

Rhoticity in the north-west England: An analysis of Working-class speech from Victorian north Lancashire

In this paper, we consider the retreat of rhoticity in the English of the North-West of England. Rhoticity in England appears to have been in decline from early modern times, though twentieth century dialectological work such as the Survey of English Dialects (Orton & Dieth, 1962; Wells, 1982) suggest isolated pockets of rhoticity remaining in Central/East Lancashire, rural west Yorkshire, and south-west England. However, recent survey work (Leemann et al., 2018) shows that rhoticity might be rapidly declining even in these locations in the speech of young, urban people. These studies reveal snapshots of rural and urban Lancashire, but how did a change such as derhoticisation spread? Did it proceed in different places at different times? What linguistic factors are involved? What intermediate productions are present?

We investigate these questions with data from the Elizabeth Roberts Working Class Oral History Archive, an extensive collection of recordings from working-class speakers born in Preston, Lancaster, and Barrow in the 1890s and early 1900s, see Figure 1. Here, we analyse 23 speakers born 1884-1907 (12m, 11f; 7 Preston, 8 Lancaster, 8 Barrow). We first transcribed and force-aligned 30 minutes from each interview. Tokens of potential coda-rhoticity were coded auditorily as very rhotic/rhotic/non-rhotic (Barras, 2010). We then conducted acoustic analysis of minimum F3-F2 during the coda interval (Turton & Lennon, under review). The statistics model location, speaker sex, word stress, vowel, coda duration, word position, content/function word, word frequency, and location*duration (~5000 tokens in total).

In our auditory analysis, rhoticity is significantly most prevalent in Preston compared to Lancaster and Barrow. Acoustic results show most rhoticity in Preston, then Lancaster, then Barrow (Figure 2). We also found significant differences for vowel context and a location*duration interaction. Speakers in Preston are mainly rhotic, speakers in Barrow are mainly non-rhotic, but there is substantial individual variation in Lancaster.

We discuss these results with reference to population growth during the Industrial Revolution in the north-west of England. While local dialect continua were mostly maintained as Preston and Lancaster expanded, we suggest that New Dialect Formation took place in Barrow during the 1870s when the population grew 158% in ten years. This may explain the lack of rhoticity in Barrow similar to processes in New Zealand and Liverpool (Hay & Sudbury, 2005; Honeybone, 2007). We explore individual variation in Lancaster with reference to the status of this small city and local increased exposure to middle class populations and external contact.

Our results show that until recently rhoticity in Lancashire extended north beyond the south/east Lancashire contexts investigated in (Barras, 2010; Durkacz Ryan et al., 2022; Turton & Lennon, under review). The results advance an account of how and when urban northern England became derhoticised and fill in detail to previous large-scale survey work (Leemann et al., 2018; Orton & Dieth, 1962; Wells, 1982). We discuss our results in the context of wider phonetic research into derhoticisation comparing auditory perceptions, articulatory work, and the impact of linguistic factors on production (Lawson et al., 2013; Stuart-Smith et al., 2014).

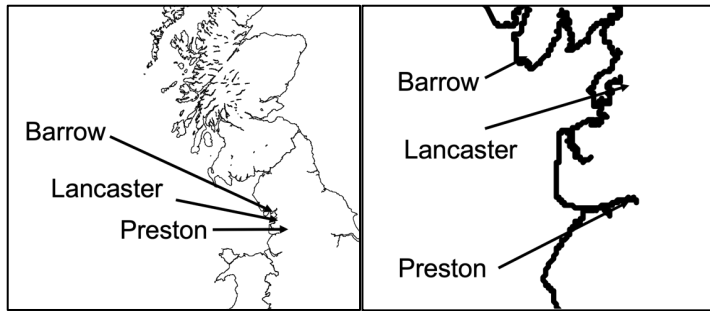


Figure 1: Map of the UK and zoomed in perspective to show the location of Barrow, Lancaster, and Preston.

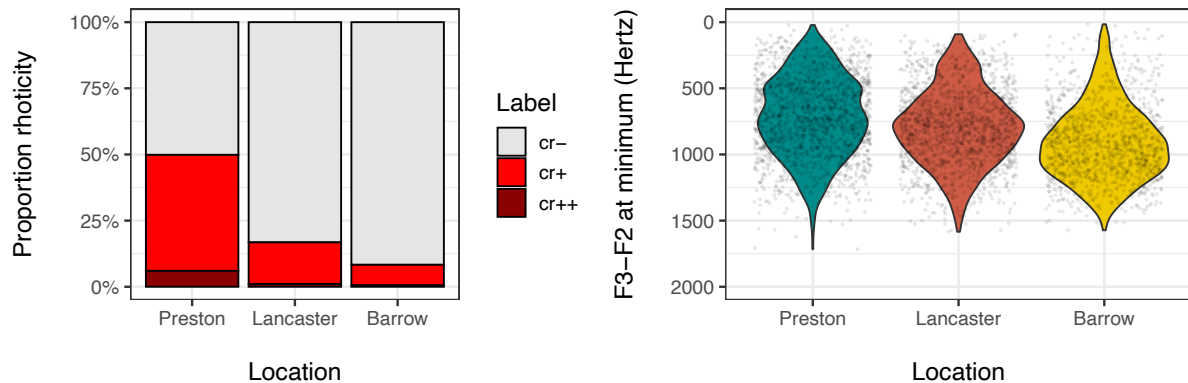


Figure 2: Summary of the results according to location. Left panel: auditory results. Right panel: Acoustic results.

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