

The future of Welsh dialects? The effects of societal changes on (r) variation in Northern Welsh

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The demographics of Welsh-English bilinguals have been changing, particularly since the latter half of the 20th Century, as a result of migration into predominantly Welsh-speaking areas and the creation of 'new speakers' in mainly English-speaking areas through immersion education (e.g. Jones 2008). This paper examines the effects of these changes on (r) variation in Northern Welsh.

It is commonly assumed that coda /r/ is realised categorically in Welsh (e.g. Penhallurick 2004: 110), and that the alveolar trill [r] and alveolar tap [ɾ] are the most commonly produced variants of /r/ (Jones 1984: 49-50). Less is known about the frequency of both the non-realisation of coda /r/ and the production of the more typically English alveolar approximant [ɹ].

Data were collected from 32 Welsh-English bilinguals (aged 16-18) via sociolinguistic interview and wordlist tasks. The sample was stratified equally by speaker sex, home language, and area (predominantly Welsh-speaking vs predominantly English-speaking). 2219 tokens of coda /r/ and 2023 tokens of /r/ in prevocalic and intervocalic positions were coded auditorily and checked acoustically. Data were submitted to numerous multivariate analyses using Rbrul (Johnson 2009).

Coda /r/ was realised in the majority of tokens, though its realisation was not categorical as might have been assumed. Non-realisation was influenced by the home language of the speaker and area, and a clear distinction can be made between those who are exposed to Welsh the most (who realised coda /r/ near-categorically) and other speakers. The alveolar approximant was found in the speech of all participants, and is subject to a more elaborate set of constraints which differs between the two areas under discussion.

The final part of the paper discusses the results in light of current trends in Welsh revitalisation efforts, and considers how the effects of these might influence variation in Welsh in the future.