The devil is in the articulatory detail: Phonological and dialectological implications of Dutch /r/ variation

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The realisation of /r/ in Dutch is notoriously variable, across speakers and across linguistic contexts (Van de Velde 1996; Sebregts et al. 2003). One important variant is a retroflex or bunched approximant in coda positions, rapidly becoming the most widely used variant in this context (Van Bezooijen 2005). Scobbie and Sebregts' (2010) ultrasound study of the properties of this variant showed that it is itself variable: it is either retroflex or bunched pre-velar, with some variation in the place of articulation for both of these categories. This result is similar to that found for Scottish English (Lawson et al. 2011) and American English (Guenther et al. 1999; Zhang et al. 2003; Mielke et al. 2010), whose speakers also employ various articulatory strategies for /r/. This is possible even though there is a relatively stable acoustic effect. Dutch is systematically more complex than English, however, because some speakers (such as ours) have onset allophones for /r/ which are phonetically very different again: they are uvular trills or fricatives.

The acoustic stability in the face of articulatory variation may be taken to imply that the latter does not have an impact on the language systems of speakers. However, variation between retroflex and bunched variants of /r/ in Scottish English has been shown to involve social stratification and to play a role in ongoing phonological change (derhoticisation).

Based on results from our ultrasound study of Dutch /r/ (not all of which reported previously in Scobbie and Sebregts 2010), and a large survey of dialectal /r/ variation in the Netherlands, I argue that a situation similar to that in Scottish English is likely to exist in Dutch, and that articulatory study of the coda approximant /r/ in Dutch is crucial for capturing fully the role it plays in individual speakers' phonologies, and the social and dialectal variation among them.