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Loss of Rhoticity in South-West England

Summary

The following doctoral dissertation describes the current state of adaptation of rhoticity in South-West England. Rhoticity is the pronunciation of the /r/ sound word-finally and preconsonantly, e.g. in words CAR and CARD. Three counties have been selected for fieldwork, i.e. Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. Despite the scarcity of research on this accentual region, as well as relying on anecdotal evidence, some reports (Piercy 2012) give evidence about the complete rhoticity loss in young speakers in Dorset which would denote a very rapid phonological shift. Comparing dialectology data coming from different periods (Orton and Wakelin 1967, Trudgill 1999), it seems indeed that the rhotic region in England has been shrinking at a very fast pace. In order to verify the hypothesis about rhoticity loss in the area, I have selected Cornwall, Devon and Dorset for fieldwork. The first methodology was inspired by Labov (1966) and was about performing rapid anonymous surveys. In each county, I have selected one city. These were Truro in Cornwall, Exeter in Devon and Bournemouth in Dorset. In each of these cities, I was visiting three supermarkets which were stratified socio-economically and geographically. The lower-end supermarkets were located in worse neighbourhoods and were attracting customers from the working class and the lower-middle class. The middle-range supermarkets were attracting the widest possible clientele. The higher-end supermarkets were located in city centres and were offering gourmet products, were never crowded and they looked aesthetically pleasing. In each supermarket, I was asking the passers-by for the time. I deliberately chose to do shopping at around 4pm, so that the word FOUR could be elicited. I was then able to verify whether the pronunciation was rhotic (with /r/) or non-rhotic (without /r/). Due to the larger popularity of non-rhotic pronunciation in England, the hypothesis adopted was that more rhoticity would be heard in the supermarkets representing the lower socio-economic spectrum, while in the supermarkets attracting the higher-income customers I would hear much less rhoticity, as such customers might aspire to adopting pronunciation features more common in the culturally influential London. Indeed, the hypothesis was supported with the data gathered. Another finding was that in shop in Cornwall, there was considerably more rhoticity than in Devon and Dorset. Given the geographical seclusion of Cornwall, and the vicinity of London in the case of Dorset, these results were also predictable. Another dataset comprised sociolinguistic interviews. This medium for recording

language data assured more control over the participants. They were designed as typical sociolinguistic interviews and were divided into five different parts, which were 1) casual conversation, 2) reading out the dialogue, 3) reading out a short story, 4) reading the list of words, 5) reading the minimal pairs of words. Each of the reading tasks 2 – 5 contained a lot of words which featured potential /r/ sounds. With each task, the level of speech formality rose. Out of all 4,544 observations (99 per all 46 informants) only 28% of the words were pronounced with the /r/ sound at the end of the word or in front of a consonant. One of the most interesting results is that rhoticity rates rose with speech formality, which shows that careful speech and spelling play an important role in the adoption of rhotic variants of pronunciation by the interviewees. Another important factor was age. The older the speakers, the higher rhoticity rates they displayed. To sum up, rhoticity may already be a minority feature in South-West England. The difference, however, was a little less dramatic than initially thought. Namely, young speakers still display some rhoticity, although in limited contexts, but this may signify that rhoticity will not disappear in the research region in the next few decades.