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Which /r/ are you using as an English teacher? rhotic or non-rhotic?

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Abstract

There are many obvious differences between North American English (NAE) and British English (BrE) /r/ phoneme, and a great majority of Turkish English teachers do not know which variant of the /r/ they are using. It must be noted that such a case easily confuses the students. The articulation and production of North American English-r is ambiguous. In terms of articulation and pronunciation, NAE is also referred as General American (GA), and BrE is accepted as Received Pronunciation (RP). The American-r phoneme, whose IPA sign is [ɾ], which is a **retroflex** case of pronunciation, also called a flap, represents a very serious setback in teaching standard American pronunciation to Turks. As opposed to this, the BrE-r is a **tap** whose articulation is very close to Turkish-r word-initially and intervocally.

Keywords: articulatory phonetics, flap, tap, retroflex, bunched-r.

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1. Introduction

Rhotic and non-rhotic are terms coined by the British phonetician John Wells (1982) for two kinds of spoken English as a fundamental contrastive feature. Received Pronunciation (RP) is a form of pronunciation of the English language, sometimes defined as the "*educated spoken English of southeastern England*". It is close to BBC English (the kind spoken by British newscasters) and it is represented in the pronunciation schemes of most British dictionaries. RP is rather a social accent and is not regional accent. It is associated, as a prestigious dialect, with the educated upper classes or with other people who have attended public schools for education in Britain.

Accents of English can be either **rhotic** or **non-rhotic**. English pronunciation, both in Received pronunciation (RP) and General American(GA), can be split into two main accent groups: **rhotic and non-rhotic**. **Rhotic accent** (pronounced /**routik**/) speakers pronounce a rhotic consonant-r in words like car, bar, far, hard, farm, and first. **Non-rhotic** speakers, for example, speakers of British English (BrE) and Australian English do not articulate the /r/ in all of such words. That is, rhotic speakers articulate /r/ in all positions, while non-rhotic speakers pronounce /r/ only if it is followed by a vowel sound in the same phrase or prosodic unit as a "linking and intrusive r" in linguistic terms, non-rhotic accents are said to exclude the sound [r] from the syllable coda before a consonant or prosodic break.

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Whereas the sound represented by the- *er* in *water* is a schwa in non-rhotic accents like Received Pronunciation, in rhotic dialects like most of North American English, "-er" designates an r-colored schwa, [ɚ], which is pronounced like schwa, except the tongue is pulled back in the mouth and "bunched up". Thus, we use the term 'accents' to refer to differences in pronunciations. Pronunciation can vary with cultures, regions and speakers, but there are two major standard varieties in English pronunciation: British English and American English.

2. The Basic Phonetic Structure of Rhotic Accent

The pronunciation of English language in the World is also divided into two main accent groups, the rhotic and the non-rhotic, depending on when the phoneme /r/ is pronounced. Rhotic speakers pronounce written "r" in all positions: word-initially word-medially, and word-finally.

2.1. Non-rhotic Countries

The main rhotic countries are USA (the northern and western states of the US apart from the Boston area and New York City), Canada, India, Ireland, south-western England, Scotland, and Barbados (MacArthur, 1998). North American English is rhotic; therefore, the "r" sound is always pronounced, with the notable exception of the Boston area and New York City. How non-rhoticism spread through the American southeast is a frequently asked question. A claim holds that these areas received British influence through sending their children to England for education. Another claim says that the speech of slaves played a sizeable role.

3. The Basic Phonetic Structure of Rhotic Accent

In another set of accents, *r-sound* is pronounced in syllable-initial position (*read, rain, rest, right, real*) and intervocalically (*error, mirror, terror, clearer*), but not postvocally (*tar, speaker, heard, walker*). In these positions it is vocalized (turned into a vowel) and not pronounced unless another vowel follows. Such a variety is variously known as *non-rhotic, non-r-pronouncing, or r-less*.

3.1. A Brief History of /r/ Articulation in England

4. The Celtic, Roman, Germanic (Angles, Saxons, Frisians, and Jutes) languages were indeed rhotic and they have left a legacy in the English dialects. English officially starts when the Germanic tribes and their languages reach the British Isles in 449 (Gelderen, 2006: 1. It may have been an alveolar approximant [ɹ] as in most modern accents, an alveolar flap [ɾ], or an alveolar trill [r] (Hogg and David, 2006). In the 9th century, the Scandinavian and the Norman conquest in 1066 brought in audible trilled-r, which survived up to the 18th century in England.

3.2 Some Non-rhotic Countries

It must be noted that in the spread of non-rhotic dialect England is primarily influential because England occupied the 2/3 of the whole World. Non-rhotic countries can be stated as follows: England apart, in the main, from the south-west; New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Black Africa, the Caribbean, except for Barbados; the southern states, the Boston area of New England, and New York City vernacular speech; and Black English Vernacular in the US, and Wales (MacArthur, 1998). Non-rhotic speakers pronounce "r" only if it is followed by a vowel - rip, right, reader, room, cart, tar, part, etc. Once again, it must be noted that England is non-rhotic, apart from the south-western England and some ever-diminishing northern areas. Scotland and Ireland are rhotic. In addition, in North America, old southern accents (i.e., by regions that were settled in the 18th century and are not as characterized by the Scotch Irish migration of the 19th Century), are generally non-rhotic.

How non-rhoticism spread through the American southeast is an interesting issue. A view insists that England occupied the 2/3 of the whole world and imposed its language upon the local people. Another view holds that these

areas received British influence through sending their children to England for education, and they had closer trading ties with the British before the Civil War. According to another view, the other the speech of slaves played a considerable role.

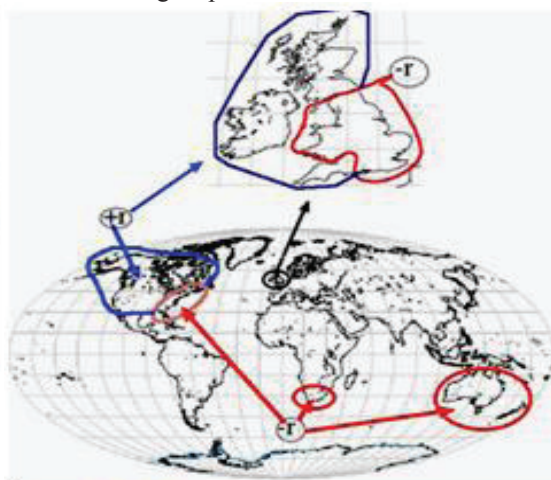
4. The Distribution of /r/ Accents in the World

English is officially used as the first language in 53 countries. The following map demonstrates this fact:



Countries where English is a primary language are dark blue; countries where it is an official but not a primary language are light blue. English is also one of the official languages of the European. From [http://familypedia.wikis.com/wiki/English language](http://familypedia.wikis.com/wiki/English_language)

Figure 1: Map of spoken and written English in the world



Modified from <http://mapweb.pare.xerox.com/map>

Figure 2: The distribution of rhotic – non-rhotic

In the following map, the articulation of /r/ as rhotic and non-rhotic is denoted. It must be noted too that this map does not show small details: in the Caribbean, for instance, most varieties of English are non-rhotic, but Barbados stands out as fully rhotic (Wells 1982:582-5). Urban Scottish accents may occasionally be non-rhotic, and residual areas of rhoticism may linger in the rhotic area of England shown below. Wells also mentions reports of rhoticism from South Island, New Zealand (606). This map also fails to show areas in Africa, India, and the Far East where English may be spoken as a first language: ([languagehttp://notendur.hi.is/peturk/KENNSLA/02/TOP/rhoticity](http://notendur.hi.is/peturk/KENNSLA/02/TOP/rhoticity)).

5. The Distribution of Rhotic and Non-Rhotic in England and Europe

Celts were one of the first inhabitants of Europe; therefore, their rhotic language predominated the Europe. Figure (3) indicates this truth. The Celtic languages were indeed rhotic and they have left a legacy in the forthcoming English dialects. From the first century B.C through the fifth centuries A. D, Romans ruled over the land of England. The Roman Empire reigned in much of Europe until 476 A. D., Latin was a rhotic language whose-r was either an alveolar trill [r], like Spanish or Italian double /r/, or maybe an alveolar flap [r], with a tap of the tongue against the upper gums. English officially starts when the Germanic tribes and their languages reach the British Isles in 449 (Gelderen, 2006: 1), but the exact nature of /r/ is not known. It may have been an alveolar approximant [ɹ] as in most modern accents, an alveolar flap [r], or an alveolar trill [r] (Hogg and David, 2006). In the 9th century, the Scandinavian Vikings invaded England, who spoke Old Norse Old Norse language which is derived from the same ancestral Proto-Germanic language like Anglo-Saxon. The Norman conquest in 1066 over England brought in an enormous number of Norman form of French words that carried a highly audible trilled-r, which survived up to early Modern English period.

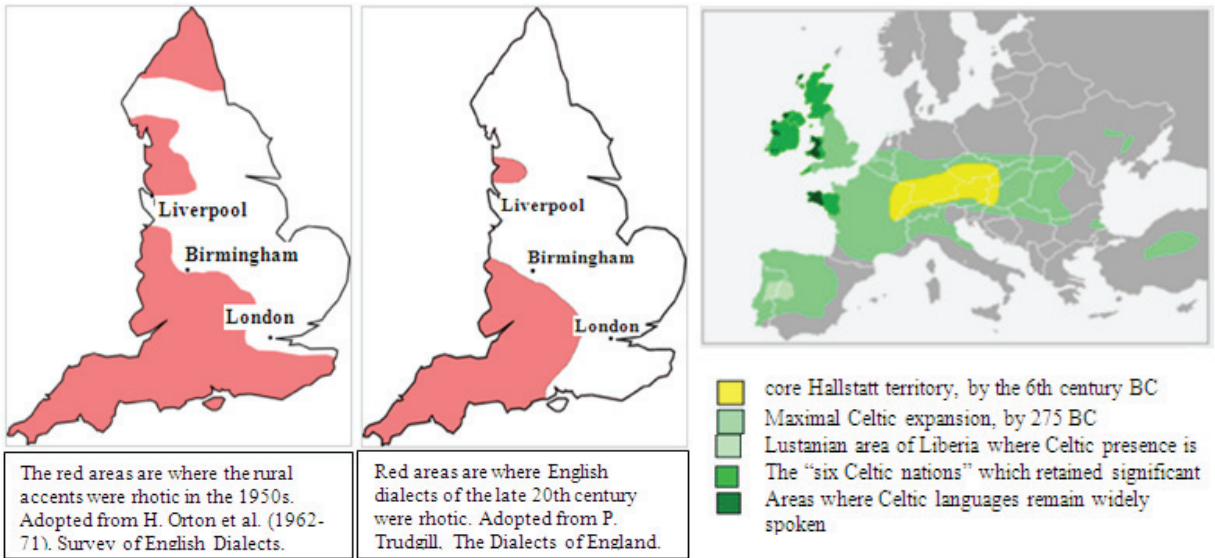
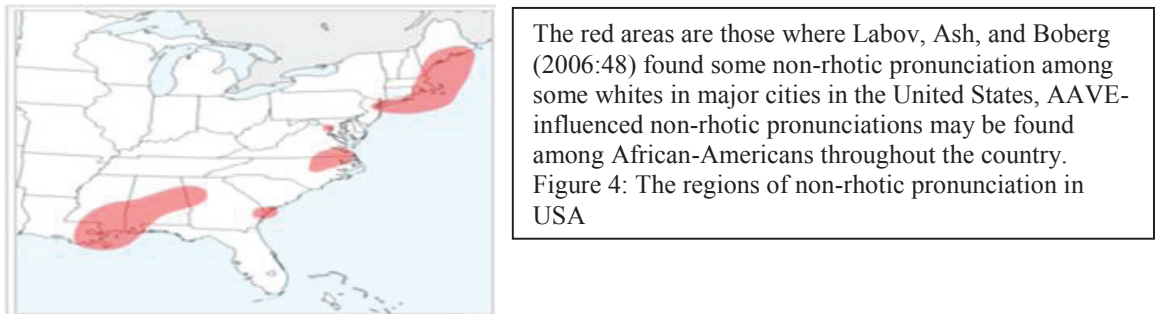


Figure 3: Celtic, Germanic Viking, French Invasion and Rhotic Dialects in England

6. Status of Rhotic and Non-rhotic Dialects in North America

After the internal migrations in the USA, the map of non-rhotic migrations can be presented as follows:



The population of USA is over 306 million as of 2009, at least 50-60 million of them speak non-rhotic English: these would include New Yorkers, many Southerners, and Blacks. In the United States, much of the South was once non-rhotic, but in recent decades non-rhotic speech has declined. Today, non-rhoticity in Southern American English is found primarily among older speakers, and only in some areas such as central and southern Alabama, Savannah, Georgia, and Norfolk, Virginia. Parts of New England, especially Boston, are non-rhotic as well as New York City and surrounding areas. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is largely non-rhotic. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhotic_and_non-rhotic_accents).

Canada has 33.6 million people, of whom English is the home language of 67%: that's about 22.5 million, all rhotic (<http://www.antimoon.com/forum/t13115.htm>). Canada is entirely rhotic except for small isolated areas in southwestern New Brunswick, parts of Newfoundland, and Lunenburg and Shelburne Counties, Nova Scotia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhotic_and_non-rhotic_accents).

7. The Distribution of Rhotic and Non-rhotic Accents in Asia and Other Parts of the World

The English spoken in Asia, India, and the Philippines is predominantly rhotic. In the case of the Philippines, this may be explained because the English that is spoken there is heavily influenced by the American dialect. In addition,

many East Asians (in China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) who have a good command of English generally have rhotic accents because of the influence of American English. This excludes Hong Kong, whose RP English dialect is a result of its almost 150-year-history as a British Crown colony (later British dependent territory). Other Asian regions with non-rhotic English are Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. Spoken English in Myanmar is non-rhotic, but there are a number of English speakers with a rhotic or partially rhotic pronunciation (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhotic_and_non-rhotic_accents).

The phenomenon of non-rhoticity can be found in some other languages as well, such as Malay. Malay in Malaysia (Bahasa Melayu, Bahasa Malaysia) is non-rhotic whilst Malay in Indonesia (Bahasa Indonesia) is distinctively rhotic. Indeed most southern Chinese languages like Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese do not make use of /r/ at all, whereas northern Chinese languages like Mandarin make use of it extensively, so that some Singaporean versions of Mandarin are also non-rhotic (<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elltankw/history/Phon/D.htm>)

6. Conclusion

Accents of English scattered in the world can be either rhotic or non-rhotic. A rhotic accent generally has an audible /r/ in pronunciation. A non-rhotic accent, however, does not have the /r/ in final or pre-consonantal positions (this is sometimes known as the post-vocalic /r/, although others use the more accurate, but perhaps more cumbersome term, the non-prevocalic /r/). What this means is that speakers of non-rhotic accents have this rule: *if the <r> in the spelling does not occur before a vowel sound, don't pronounce it.* (NOTE: *vowel sound*, not *vowel letter*). We can say that all English accents were rhotic up until the early Modern English Period and non-rhoticity was a relatively late development. It is said to have started in 18th century as a prestige motive. What is particularly interesting about the non-prevocalic /r/ is that before it was lost, it affected the vowel *preceding* it. It did three kinds of things: (1) lengthened the preceding vowel sound; (2) changed the quality of the vowel sound; (3) caused diphthongization (<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elltankw/history/>). Foreign learners from such backgrounds as the Romance languages and Arabic and those who have Network American as their pronunciation model tend to be rhotic. Foreign learners in Black Africa, and from China and Japan, as well as those who have RP (BBC English) as their model tend to be non-rhotic (MacArthur, 1998). There has been a general amalgamation of accents towards GA and loss of regional distinctiveness in the U.S. with the advent of television and cinema. The affinity is seen in the dialect of England whose rhotic dialects are being leveled to RP: this is still an on-going process. So, which type of /r/ are you using while teaching English, rhotic or non-rhotic?

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