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

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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: \textit{nurse} > \textit{market}

Possible explanation:

\textit{NURSE/LETTER} contains an R-coloured vowel (i.e., /ɜ/ or /ə/) 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: \textit{nurse} \textgreater \textit{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: `car / letter` > `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 > market*
Semi-rhoticity

1. The melodic effect

2. The prosodic effect: word-final (stressed) position supports the realisation of R: \textit{car\_letter} > \textit{market}

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

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<th></th>
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<th>V___V</th>
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<td>cheval</td>
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<td>fil(u)</td>
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Scheer 2004:629
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-realisations) of all types of the tokens were added to the database.
The study

<table>
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<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
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<th>G</th>
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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

[Bar chart showing variation for Speaker 1 to Speaker 13]
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
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


