

**“That Hoboken near the Gulf of Mexico:”  
What (r) can tell us about English in New York City and New Orleans**

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New York City English (NYCE) and New Orleans English (NOE) share a number of salient phonological features, including raised BOUGHT, variable non-rhoticity, and a split short-a system. These similarities have led scholars to suggest that the two varieties share a common source (Berger 1980; Dillard 1985; Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006). Labov (2007) argues that the NYCE system was transported to New Orleans in the nineteenth century as a result of close commercial ties between the two cities, and cites the NOE short-a pattern as an example of diffusion, or adult to adult language transfer that is characterized by a loss of structural detail. In this paper we test past claims about the relationship between NYCE and NOE by comparing contemporary data on variable non-rhoticity in the syllable coda, or the variable (r). Results indicate striking similarities between the two varieties for both linguistic and social constraints on (r).

In both regions, data from interview speech was auditorily coded for the presence or absence of constricted /r/, and an [r-1] index was calculated for each speaker. The speakers are all European-American, stratified by gender, age, and socioeconomic status. Overall, speakers of NYCE are more rhotic than speakers of NOE, with an NYCE mean [r-1] of [r-69] compared to NOE's [r-57]. As a measure of dialect similarity, we compared mixed-effect logistic regression models generated for each region, focusing on significant predictors and the ordering of levels within factors (Nagy & Irwin 2010). This analysis revealed a surprising uniformity for the linguistic and social constraints on [r-1]. In both NYCE and NOE, preceding vowel and word context are significant predictors of [r-1]. Moreover, the ordering of levels within these factors is almost identical, in contrast to the widely variable ordering of constraints for these factors found across American English (Nagy & Irwin 2010). There are also similarities for social conditioning—the only social factor selected in either locale is age, with young speakers leading in change in progress towards rhoticity in both places. One important difference between the two varieties, however, is an additional internal constraint on [r-1]—the lexical status of the word—which operates in NYCE but not NOE, and may support a picture of diffusion similar to Labov (2007).

The degree of dialect similarity—as measured by the similarity of constraints on [r-1]—suggests that NYCE and NOE do indeed share a history. The striking uniformity of the two systems raises questions about the mechanism of generational transmission in two communities widely separated both geographically and culturally, while NYCE's slightly more complex system provides some support for incorporating diffusion into the story of how New Orleans became known as the Brooklyn of the South.

## References

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