

7. The restoration of post-vocalic /r/

The weakening of English /r/ seems to have its beginning in the seventeenth century, when the trilled apical consonant gave way to the humped or retroflex consonant that is general today in most English dialects (Jespersen 1949: 13.2). The tendency for some post-vocalic /r/ to be vocalized before /s/ has been traced in fifteenth- to eighteenth-century spellings by Wyld (1936: 298–299), as in the Cely papers' example of *passell* for 'parcel', and in such surviving colloquial forms as *bust*, *fust*, *cussed* for 'burst', 'first', 'cursed'. The general vocalization of post-vocalic /r/ is an eighteenth-century phenomenon. In 1775 Walker used *ar* to register broad *a* in *aunt* and *haunch*. The first general recognition of a dialect with consistent *r*-vocalization is found in Walker's 1791 dictionary, where he reported that London speech consistently realized 'bar', 'bard', 'card' as *baa*, *baad*, *caad*, etc.

It seems clear that the default value in the seventeenth and eighteenth century for North American dialects was consistent *r*-pronunciation. The areas of *r*-vocalization in the eastern United States are centered about the major cities of Boston, Providence, New York, Richmond, Charleston, Savannah, and Atlanta. This is documented most clearly in Map 151 (*dollar*) and Map 156 (*door*) of PEAS. Around each of the *r*-less cities there is found a roughly convex area of *r*-vocalization with a radius of about 75 miles.¹

The basic vernacular of New York City was consistently *r*-less in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. *r*-less pronunciation, as a characteristic of British Received Pronunciation, was also taught as a model of correct, international English by schools of speech, acting, and elocution in the United States up to the end of World War II. It was the standard model for most radio announcers and used as a high prestige form by Franklin Roosevelt.

r-pronunciation was examined in some detail in the sociolinguistic study of New York City (Labov 1966). The variable (r) is defined as tautosyllabic (or coda) /r/. This excludes intervocalic /r/, which is never vocalized in the white community, and word-final /r/ before a vowel-initial word, which is vocalized at a much lower rate. The result showed a fine-grained stratification in the use of constricted [r] in formal styles, while in casual style there was a sharp division between (younger) upper middle class speakers and everyone else. There is some evidence of variable *r*-pronunciation in New York City before World War II which may have provided the raw material for the norm of constricted /r/ (Frank 1948), but the shift to a positive evaluation of *r*-pronunciation affected all New Yorkers born after 1923 (Labov 1966: Ch. 11). Parallel shifts towards an *r*-pronouncing norm can be observed in Boston.² Recent re-studies of New York City speech show that a consistent pattern of *r*-vocalization characterizes the spontaneous speech of all but the upper middle class and the upper class. *r*-pronunciation is primarily a feature of formal speech: a superposed dialect, with a rate of increase of about 1.5 percent a year (Fowler 1986; Labov 1994: 83–87). Feagin (1987) reported a more radical shift to *r*-pronunciation across three generations in Anniston, Alabama.

The Telsur interview did not inquire directly into *r*-pronunciation. Given the high frequency of this variable, it was evident from the first ten tokens of (r) if the speaker was consistently *r*-pronouncing. Not surprisingly, the great majority of Telsur speakers displayed consistent *r*-pronunciation, including many in tradi-

tional *r*-vocalizing regions. If any variation was noted, the next 20 tokens of coda /r/ as defined above were rated and the percentage of vocalization was calculated. The results are shown on Map 7.1.

The dark blue isoglosses on Map 7.1 indicate those areas of the eastern United States in which some degree of *r*-vocalization was reported in PEAS in 1961 (Map 151 for *father*, Map 156 for *door*). The colors of the circles and stars indicate the use of (r) by Telsur speakers. Yellow symbols show speakers with consistent *r*-pronunciation. Green indicates infrequent vocalization of /r/ (1–49%), light blue indicates predominant vocalization (50–90%) and dark blue consistent vocalization (91–100%).

The blue and green symbols on Map 7.1 are confined to the *r*-less areas of PEAS, with the exception of points in the Gulf states that were not covered by PEAS. In Eastern New England and New York City, *r*-vocalization is still strongly represented, though largely variable. There are only two speakers who show 100 percent *r*-lessness. At the same time, only one speaker in these two regions is consistently *r*-pronouncing.³

The Telsur interviews contain many sections that focus attention on speech to one degree or another, ranging from the semantic differential to elicitation of minimal pairs. Dividing the data for four New York speakers into those that are marked for (relatively) formal styles and all other, we find that the rate of *r*-pronunciation is 55.5% for formal styles, and 24.5% for the balance. This is consistent with the view that emerges from the more detailed study of 1966, that *r*-pronunciation is chiefly a marker of formal speech in New York City.

The expansion of /r/ in the South

The development of /r/ is quite different in the South. *r*-pronunciation has swept through the region in all styles of speech, so that younger white speakers are consistently *r*-ful. The majority of the circles are yellow: 136 out of 157. The stars on the right-hand side of the groups for New Orleans, Jackson, Birmingham, Atlanta, Columbia, and Durham represent the African-American speakers for whom *r*-vocalization appears to be stable: only three out of 22 are consistently *r*-pronouncing.

Table 7.1 shows the results of a regression analysis of (r) for these 179 Southern speakers. The negative coefficient for age indicates that each older generation is about 14 percent lower in *r*-constriction, a strong effect in apparent time.⁴

1 New York City is an exception here; the *r*-less area surrounding the city is confined to New York and its immediate neighbors, Jersey City and Newark. This geographic constriction of the NYC dialect is characteristic of the dialect as a whole.

2 W. Labov conducted an informal replication of the New York City department store study in Filene's in Boston in 1986, with similar results.

3 The points in western Massachusetts and Connecticut that fall near or within the *r*-less isogloss were quite variable in the PEAS data and do not sharply define the Eastern New England area.

4 There is not enough variation in the African-American community to show such an age trend, though one of the two *r*-ful speakers is a 16-year-old girl.

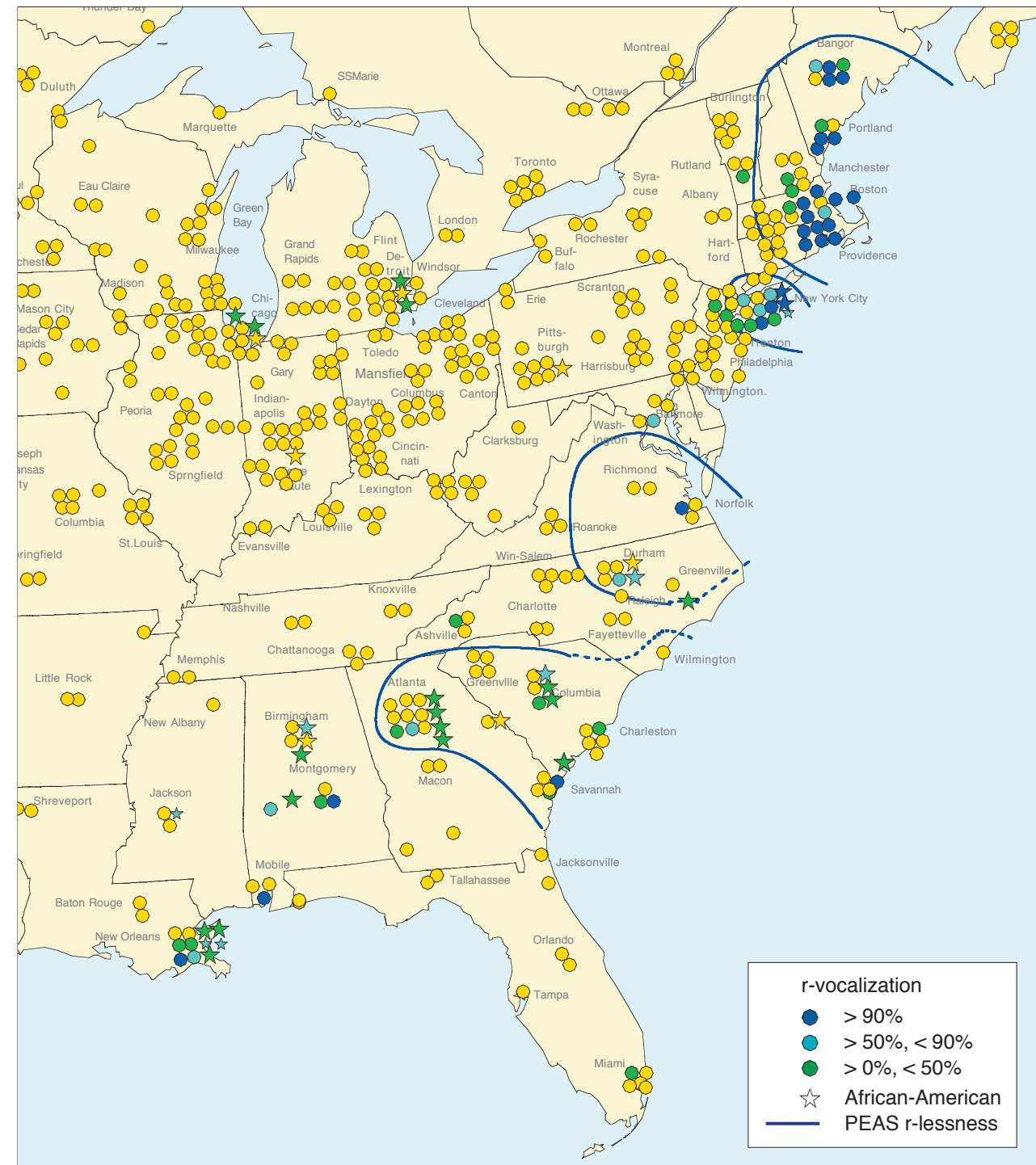
These figures conform to the view of rapid generational change in the use of /r/ that Feagin (1987) first reported in Anniston, Alabama. It appears to be a change from above: the higher the educational level, the more *r*-ful the speaker, though this is a much smaller effect than age. The last row shows the largest effect, all other things being equal, African-American ethnicity lowers the frequency of *r*-constriction by 32 percent.

Table 7.1. Regression analysis of *r*-constriction in formerly *r*-less areas

Variable	South		NYC and ENE	
	Coefficient	Probability	Coefficient	Probability
Constant	97	≤ 0.0001	72	≤ 0.0001
Age * 25	-14	≤ 0.0001	--	n.s.
Education * 4	6	0.0034	--	n.s.
African-American	-32	≤ 0.0001	--	n.s.
N	179		41	

The right-hand side of Table 7.1 shows a comparable regression analysis of the other *r*-less areas, Eastern New England and New York City. For two of the three independent variables, it is not surprising that there is no significant effect, as a consequence of the small numbers of speakers in those categories; only three of the 41 subjects are upper middle class, and only three are African-American. But there is an even distribution of age from 14 to 80 among these 41 subjects and no significant effect of age is found. As noted above Labov 1966 found a change from above in New York City that began at the end of World War II, and the studies repeated in real time have confirmed the results (Fowler 1986; MacDonald 1984). However, the change in New York City is primarily a change in the norms of careful speech. The small rate of increase of 1.5 percent a year reported above is largely due to the behavior of the younger upper middle class speakers. For others, *r*-constriction shows an increase only in careful styles, and this tendency is greatest in middle-aged rather than younger speakers. From all indications, Eastern New England shows a similar pattern.

This striking difference between the mode of restoration of /r/ in the South and the route followed in the North does not have any obvious linguistic explanation, and requires a further examination of the social and cultural matrix in which /r/ is restored. Chapters 11 and 18 will show that the central or defining region of Southern English has shifted from the coastal area to the Appalachian area, which was always an *r*-pronouncing region.



Map 7.1. *r*-vocalization in the eastern United States



In the middle of the twentieth century, *r*-less speech was found in all of the major cities of the eastern U.S. except for Philadelphia. In the ANAE data, vocalized /r/ is still to be found in the area of Eastern New England, centered around Boston and Providence, and in New York City, but the great majority of Southerners (except for African-Americans) are now using consonantal /r/ consistently. Stars (of any color) represent African-American speakers.