Who sounds /r/-ful? 
The pronunciation of /r/ in São Paulo Portuguese

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The pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ is highly variable in Brazilian Portuguese, including a ‘standard’ tap, an aspirate [h] and a retroflex [r]. In São Paulo, each variant is popularly associated with particular social identities: the aspirate is perceived as “Carioca” (someone from Rio de Janeiro); the tap is typically “Paulistano”, associated with cosmopolitan and educated speakers; and the retroflex is perceived as "Caipira" (“country”), associated with unsophisticated and uneducated speakers. Surprisingly, despite the sociolinguistic salience of this variation (Callou et al. 1996; Brandão 2008), /r/ has never been studied quantitatively in São Paulo Portuguese.

In this paper, I focus on the use of the retroflex variant of /r/ in the speech of 24 speakers born and raised in São Paulo. From over 30 hours of conversation, approximately 5000 tokens of syllable-final /r/ were extracted and coded for linguistic and social factors and analyzed using GoldVarb X.

Results show that retroflex [r] occurs very infrequently (12%) in São Paulo Portuguese. It tends to be favored by anterior and unrounded vowels and in stressed syllables. Frequent words, such as "porque" (why/because) and "ser" (be), tend to favor the retroflex variant. The negative social evaluation of retroflex [r] is confirmed by the disfavoring effect of careful speech. Although younger speakers disfavor its use, suggesting a change in progress, it is favored by women. If retroflex [r] is a feature in recession, its social conditioning is not following the typical path of standardization reported in other studies (Fischer 1958; Labov 2006).

While shedding light on the contexts in which this negatively evaluated variant occurs in the speech of "paulistanos", this paper raises the possibility that retroflex /r/ may still sustain some level of covert prestige in the city. Would sounding "down-to-earth" sometimes be more sociolinguistically valuable than sounding "urban" and "sophisticated"?

References