Postvocalic /r/ in the Upper Valley of Vermont and New Hampshire

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This study focuses on postvocalic /r/-pronunciation (r) in the Upper Valley (UV), a semi-rural New Hampshire/Vermont community located 150 miles north of Boston. While phonological data has previously been collected in New Hampshire by Nagy (2001) and Labov, Ash, & Boberg (2006), no published study has ever focused specifically on the Upper Valley, and no published study focusing on (r) has collected data from UV speakers. My aims were to document the variable pattern and examine attitudinal effects.

The project was designed with Labov's (1963) Martha's Vineyard study in mind. I hypothesized that, as on Martha's Vineyard, there exists in the UV a significant social barrier between natives and outsiders. I further hypothesized that Dartmouth College (located in the UV) is seen as representative of these outsiders. My goal was to determine whether there was any correlation between a speaker's attitude towards Dartmouth and her/his rate of /r/-deletion.

I interviewed 28 subjects (14M, 14F, ages 16-93), all natives of the UV. I tape-recorded each subject as s/he read aloud a passage containing 203 tokens of (r) and then answered a series of questions about age, occupation, education, family, and attitudes towards Dartmouth and the UV.

A multivariate analysis using Goldvarb X shows a correlation between age and (r) (older speakers, especially men, delete /r/ much more often), as well as a correlation between a subject's attitude towards Dartmouth and (r) (speakers who feel more negatively towards Dartmouth delete /r/ more often than others). The age difference (58% [r-0] for older; 3% for younger) contradicts Labov, Ash & Boberg’s (2006) report of stability for this variable in NH but confirms Irwin & Nagy’s (2007) finding of a change in progress.

References