The fall and rise of the burred 'r'

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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

HOW is it that we pronounce "fort" and "fought" the same way even though the first contains the letter "r" and the second doesn't?

Though history is not quite as clear on this point as we sometimes like to pretend, sometime in the late 16th or early 17th centuries, in eastern England, the pronunciation of the letter "r" started to change. For Ben Jonson "r" was "the dog's letter", which seems to imply a growly trilling version, perhaps rather like modern Italian. But the "r" became less trilled, particularly at the end of a word or before a consonant, till it turned into a vowel or disappeared entirely.

Because London is in the east of England, this change affected the English of London, and it became part of the standard English of England. The same change did not occur in the west of England, or in Scotland, and even today you can hear a real "r" sound in words like "far" and "farm" from speakers who come from these areas.

When North America was settled, many of the early settlers came from the west or still pronounced "r", with the result that standard North American varieties still have an "r" sound in words like "far" and "farm" (such accents are called "r"-ful or, more technically, "rhotic"). By the time Australia and New Zealand were settled, it was a lot clearer that users of the standard form in England did not pronounce an "r" in "far" and "farm", and so, except in Southland, where there was a huge Scottish influence, a non-rhotic variety became the norm here, too.

We copy the standard English forms (but not the standard American forms) and pronounce "spar" the same way that we pronounce "spa", "court" the same way that we pronounce "caught", "dater" the same way that we pronounce "data" with no "r" sounds in either member of the pairs. But we still expect people from Southland to talk about Gore with an "r" sound — what we call a "burr".

There are just two words where most of us who do not come from Southland get it wrong. The letter of the alphabet that comes between Q and S is usually called "arrrr" with a burr, and the name of the country "Ireland" is usually said with a burr in the middle. There may be good reasons for these exceptions, but they are nevertheless rather strange exceptions.

For a while it was not considered cool to sound like a Southlander, and many Southlanders lost their burr, then it became cool once more to be associated with the region, and burrs started to reappear as far north as Dunedin and Queenstown. The interesting thing about these new burred "r"s is that they appear almost exclusively after the vowel, that is in words such as word, work, fern, nurse, curse, learn, first, bird. They do not appear in words like finger, farm, scarce, beard and ford, where the "r" in the spelling shows that there once was an "r" in the pronunciation (and where there still is one for standard speakers from the US, Canada, Scotland and Ireland).

In the meantime, the world has moved on, and North American varieties of English have gained a lot of prestige, particularly in certain cultural areas, such as hip-hop. As a result we find that New Zealand hip-hop artists and even school children, who may not aspire to becoming artists themselves, are starting to use the burred "r".

But, despite the North American model, they appear to be using the "r" sound only when it follows that "nurse" vowel. Researchers from Victoria University, as well as those in other centres, are finding traces of this new rhoticity in the speech of school children from Kaitaia in the north, through Auckland, to the volcanic plateau. And it seems to be travelling fast, and to be strongest in the speech of young people who are members of Maori or Pacific Island communities.

The development of the pronunciation of "r" provides a fascinating study, and the way in which different sources seem to be converging to provide a unique New Zealand variant as a conservative south meets an innovative north is one of the most fascinating parts of the study.

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