

Variable rhoticity in Standard Scottish English: a sociolinguistic perspective

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This paper explores patterns of variation and change with regard to rhoticity in Standard Scottish English (SSE). A substantial shift in the usage of postvocalic /r/ has been reported for this variety of Scottish English, with rhoticity among middle class Scottish speakers declining at the beginning of the 20th century and making a subsequent comeback from the 1970s onwards (Lawson et al. 2014). However, most available studies of rhoticity in Scotland focus either on changes in the pronunciation of /r/ among working class speakers (e.g. Romaine 1978, Macafee 1983, Lawson et al. 2008) or on social stratification of /r/ from the perspective of the working class (e.g. Stuart-Smith et al. 2007, Stuart-Smith et al. 2014), thus making the intricacies of rhoticity patterns within the middle-class speech a still significantly understudied issue.

The paper presents results of a sociolinguistic investigation into variable rhoticity patterns of middle class Scottish speakers from Glasgow and Edinburgh. Based on sociolinguistic interviews from SCOTS (Scottish Corpus of Text & Speech), my analysis consisted of identifying and auditorily coding 5001 potential /r/ sites in speech recordings of 12 middle class speakers (6 F, 6 M). The speakers were divided into 2 age groups: 7 speakers born before 1950s and 5 speakers born in the 1980s and 1990s. The realisations of /r/ were grouped into one of the three categories, from the most to the least rhotic: 1. Tap or trill, 2. Approximant, 3. Zero. A fourth category, Unidentified, was employed when the realisations of /r/ could not be assigned to any of the three categories above, e.g. when more than one interviewee was speaking at the same time. I examined the usage of the above /r/ variants in relation to the age of the speakers; I also analysed the realisations of /r/ in 4 phonological contexts for occurrence: (i) before fricatives, (ii) before consonants other than the fricatives, (iii) before vowels, and (iv) before a pause.

The statistical analysis in terms of a logistic regression model indicates divergence in the rhoticity patterns between the older and the younger speakers, as the replacement of the traditional tap/trill variant by the approximant variant turned out to be significantly influenced by the age factor ($p < .0001$). Age also interacts significantly with the phonological context ($p < .0001$), with the two age groups opting for the tap/trill vs. approximant in different environments. For example, in the context before vowels, it is the younger speakers who prefer to use the traditional tap/trill variant, while the older speakers use predominantly approximants. Age also turned out to be a significant predictor regarding the usage of taps/trills vs. the zero variant before fricatives and other consonants ($p < .0001$). These results indicate a qualitative change in rhoticity patterns among SSE speakers, which is driven by both social and linguistic factors.

Word count: 462

Keywords: rhoticity, sociolinguistics, Standard Scottish English

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