



Robertar and the question of the intrusive R



Paul Warren

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

LAURIE BAUER'S article on "r" (*The fall and rise of the burred "r"*, August 13th) provoked some questions about other "r" matters. For instance, one reader, Roberta, noted that one pronunciation of "Get some pencils out of the drawer and draw a picture" might be "out of the draw and drawr a picture". One "r" dropped, another added.

There is more here than at first meets the eye (or ear). Take Roberta's "drawer and". It is indeed possible to have no "r" here if you are not a rhotic speaker, ie if you don't pronounce "r"s in "bird", "farm", etc. But even many non-rhotic speakers are likely to have an "r" between the same two words in "a drawer and cupboard unit."

The difference is that, in Roberta's example, there is a fairly im-

portant break between "drawer" and "and" – you might expect to pause or even take a breath at that point. When you put the two words closer together in a single phrase, you are more likely to get that "r".

Linguists call this a linking r – an "r" in the spelling at the end of one word that is pronounced when another vowel follows. Fluent speech regularly runs words together, and this is one way of joining two words without their vowels bumping into one another.

Not everyone does this – many speakers separate the vowels with what is called a glottal stop (the sound you might find for the "t" in a Cockney pronunciation of water).

"R"s can be intrusive too. Roberta's "r" added in "drawr a picture" is an example of what linguists call an "intrusive r". The

label reflects the fact that the "r" doesn't really belong, in the sense that it is not there in the spelling. Not all speakers or dialects with a linking "r" will also have an intrusive "r", but both are quite frequent in New Zealand English.

Another correspondent, Greg Bodnar, a Canadian living in New Zealand, comments that the Kiwi accent often uses an "r" to pivot between two vowels, citing the example of "Bonjela-r-it" from an advertisement for Bonjela.

Note how the intrusive "r" will not pop up in all vowel contexts – if the product were called Bonjeli, the ad might sound something like "Bonjeli-y-it"; for Bonjelu, you would listen out for "Bonjelu-w-it". In other words, the type of intruder depends on the type of vowel at the



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end of the first word. It follows that, if the pronunciation of the vowel at the end of a word changes, then the nature of the intrusive sound may also change. For instance, many speakers will have a u-like sound at the end of the word “now” (nau), and might say “now out” with a “w” sound between the words.

But there are many others who pronounce “now” without a strong “u” component (something like nah), and they may have an intrusive “r” in the same position. I have certainly heard “nah-r-out on video” in New Zealand television advertisements.

Still on the topic of what happens when vowel sounds get together, a short answer to Maura

Byrne, who asks where and why we use dieresis in English spelling.

Dieresis refers to the two dots that we often find in the spelling of words such as naïve, Zoë and Noël.

In earlier English spelling conventions, it also cropped up in coöperation as an alternative to co-operation. Dieresis comes from a Greek word meaning divide, and the two-dot symbol is used to show that the vowel in question should be pronounced as a vowel in its own right and not run together with the preceding vowel – contrast Zoë and toe.

It is also used to show that a vowel should be sounded out, even when it is not a case of making a division between vowels, as in the

name Brontë. Dieresis tends to be found now largely on less frequent words, possibly because their pronunciation is not well known.

It would be interesting to track birth announcements over the years to see if Chloë shifted to Chloe as the name became more popular and its pronunciation better known.

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Send your questions
 about language to

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