

Bostonians' /r/ speaking: A quantitative look at (R) in Boston

The Boston accent is among the most notorious in America, and the most frequently mentioned aspects of it are “dropped R’s” and the fronted vowel in words like *park* and *car*. Variation in the production of post-vocalic /r/ has been carefully studied in many dialects (Foulkes 1998, Hay & Sudbury 2005, Yeager-Dror 1991), but no in-depth quantitative analysis of the production of (R) in Boston has been published. This paper begins to fill that gap, presenting the first sociolinguistic analysis of (R) in Boston. This study complements the descriptive overviews of American (R) found in Labov, Ash & Boberg (2006) and Thomas (2001).

We present a comparison of patterns among 13 lifetime residents of Boston who vary in age, sex, income, neighborhood, and level of education. These speakers were recorded reading a story containing ~200 words with post-vocalic /r/. The recordings were analyzed auditorily by both authors, making binary judgments about the presence or absence of [r]. Environments were categorized according to word-position, preceding vowel, following segment, word type, word length, and word stress. The factors were submitted to multivariate analysis using Goldvarb X for Macintosh (Sankoff et al. 2005). All the linguistic and social factors proved significant. We highlight the following phonological effects:

- Vocalization of /r/ is most likely to occur when /r/ is morpheme-final, but not word-final.
- Vocalization of /r/ is least likely to occur when the /r/ is word-final. This may be because r-vocalization is less likely to occur when /r/ is followed by a pause. This result both supports phonological theories of /r/ distribution based on syllable structure (*cf.* McCarthy 1993) and shows the need to interpret /r/ production as gradient rather than categorical, as proposed by Anttila & Cho (1998).

There is some evidence that this variable is undergoing a change in Boston: younger speakers have a higher rate of retention of post-vocalic /r/: 20- and 30-year olds have almost twice as much as 40-70 year olds. Level of education also has a strong effect on (R): speakers with post-college education retain /r/ twice as often as those with only a high school education, supporting the popularly expressed claim that r-deletion is stigmatized. Women, however, have a slightly lower rate of r-retention than men, complicating the picture.

The speech of two well-known Bostonians, Tom and Ray Magliozzi (the Car Talk guys) was also examined, using all tokens from a fifty-minute broadcast of the NPR show *Car Talk*. Our analysis of the Car Talk speech shows that these two celebrities follow the same (phonological) rules as the Bostonians discussed above. The combined rate of retention of /r/ for the Car Talk speakers is 66% (801 tokens). However, the two Car Talk speakers have different rates of retention (Ray: 73% r-ful, Tom: 45%), both of which differ from the overall rate of retention found for the reading-passage males educated beyond high school (53%). Comparing these rates, we suggest that the composite persona presented by Car Talk is that of a well-educated person but still very much a Boston local, just who you'd want to fix your car.

References

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