Chapter 3 Phonology
Joyce Bruhn de Garavito

"Delving Deeper"

Free Variation

Free variation in phonology is important because it links to social and pragmatic factors that are crucial in our use of language for communication. Let's look at an example.

We all vary in our pronunciation of words ending in *-ing* such as *talking* or *swimming*. Sometimes we pronounce the ending as [ɪŋ], sometimes as [ɪn]. There is no phonological context that determines which of the two forms we produce, that is why we say there is free variation. However, the social context in which we speak will influence how we pronounce this ending. Factors such as social class, gender, education, setting, register, all must be taken into consideration by the linguist studying how we speak. More educated people will tend to choose [ɪŋ] more often, but will probably use [ɪn] in informal settings. Perhaps you can predict how your professor will pronounce *drinking* when giving a lecture, or when sharing a beer with friends in a bar?

William Labov is the founder of *variationist linguistics*, that is, the sub-discipline of linguistics that researches the type of variation illustrated above. Much of the methodology used in sociolinguistics is due to his original approaches. He has studied social dialects in places such as New York City, and has been particularly influential in the recognition of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a rule governed form of language equal to other varieties and languages. Our knowledge of how we use language in context owes an enormous amount to him. To give you an example of some of his pioneering work we will briefly summarize some of his research on the pronunciation of post-vocalic (after the vowel) /ɹ/ in New York City.

As you have seen, there are some varieties of English in which /ɹ/ is not produced when it appears after the nucleus of a syllable. Instead, the quality of the vowel in the nucleus is changed, as you saw in exercise 4 of this chapter. For example, the word *hard* is pronounced as [hɑ:d].

Varieties in which post-vocalic /ɹ/ is dropped are often referred to as non-rhotic. Regions that include non-rhotic dialects are England and Wales, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. In the Caribbean we find variation in the production of post-vocalic /ɹ/. In North America, non-rhotic pronunciation is found in pockets around the US, although in some places it is dying out. African American English is generally non-rhotic.

Sections of New England are considered variably non-rhotic. One of the factors that lead to variation in the production of post-vocalic /ɹ/ is people's attitude toward non-rhotic production. In non-rhotic areas such as England and Wales it is the accepted variety. You can hear it in the queen's speech. However, in the US the view is often, though not always, more negative and often associated with lack of education.

In the sixties, Labov set out to investigate whether attitude and social stratification in New York City could account for the variability in the production of syllable final /ɹ/. He devised a very

original experiment. He chose three department stores: a very expensive one, a less expensive one and a more popular one. Salespeople in each store were asked a question that would be answered by the phrase *the fourth floor* (1). The salesperson was then asked to repeat the answer, which they would do more slowly. This gave each person the opportunity to produce two words that include /ɹ/ in the coda of the syllable, twice each.

(1) Question: Where can I find the lamps?
Answer: On the fourth floor.
Question: Excuse me?
Answer: On the fourth floor.

Results were as expected. Higher socioeconomic status correlated with production of /ɹ/. In other words, in stores such as Saks of Fifth Avenue the production of /ɹ/ was significantly more frequent than in the less expensive stores. Although some speakers consistently used non-rhotic speech in both the first answer and the repetition, other speakers, in all three stores, would produce the /ɹ/ more often when repeating the answer. This is probably due to the fact that they were more careful the second time around.

Labov's experiment has been replicated twice: in 1986 by Joy Fowler, in 2012 by Patrick-André Mather. Although the proportion of /r/-dropping was similar to what Labov found, the overall frequency seems to have dropped, evidence that this phenomenon is changing in New York.

As a footnote, it is interesting that the lower prestige of omitting syllable final /ɹ/ is a relatively recent phenomenon. If you listen to some presidential speeches, F. D. Roosevelt and J. Kennedy come to mind, you will realize that dropping /ɹ/ was not only prestigious but frequent.

Can you think of an experiment in your region to elicit a particular linguistic variable such as the one described here?

Reference

Fowler, J. (1986). The social stratification of (r) in New York City department stores, 24 years after Labov. New York: New York University unpublished manuscript.
Labov, W. (1966). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics.
Mather, P.-A. (2012). The social stratification of /r/ in New York City: Labov's department store study revisited. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 40 (4), 338-356.