

Rhoticity and national identity among Berwick English speakers Dominic Watt (University of Aberdeen)

Post-vocalic rhoticity was, according to dialectological sources such as Pålsson (1972) and Glauser (2000), still common in rural Northumbrian accents until relatively recently. The trend reported by Pålsson towards loss of rhoticity, associated with a marked decline in the use of traditional uvular variants in onset and coda positions, has all but reached its endpoint in the almost complete absence of uvular /r/, and a marked attrition of post-vocalic /r/, in a sample of Berwick English collected over the past two years. In this respect, the status of the nearby Scottish/English border as representing 'the most numerous bundle of dialect isoglosses in the English-speaking world' (McArthur 1992:895) is strengthened, since there appears to be no parallel loss of post-vocalic /r/ on the Scottish side of the border. One would, in this case, expect the capacity of post-vocalic /r/ to index 'Scottishness' among inhabitants of the region to be enhanced. One might also, by extension, predict that Berwickers who make the common claim of seeing themselves as more 'Scottish' than 'English' would be inclined towards greater use of post-vocalic /r/ than that in evidence among Berwick speakers who profess greater identification with 'Englishness'.

Rhoticity patterns were investigated in the speech of a total of 30 male and female informants (adults and adolescents) from Berwick upon Tweed in order to try to establish the extent to which the use (a) of post-vocalic rhoticity and (b) particular phonetic variants of /r/ in Berwick speech might be correlated with overtly expressed attitudes towards Scotland/Scottishness and England/Englishness, collected via extended structured interviews conducted using a modified version of the SuRE method (Llamas 1999).

References

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