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Do you “park your car” or “pahk your cah”?: The Changing Dialect of Southern New Hampshire

—Melanie Platt (Editor: Sarah Bogert)

The way that you speak is affected by your age, gender, education, and the dialect you grew up hearing. The field of sociolinguistics studies the relationship between these factors and language change over time. Through my involvement in the University of New Hampshire (UNH) linguistics program, I heard about the New Hampshire Language and Life Project (NHLL) started by Dr. Maya Ravindranath, assistant professor of linguistics in the Department of English. The NHLL allows students the opportunity to document and analyze language change in southern New Hampshire. As a linguistics major and native of Exeter, New Hampshire, I was particularly interested in this project. With the help of Ravindranath and the support of a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF), I carried out a sociolinguistic study during the summer of 2014 as a part of the NHLL research.

Previous researchers associated with the NHLL have collected recordings of speakers to listen for different dialect variables in their speech. In linguistics, a dialect refers to any variety of language characterized by a particular pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structure (Van Herk, 2013). The variable I chose to focus on in my research was rhoticity (the r variable), which is the pronunciation or omission of the post-vocalic r in words such as *park* or *car*. Speakers of any English dialect can pronounce the r (*park*), omit it (*pahk*), or—particularly where a dialect shift is taking place—do both. If they omit the post-vocalic r at all, they are considered non-rhotic speakers. Outside of linguistics, non-rhotic speakers are said to “drop their r’s.”



The author records an interview with a younger southern NH speaker.

Before the early 2000s, nearly all southern New Hampshire speakers were considered non-rhotic. Many early dialect studies grouped New Hampshire, eastern Massachusetts, and southern Maine together as a community of non-rhotic speakers (Kurath, 1949; Carver, 1987; Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006). However, as a young speaker of southern New Hampshire, I can attest that hardly anyone I know actually “drops their r’s” anymore. More recent studies suggest that southern New Hampshire is becoming more rhotic (Nagy & Irwin 2010; Ravindranath & Fernandes 2014; Chartier, Fernandes, Perry, Ravindranath, & Stanford, 2013).

As it is the nature of language to change over time, I set up my study to determine when this change might have occurred. I interviewed twenty-seven men and women ages eighteen to eighty-nine in southern New Hampshire, listened for and counted the r variable, and compared my results with earlier dialect studies in the area. I found that speakers younger than sixty in southern New Hampshire exhibit more rhotic speech than older speakers, showing a dialect shift is in progress.

Interviewing the Southern New Hampshire Locals



Fig. 1: Map of New Hampshire that highlights the region characterized as southern New Hampshire (Destination360.com).

I began my study by looking for southern New Hampshire natives whose speech would be an accurate sample of the southern New Hampshire dialect. They had to have lived in southern New Hampshire for their entire lives or since early childhood, and could not have lived anywhere else for a significant amount of time. (See Fig. 1) I found participants in places where I grew up, such as local schools, churches, and other community settings. I was also able to find speakers in Riverwoods, the retirement community in Exeter. The wide age range in my participants allowed me to look at differences between older and younger speakers. I later split the participants into two groups for data analysis: the fifteen speakers younger than sixty (referred to here as “younger speakers”) and the twelve speakers older than sixty (referred to as “older speakers”).

My next task was to record speech samples from these persons. I used the same interview materials that NHLL and other researchers have used, which contained two main parts: reading passages and conversation questions (Nagy 2001, Stanford, Leddy-Cecere, & Baclawski, 2012; Chartier et al., 2013). The first had a word list, reading passage, and sentence list that the speakers were asked to read. Each aspect was designed with words containing post-vocalic r, such as *farm* or *blizzard*. This way I could

see where the speakers “dropped their r’s” and where they did not—if they did at all. In a typical interview, I first asked the speakers for basic background information (such as name, age, hometown, and ethnicity) and then moved on to the reading materials.

[Listen farm](#) >> [Listen fahm](#) >>

The conversation questions were designed with two goals in mind. First, I was looking to gather more natural speech than what I got from the readings. One way to do this is to get the speakers to talk about their childhood or tell emotional stories. For this reason, the questions asked about topics like changes to their hometowns since childhood. Second, I wanted to know about their attitudes towards their own and surrounding dialects. I asked the participants how they would describe a southern New Hampshire dialect, if they could detect different dialects within New England, and if they could point out dialect features and social factors associated with them. For instance, if they mentioned that people in New Hampshire “dropped their r’s,” I would ask who specifically did this and what the speaker thought of those people.

To analyze the data, I transcribed all of my interviews using a program called ELAN, and counted all of the words that contained the post-vocalic r. This was all the possible places in which a speaker could “drop their r’s.” I then went through the transcriptions again and counted all the places where each speaker pronounced their r’s. In the end, I had a percentage of rhoticity for each speaker. If a speaker drops their r’s at all, they are considered non-rhotic speakers. Therefore, only speakers with 100% rhotic speech can be considered rhotic speakers. A speaker can, however, have varied levels of non-rhotic speech.

Non-Rhotic Speech in Older Speakers

My results showed a shift happening in southern New Hampshire in terms of rhoticity. Where earlier dialect studies in the area found all speakers to have some percentage of non-rhotic speech, the speakers younger than sixty (born after 1954) in this study had 100% rhotic speech. On the other hand, older speakers (born from the 1920s to 1954) had more varied outcomes. Looking at the chart in Figure 2, you can see that only one speaker had 23% rhotic speech, five speakers had between 40% and 60% rhotic speech, and the remaining speakers had between 80% to 100% rhotic speech. Since I could tell that this data showed a dialect shift was occurring for younger speakers, my next step was to find possible motivations for the shift. Why had younger speakers stopped using non-rhotic speech?

To answer this question, I took several steps. From studying sociolinguistics, I knew that dialect features could be associated with certain social factors, such as level of education or gender. These were certainly influences on the speech of some of the people I interviewed. For my study, however, I looked in particular at what sort of social factors were associated with non-rhotic speech which might make younger speakers not want to use it anymore. I looked at the older speakers with high percentages of non-rhotic speech to find among them common social factors and attitudes toward their speech. I could then see what social factors and dialectal attitudes in the lives of younger speakers were different, and perhaps were related to the shift.

I found a childhood association with farming, which meant either living on a self-sustaining farm or in a small farming community, to be a common social factor for older speakers with high percentages of non-rhotic speech. Two speakers, for example, demonstrated this: one man, with 23.4% rhotic speech, who owns one of the last farms in Stratham; and another, with 24.7% rhotic speech who grew up in a small farming community in Exeter. Both men explained that many of the highly commercialized areas of the Seacoast, including Portsmouth Avenue in Exeter and Stratham, Calef Highway in Epping, and Route 1 in Portsmouth and North Hampton, used to be entirely farming lands. All residents of these areas bought food from the local farms, many having it delivered to their doors each week. They recalled having milk and meat delivered, and both speakers brought up a popular saying of the time, that there were "more cows than people in Stratham." In terms of social life, residents generally knew everyone living in their towns, since families were all native to the area and stayed there. Regardless of percentage of non-rhotic speech, most speakers over sixty discussed these differences. However, speakers directly associated with farming had the highest percentages of non-rhotic speech.

In addition to an association with farming, non-rhotic speakers also had positive attitudes towards their speech. One woman from Kensington, with 43% rhotic speech, associated it with an earlier version of New England and expressed her love for the way it sounded. She also recognized that southern New Hampshire has changed drastically in more recent years, both linguistically and culturally. She stated:

"Unfortunately many people come here and try to make it the place from which they came, rather than just embracing that it's a small community. You know, it's not a yuppie-type community. When I came here, we were farmers. My father was a farmer. Most of the industry was farming . . . they want to bring

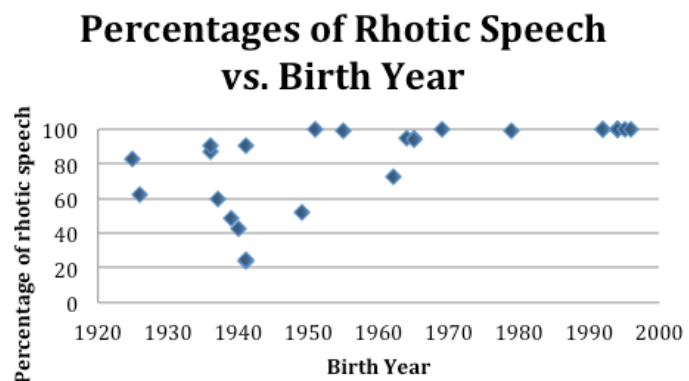


Fig. 2: Chart that displays speakers' rhoticity percentages in relation to years of birth.

the laws of Massachusetts, or wherever, here, and so that's why you're not finding a lot of old New Hampshire."

Here, her love for this "old" New England is clear, and she is critical of the newcomers from Massachusetts. Acknowledging this, I saw what was different in the younger speaker's lives: the lack of small farming communities. I found these younger speakers were brought up in a different world, and they also had different opinions of non-rhotic speech.

Rhotic Speech in Younger Speakers

The first social difference in the lives of younger speakers in southern New Hampshire was the types of communities in which they were raised. Like mine, these communities are much larger than those of the older speakers. Families in southern New Hampshire haven't lived here for decades like they used to, and there are many more immigrants now from other parts of the United States and foreign countries. In fact, between 1970 and 1990, immigrants accounted for two thirds of New Hampshire's population growth (Wood, as cited in Chartier, 2013). In their interviews, younger speakers could not recall when there was more than one large farm in their area, only one grocery store, and the entire community knew each other. The younger speakers no longer have any association with the smaller farming communities that older speakers knew. Their picture of southern New Hampshire is of larger, more diverse communities.

The second social difference is the increased presence in their lives of media such as television and the internet. Standard American speech is rhotic speech. This kind of speech is usually heard in television shows or on the radio. Whether it is on a conscious or subconscious level, younger speakers are trying to sound more like a "general American speaker," or what they perceive one to sound like from the media that they hear. Younger speakers identify themselves with the standard, rhotic speech they are exposed to and have positive attitudes toward.

Attitudes towards Boston Dialect

In addition to this convergence with the standard dialect, younger speakers have different associations with non-rhotic speech than older speakers do. In their interviews, younger speakers exhibited positive attitudes towards rhotic speech and negative attitudes towards non-rhotic speech. In fact, they generally associated non-rhotic speech with Boston, instead of with "old" New England as many older speakers interviewed did. Most younger speakers considered the non-rhotic dialect associated with Boston to be "stronger" and "harsher" than other dialects, and thus undesirable. Collectively, there was agreement that southern New Hampshire speakers do not sound like Boston speakers, nor do they want to.

My findings are consistent with recent NHLL research, which calls this motivation for the shift away from non-rhotic speech a "divergence from Boston" (Nagy, 2001; Chartier et al., 2013). This "divergence from Boston" motivation suggests that younger speakers are trying to differentiate themselves from Bostonians linguistically and socially. They will often use the term *Massholes* to refer to residents of Massachusetts (Nagy, 2001; Chartier et al., 2013). A majority of the younger speakers admitted that they did not go to Boston a lot, or that they did not like the city. Some added that it was nice to be able to go every once in a while, but they would not want to live there. In an attempt to linguistically and socially dissociate themselves from Boston speakers, it is possible that these younger southern New Hampshire speakers have stopped using non-rhotic speech because they see it as a noticeable and undesirable feature of a Boston dialect.

Many non-rhotic, older speakers shared the same negative attitudes towards Massachusetts. The woman from Kensington, introduced earlier, called Massachusetts people "yuppies" for changing the traditional New Hampshire way of life when moving here. Another woman said people always tell her she has that "horrible Massachusetts accent," adding that her son jokingly "cringes and covers his ears," when she uses non-rhotic speech.

Although non-rhotic, older speakers share these negative attitudes towards the culture of Boston, they are not participating in the shift to rhotic speech because they do not view non-rhotic speech as negative and associated with the Boston dialect. Instead, they appreciate it as a valued part of the old New England that they grew up in. Therefore, we see a shift only in younger speakers' speech, possibly as both a convergence with the standard, rhotic dialect, and a divergence from Boston.

Coming to a Conclusion and Further Opportunities

In summary, this study shows a dialect shift taking place in southern New Hampshire. Where the region used to have entirely non-rhotic speakers, the younger speakers are now showing almost 100% rhotic speech. This confirms the results of previous NHLL research. By looking at the stories and attitudes of each participant interviewed, I found it likely that the motivations for this shift have to do with the changing social dynamics of southern New Hampshire, from the lives of older speakers to the lives of younger speakers. Younger speakers seem to be converging with "standard" rhotic speech and diverging from non-rhotic speech that they tend to associate with a Boston dialect. It is possible that these motivations are acting simultaneously.

Personally, the interview and analysis process allowed me to learn the work and preparation that goes into sociolinguistic studies. The time spent talking to each participant was not only fascinating, but helpful in seeing more than a scientific analysis of this shift. I learned how to take each story and make meaningful speculations about the motivations for the dialect shift. In terms of future work, other southern New Hampshire dialect features must also be considered to get an accurate picture of this shift in its entirety. Further research in northern New Hampshire and eastern Massachusetts would be useful to see what is happening with rhoticity and other variables in those areas, as well as with attitudes toward standard and non-standard speech. Once more of this is examined, the motivations for this shift can be more accurately described and an updated dialect map of New Hampshire can be presented.

I would first like to thank my mentor, Dr. Maya Ravindranath, for guiding me through this research process. From introducing me to the NHLL project, to assisting in writing the research proposal, overseeing the collection and analysis of data, and reading numerous paper drafts, I am grateful for the time taken to make this such a meaningful experience. Many thanks as well to the Elizabeth Lunt Knowles Fund and the Patricia M. Flowers '45 Scholarship Fund, which funded my research through the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research. Without these generous donors, this research would not have been possible. I would finally like to express my appreciation to each participant in this study. It was your shared enthusiasm and unique stories that brought the southern New Hampshire experience to life.

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Author and Mentor Bios

Exeter, New Hampshire native, **Melanie Platt**, has a wide array of interests ranging from sociolinguistics to figure skating. A linguistics major, Melanie is a member of the Honors in Major program, and will graduate in May 2015 with a bachelor of arts. Melanie was introduced to the New Hampshire Language and Life project by her advisor, Dr. Maya Ravindranath. Melanie explained that, “through the [research] process, I was able to learn a lot about how sociolinguistic research is conducted. I learned how to interview people, what questions to ask, and how to analyze the data effectively.” She claimed that the most difficult part of the project was finding people to interview in the Exeter area, but the most rewarding part was listening to stories regarding historical New England. “It was great to hear how much has changed socially and linguistically where I grew up,” she said. Melanie chose to submit to *Inquiry* because she thought it a perfect opportunity to share her summer’s research. Although interested in future sociolinguistic work, she is also minoring in studio art. This past fall and winter she won gallery space in downtown Exeter to show some of her oil paintings and charcoal drawings.

Dr. **Maya Ravindranath**, an assistant professor of linguistics in the English department, has worked at the University of New Hampshire for seven years. She is a sociolinguist who studies language variation and change. “I’m interested in dialectal variation and its relationship to language change over time, particularly in cases of language endangerment,” she explained. The New Hampshire Language and Life Project grew from Dr. Ravindranath’s realization that the students in her sociolinguistics classes did not have traditional New England dialect features. Dr. Ravindranath has previously worked with a few undergraduate researchers, but this was her first time mentoring a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) recipient, as well as her first time working with an *Inquiry* author. She believes that writing for *Inquiry*’s broader audience is, “without question,” useful for students in the field of linguistics. “The ability to translate your research into language that is widely accessible is important for anyone. For students, the ability to explain what they learn in their classes to a broader audience is a key part of the learning process,” Dr. Ravindranath said.