of several phonological features of AAE (from Green 2002, Hinton & Pollock 2000, Rickford 1999, Wolfram 1994) and looked for a correlation between the usage of these phonological features and rate of *r*-lessness. Among the AA Bostonians, the most *r*-less speaker is the one with the lowest occurrence of AAE features, suggesting that the *r*-lessness of AA Bostonians comes more from the influence of white Bostonian English than from the phonology of AAE.

The speakers from NH show the same constraints as the white speakers from Boston, but with a much higher rate of [r] overall (87% vs. 38%). The age effect among NH speakers is even more pronounced, indicating that (R), along with the *Mary/merry/marry* merger, short-*a* breaking, and the *father/bother* merger (Nagy 2001, Wood 2006), is a means by which southern NHites are distinguishing themselves from Bostonians.

Following Hay & Maclagan's (forthcoming) evidence that (R) is best analyzed as a scalar variable, we acoustically analyze a subset of tokens. We measure the normalized relationship of F2 and F3 as an acoustic correlate of degree of constriction and report on the correlation between these continuous acoustic measurements and the independent variables above, as well as whether this approach provides a better model of the data and can further validate the evidence that post-vocalic [r] is returning to New England.

References

- Feagin, C. 1990. Dynamics of sound change in Southern States English: From r-less to r-ful in three generations. In *Development and diversity: Language variation across time and space: A festschrift for Charles-James N. Bailey*. Dallas, ed. J. Edmondson, C. Feagin, and P. Mülhäusler, 129–146. SIL/University of Texas, Arlington.
- Green, L. J. (2002). *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hay, J. & M. Maclagan. (forthcoming). Social and phonetic conditioners on the frequency and degree of 'intrusive /r/' in New Zealand English. In *Methods in Sociophonetics*, ed. D. Preston and N. Niedzielski. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Hinton, L. & K. Pollock (2000). Regional variation in the phonological characteristics of African American Vernacular English. *World Englishes*, 19, 1: 59-71.
- Irwin, P. & N. Nagy. (forthcoming in 2007). Bostonians /r/ speaking: A quantitative look at (R) in Boston. *Penn Working Papers in Linguistics 13: Selected papers from NWAV 35*.
- Nagy, N. (2001). 'Live free or die' as a linguistic principle. *American Speech* 76, 1: 30-41.
- Rickford, J. (1999). *African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, Educational Implications*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Wolfram, W. (1994). The phonology of a sociocultural variety: The case of African American Vernacular English. In J. E. Bernthal & N. W. Bankson, eds., *Child Phonology: Characteristics, Assessment, and Interventions*. New York: Thieme.
- Wood, J. (2006). The Phonetic status of short-*a* in Northern New England. UNH ms.
- Yaeger-Dror, M. (2005). Best Practices in Sociophonetics. NWAV presentation, NYU.