

We R Who We Are: A Study of Phonetic Variation of /r/ within Toronto's Heritage Language Speakers

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Nagy & Kochetov's (2013) study of voice onset timing (VOT) in heritage language speakers of Russian, Ukrainian, and Italian in Toronto considered whether the VOT of heritage speakers were more similar to that of English or kept true to the standard shorter VOT of the homeland varieties of the heritage languages. They found there was a correlation between the VOT of heritage speakers and their ethnic orientation, based on an ethnic orientation questionnaire. However, they did not find significant results for a consistent shift across all three languages, showing a shift only for Russian and Ukrainian. In our study of heritage languages we examined the shifts in /r/ from a trill in the Heritage Languages of Italian, Russian, and Ukrainian to an approximant which more closely resembles that of a /ɹ/ in English. The hypothesis was that age would have the most impact on a shift from the trill /r/ to an approximant /ɹ/. We examined 10 speakers of Russian with 25 tokens each and from Italian 8 speakers over three generations with between 25-35 tokens each, however, we expect to be adding at least 2 more speakers each with 25-35 tokens as well. We intend to ameliorate our preliminary work of analysing the tokens by ear to determine whether it is a trill or approximant by re-examining each token using Praat. In each language we used the HLVC's recorded and transcribed interviews, coding the data in ELAN for the linguistics variables. The linguistic variables included the preceding context, whether the word was a content word or a function word, lexical frequency, preceding articulation place and following articulation place. We plan to conduct a multivariate analysis using GoldVarb of those variables as well as the participants' sex, age, class based on occupation, as well as the social factors of each participant based on the HLVC's Ethnic Orientation Questionnaire coding scheme: language use, ethnic orientation, and social network. A preliminary analysis of the data using Rbrul finds that there are statistically significant patterns of shifts from a trill /r/ to the approximant /ɹ/ in Italian according to the language use of the speaker and in Russian according to the age of the speaker. Ukrainian violated the expectations, since all speakers maintained the trill virtually all the time, regardless of the linguistic and social factors considered. Although the preliminary findings do not show evidence that the ethnic orientation of the speaker is the most significant factor for the shift, in support of Nagy & Kochetov (2013), the findings have a crucial impact on identifying emerging patterns to solve the critical social and linguistic effects English is having on the heritage languages of Toronto.