

Semi-rhoticity in language contact: English-based creoles and interlanguages



Katalin Balogné Bérces

Ágnes Piukovics

Institute of English and American Studies, PPCU



Intro

- various forms of language contact display parallel characteristics
- mixed and/or intermediate systems:
interlanguage (L1 → L2) ~ creole/dialect
contact (substrate → superstrate) +
general principles of linguistic organisation
("interlanguage hypothesis", cf. Plag 2009)



Intro

- the example here: (non-)rhoticity in varieties of English
- rhotic and non-rhotic varieties
- intermediate forms of rhoticity: semi-rhotic (Wells 1982: 76, 221)
- we have observed the same pattern in the case of certain Hungarian learners (with a rhotic L1) of English whose target accent is non-rhotic



Rhoticity

two types of R-systems in English:

- **R-ful (rhotic)**: all historical/orthographic R's are pronounced
- **R-less (non-rhotic)**: only prevocalic (non-coda) R's are pronounced

nurse, car, market, letter

“Accents [in which] historical /r/ is retained consistently in some non-prevocalic environments but lost consistently in others, may be referred to as **semi-rhotic**.” (Wells 1982:221)



Semi-rhoticity

- varieties with intermediate rhoticity arise under dialect contact:
- either a traditionally non-rhotic accent is shifting towards rhoticity (documented cases include the Jamaican basilect and Boston English)
- or vice versa (e.g., Southland New Zealand English, North Yorkshire English)
- the resulting system does not coincide with that of either the substrate or the superstrate
- **Overall degree of R realisation (rhoticity): 20–40%**
(e.g., 21.7% in a survey on Jamaican Creole – Rosenfelder 2009:68; 38% in a survey on Boston English – Irwin & Nagy 2007:140)



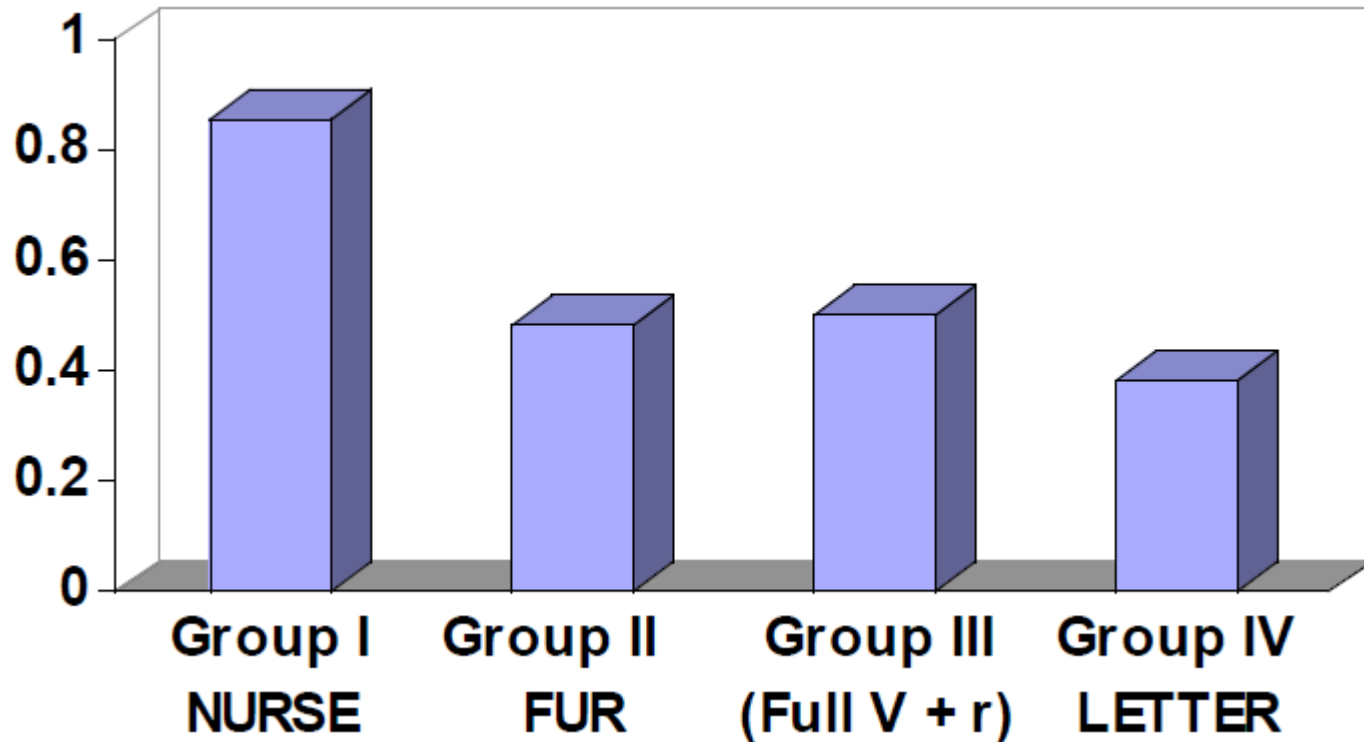
Semi-rhoticity

1. **The melodic effect:** a preceding NURSE (and/or LETTER) vowel supports the realisation of R: *nurse* > *market*



Semi-rhoticity

R realisation in Boston English (Irwin – Nagy 2007:141)



Group III: CURE, START, NEAR, SQUARE, NORTH/FORCE



Semi-rhoticity

- 1. The melodic effect:** a preceding NURSE (and/or LETTER) vowel supports the realisation of R: *nurse* > *market*

Possible explanation:

NURSE/LETTER contains an R-coloured vowel (i.e., /ɜ̃/ or /ə̃/) or a syllabic /r/ – the R is in the nucleus, not the coda



Semi-rhoticity

1. **The melodic effect:** a preceding NURSE (and/or LETTER) vowel supports the realisation of R: *nurse* > *market*



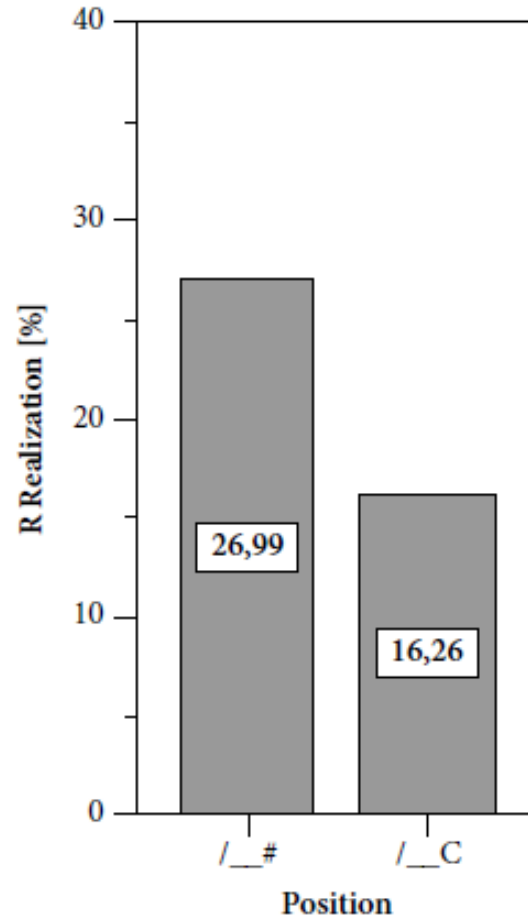
Semi-rhoticity

- 1. The melodic effect:** a preceding NURSE (and/or LETTER) vowel supports the realisation of R: *nurse* > *market*
- 2. The prosodic effect:** word-final (stressed) position supports the realisation of R: *carr / letterr* > *market*



Semi-rhoticity

R realisation in Jamaican English (Rosenfelder 2009:79)



Semi-rhoticity

1. **The melodic effect**
2. **The prosodic effect:** word-final (stressed) position supports the realisation of R: *car_ / letter_ > mar_ ket*



Semi-rhoticity

1. **The melodic effect**
2. **The prosodic effect:** word-final (stressed) position supports the realisation of R: *car̄ / letter̄ > mar̄ket*

Possible explanation:

The phonological strength of a position inhibits the lenition/deletion of the segment in that position. Word-final is stronger than preconsonantal, stressed is stronger than unstressed



Word-final is stronger than preconsonantal

(368) Old French l-vocalisation

a. Onset

#		C		V	V
lamina	lame	plaga	plaie	vela	voile
levare	lever	flore	fleur	mula	mule
luna	lune	fab(u)la	fable	dolore	douleur
lepore	lièvre			valere	valoir
		C			
		mer(u)lu	merle		

b. Coda

	#		C
sal	sel	alba	aube
mel	miel	talpa	taupe
caball(u)	cheval	sol(i)dare	souder
fil(u)	fil	poll(i)ce	pouce



Semi-rhotic interlanguages

- **Question:** Can the “imperfect” acquisition of non-rhoticity result in semi-rhotic interlanguages?
- An empirical study



The study

Participants:

- 13 Hungarian language teachers and BA students of English Studies, i.e., advanced learners of English with a rhotic L1 plus heavily influenced by spelling in their English
- For all of them the target accent is non-rhotic



The study

Methods:

- The participants took part in a recording session involving three tasks:
 1. free speech on a given subject;
 2. guided speech (placing objects in a picture);
 3. reading out a passage.
- The tokens containing potential non-prevocalic R's were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet
- The database filtered for three variables: position of R, stress, preceding vowel
- The participants' realisations (and non-realizations) of all types of the tokens were added to the database



The study

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1					Speaker 1		Speaker 2		Speaker 3	
2	word	R-position	stress	vowel	R kept	Total	R kept	Total	R kept	Total
3	air_conditioner	before C	stressed	NEAR/SQUARE/CURE	0	2	0	1	0	1
4	air conditioner_	final	unstressed	LETTER	0	2	0	1	0	1
5	armchair	before C	stressed	START	0	1	0	2	0	3
6	armchair_	final	stressed	NEAR/SQUARE/CURE	0	1	0	2	2	3
7	beer	final	stressed	NEAR/SQUARE/CURE	0	3	0	1	1	1
8	binoculars	before C	unstressed	LETTER	0	1	0	1	0	1
9	bird	before C	stressed	NURSE	0	1	0	1	1	1
10	butterfly	before C	unstressed	LETTER	0	1	0	1	0	1
11	carpet	before C	stressed	START	0	1	0	1	0	0
12	caterpillar	before C	unstressed	LETTER	0	1	0	1	0	1
13	caterpillar_	final	unstressed	LETTER	0	1	0	1	0	1
14	computer	final	unstressed	LETTER	0	1	0	2	0	1
15	corner	before C	stressed	NORTH	0	1	0	1	0	0
16	corner_	final	unstressed	LETTER	0	1	0	1	0	0



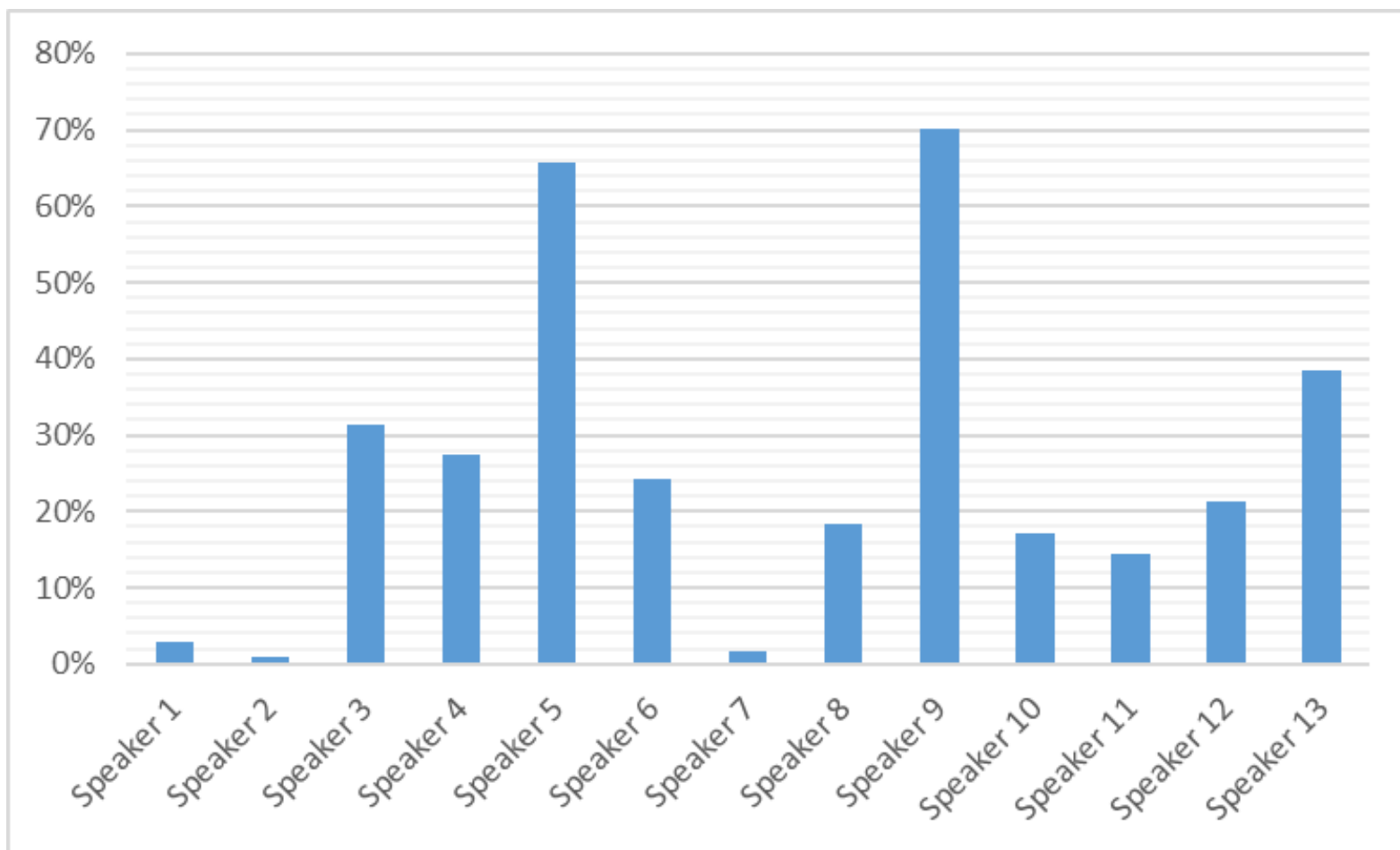
First results

- **Overall degree of R realisation (rhoticity): 26%**
- i.e., non-rhotic-targeting students perform reasonably well but not without “errors”
- **Inter- and intra-speaker variation:** considerable



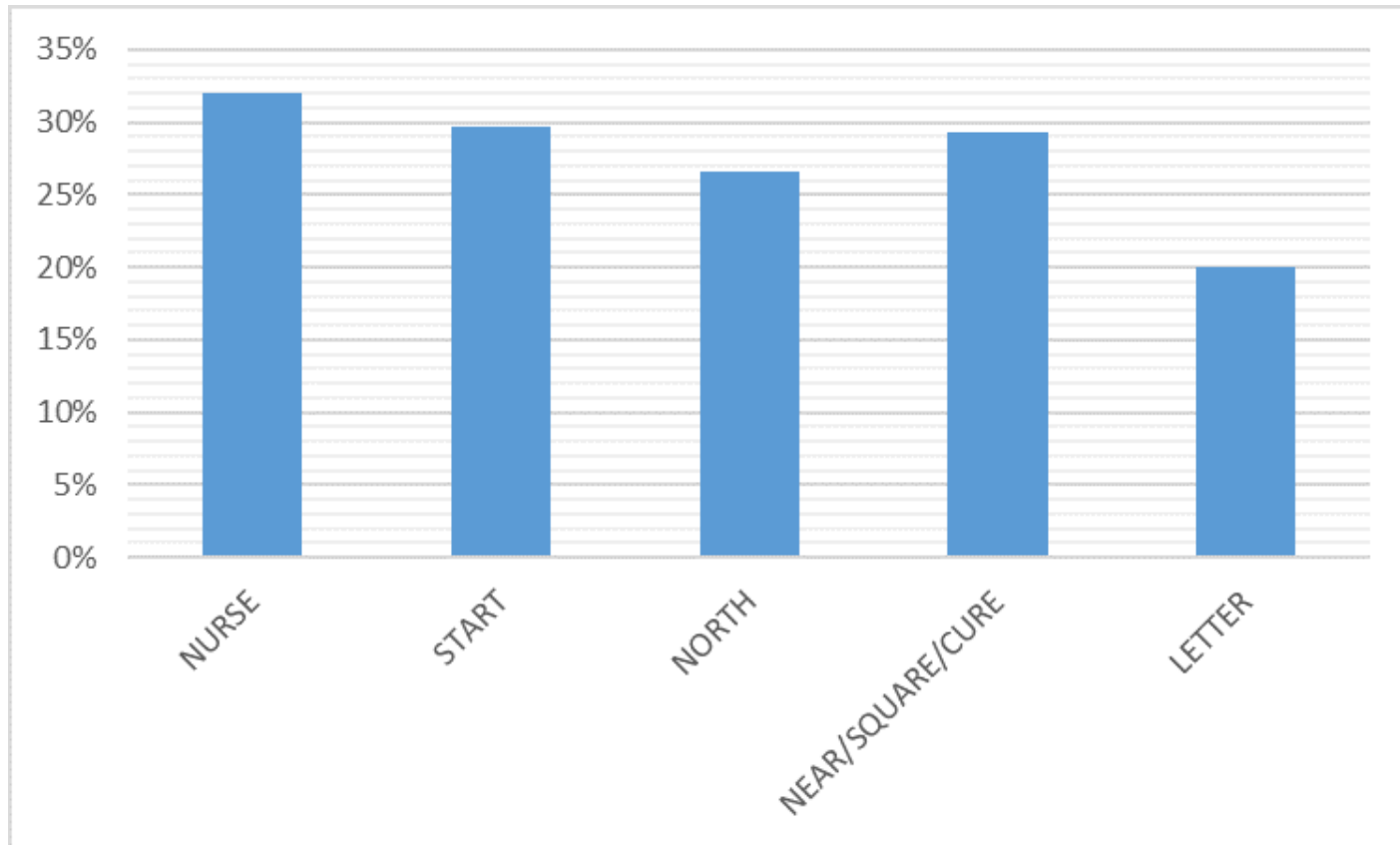
First results

Inter- and intra-speaker variation



First results

1. The melodic effect



First results

1. The melodic effect

- **Conclusion:** The melodic effect is not attested in our sample.
- **Possible explanation:** In $V+r$ sequences Hungarian learners of English do not merge the vowel with the $/r/$, i.e., they do not produce R-coloured vowels or syllabic $/r/$'s
→ all $V+r$ sequences are treated in a uniform fashion, irrespective of the quality of the V



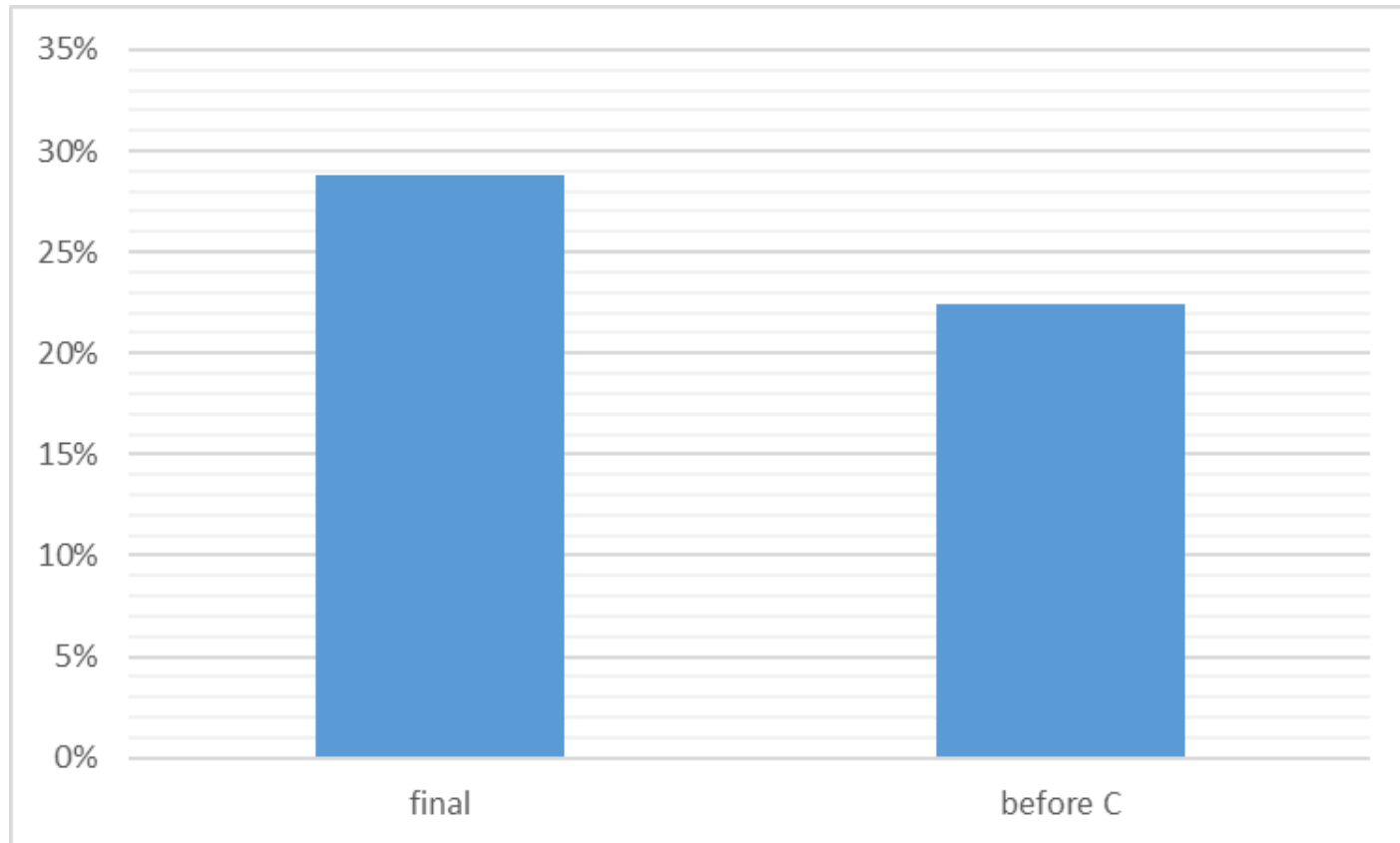
First results

1. **The melodic effect**
2. **The prosodic effect:** word-final (stressed) position supports the realisation of R



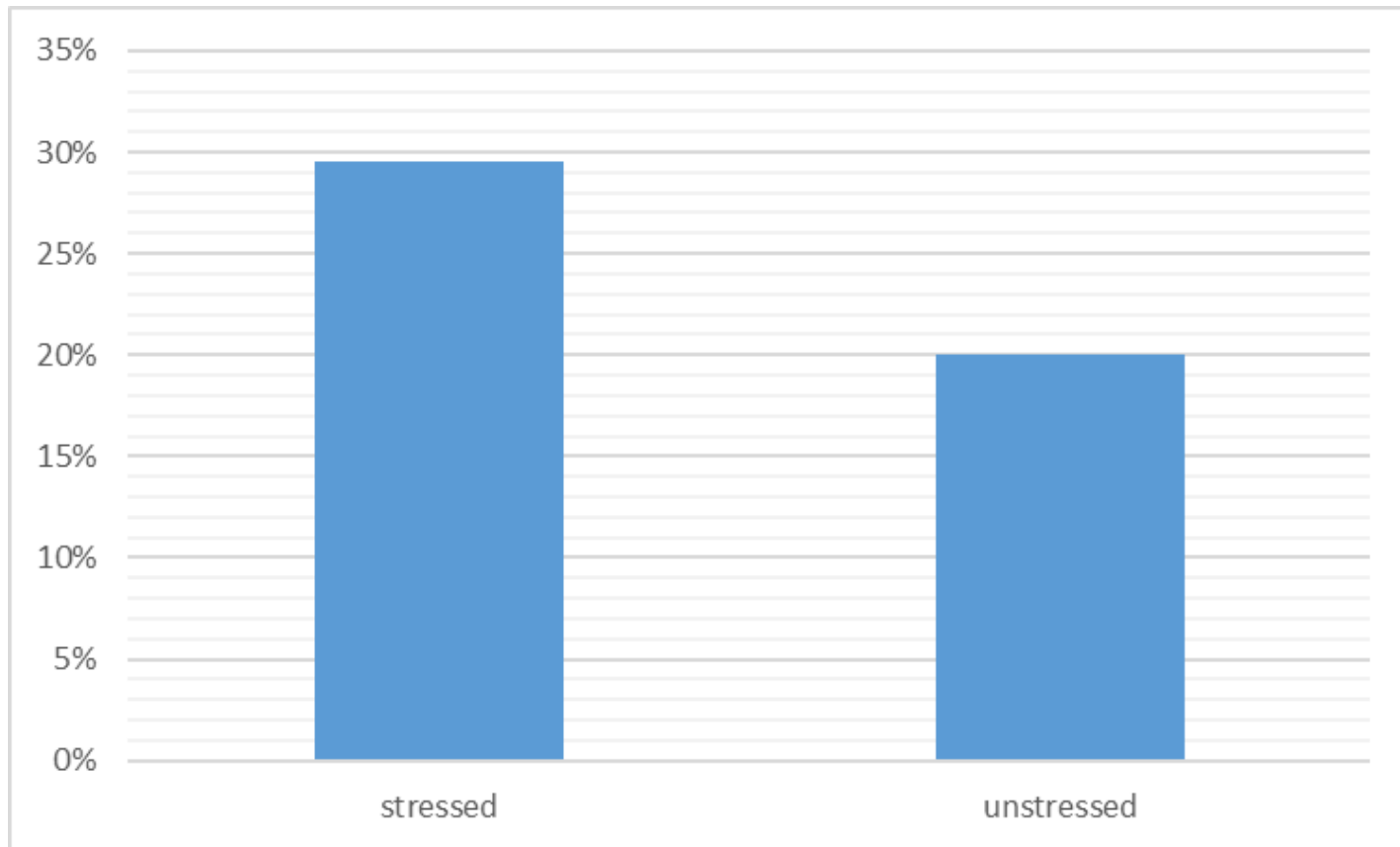
First results

2. The prosodic effect



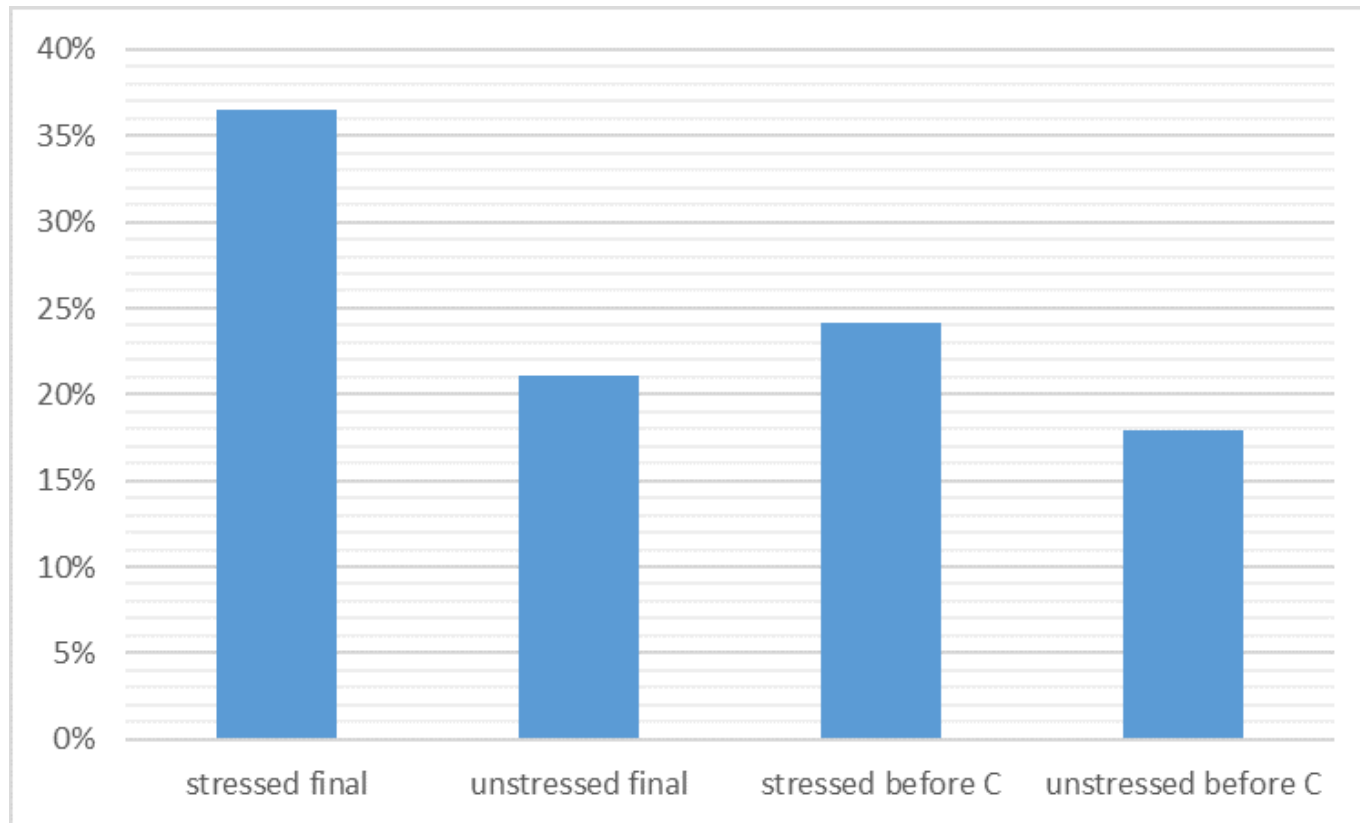
First results

2. The prosodic effect



First results

2. The prosodic effect



First results

2. The prosodic effect

- **Conclusion:** The prosodic effect *is* attested in our sample: the word-final stressed position supports the realisation of R. Final R is slightly more stable than preconsonantal R, while stress seems to be the major factor.

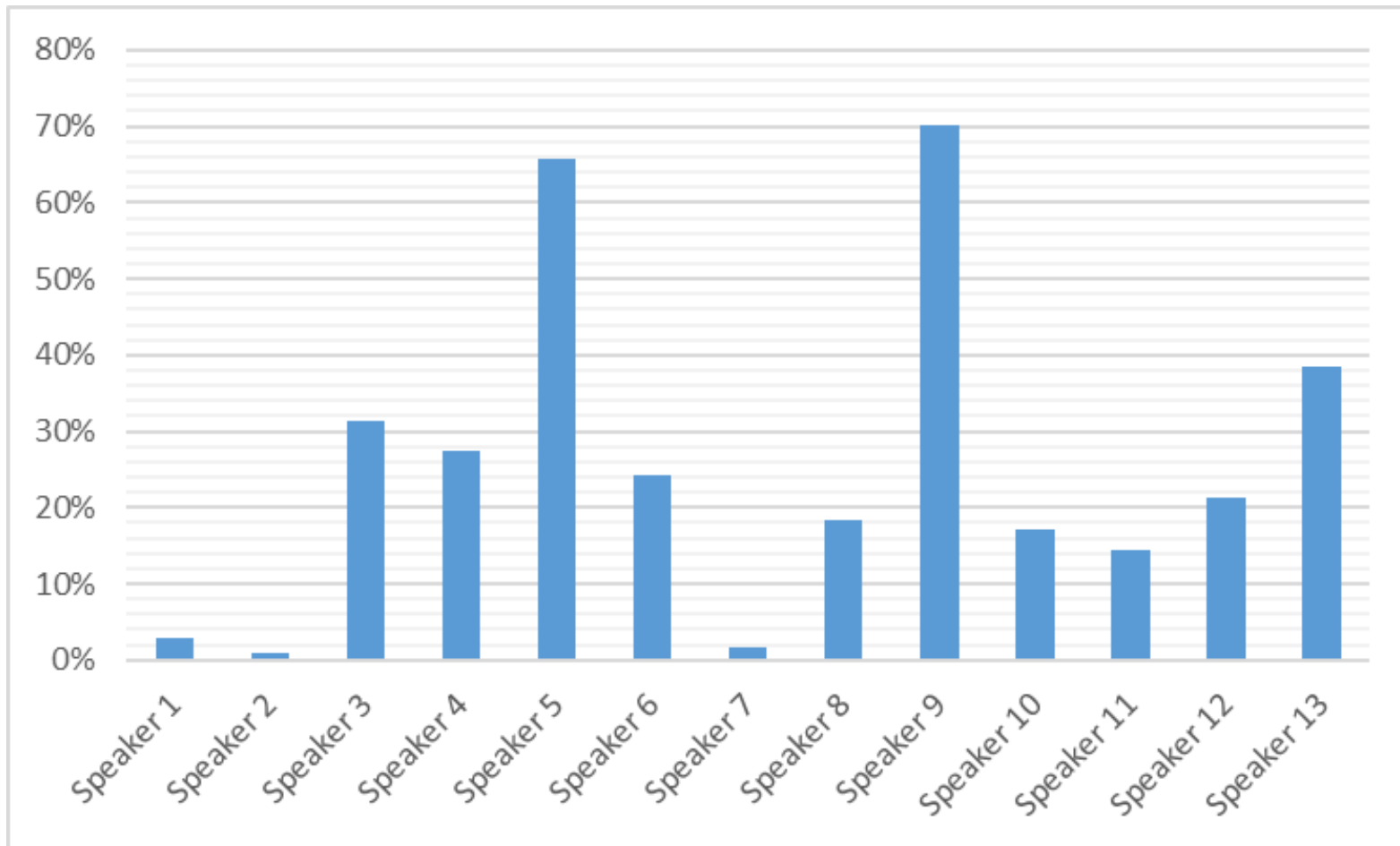


Second results

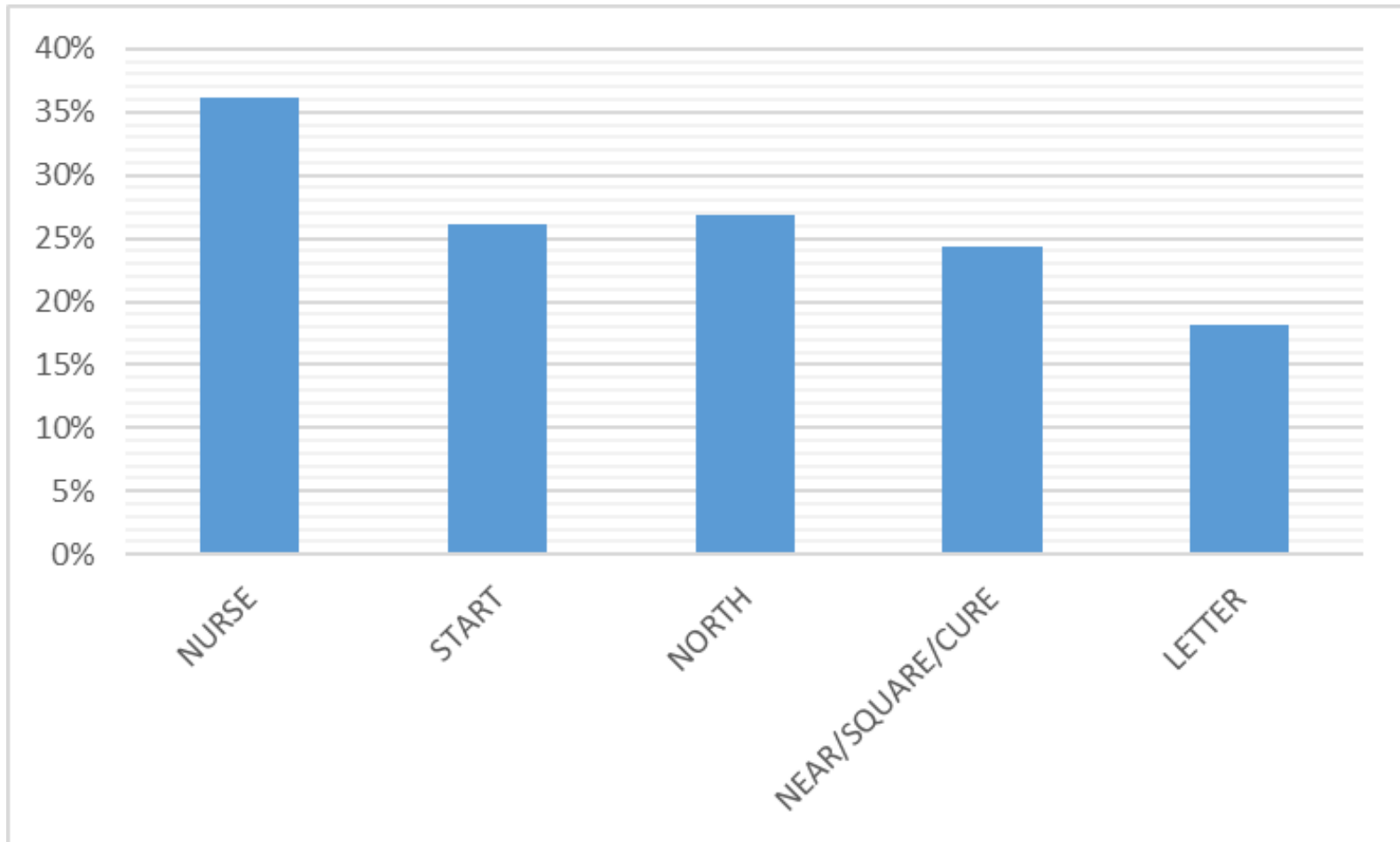


Second results

Inter- and intra-speaker variation



Second results



Second results

- With the outliers excluded from the analysis, the melodic effect is also attested
- Most learners *do* merge the /r/ with the preceding NURSE-vowel



Second results

Some further observations:

- Analysed individually, the patterns found in the learners' interlanguage seem to correspond to certain subtypes of semi-rhotic accents
- **NONE** of the learners' pronunciation displayed /r/-liaison



Outro

Non-rhotic-targeting learners of English speak a variably semi-rhotic variety of Hunglish.

Possible explanation: learners depart from R-ful forms under the influence of spelling → achieving the non-rhotic target means R-suppression

Before they reach full non-rhoticity, the intermediate stage in their interlanguage is mostly governed by general principles of linguistic organisation (cf. Plag 2009), i.e., by universal phonological principles of prosodic strength.



Outro

Factors ignored:

- following consonants
- morphological structure
- text frequency
- semantic field
- sociolinguistic factors (speaker sex, age, etc.)



References

- Irwin, Patricia and Naomi Nagy (2007) Bostonians /r/ speaking: A quantitative look at (R) in Boston. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 13(2), 135–147.
- Plag, Ingo (2009) Creoles as interlanguages: Phonology. *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 24(1), 119–138.
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- Scheer, Tobias (2004) *A lateral theory of phonology: What is CVCV and why should it be?* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
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