

What a single sound says about you



Do you growl, roll or trill? The letter 'r' – and how we pronounce it – reveals a surprising amount about identity, fashion and history, writes James Harbeck.

The 'r' sound is the Doctor Who of speech sounds: it's really several, obviously different sounds that we treat as the same because they play the same role. But which 'r' you use says a lot about who you are, where you're from, and who you want to sound like.

Three-quarters of the world's languages have at least one 'r' sound – what linguists call a *rhotic*. The problem is that the rhotics seem to have very little in common: they're said anywhere from the far back of the mouth to the lips, and the tongue may be trilling, tightly constricting the airflow, loosely constricting it, or doing very little indeed. And yet we generally recognize them as versions of the same sound. The French uvular 'r', for instance, is what we consider the classic French 'r' – think of how Hercule Poirot says his own name. The German version of the uvular 'r' is a little different because it drops off completely after vowels – think of how Arnold Schwarzenegger says his own name or the classic line from Kindergarten Cop, "It's not a tumour!" ("It's not a tumah!")



Linguists argue about what all the 'r' sounds have in common; recent ultrasound-imaging [research](#) at the University of Cincinnati has suggested that, whatever the front or top of your tongue is doing with a rhotic, the very back root of it is always tightening your throat.

The 'r' is among the last sounds children master... if they ever do

Most rhotics require more effort to say than the average speech sound, and they're among the last sounds children master... if they ever do. The tongue-tip trill is particularly difficult, so it's no surprise that speakers might slip over to something slightly easier – economy of effort is an important factor in sound shifts, though we're also willing to exert effort to make ourselves understood. But ease of saying and hearing aren't the main reasons for the difference between the 'r' sounds you hear as you travel through Europe. Fashion and identity are.

Roll with it

Long ago, Latin speakers said 'r' with the tips of their tongues, just as most Italian speakers do now. For a long time, French speakers did too. But in Paris in the late 1600s, some of the smart set started saying a back-of-the-throat 'r' – what linguists call 'uvular' – perhaps to save effort, perhaps as a fashion. People such as the noted physician Nicolas Andry de Bois-Regard counselled everyone to use the sound, because many people had been converting 'r' to other sounds such as 'l' or 'z' or – gasp – dropping it altogether. And so the uvular 'r' started spreading gradually through France and the tongue-tip trill came to be seen as 'vulgar' or 'provincial'.

And then it spread from there, city by city, among the fashionable set, into Germany and the Netherlands and up to Denmark... or so the old story goes. But it's not quite that simple. There's evidence that the back-of-the-throat 'r' had already shown up in some dialects of German by that time, and not even among the fashionable city set. Nonetheless, the main spread of the uvular 'r' through Germany and neighbouring countries did follow the fashionable city folks and travelling merchants. Berlin had it by 1700; it took hold in Copenhagen in the late 1700s and spread from there back through Denmark; it moved into southern Sweden by the late 1800s and stopped. It spread too into Norwegian around Bergen, which has a long history of trade with Germany.

It also moved into the Netherlands, but in any given place in the Netherlands you can hear some speakers who say 'r' with the tongue tip, some who say it uvular, and some who say it mid-mouth like Americans, and what's preferred by young women (who are typically the bellwethers of language change) varies from city to city. Next door in Belgium, though, Flemish (another name for Dutch) avoids the uvular 'r'. It may have something to do with Belgium also having French speakers: your 'r' declares your language group.

Uvular 'r' also travelled west. Spanish resisted it (except for a few places), but it took Portuguese by storm. Portuguese, like Spanish, has two kinds of 'r,' a heavy one (as in *carro*) and a light one (as in *caro*). In the late 1800s, some influential speakers in Portugal's larger cities started saying the heavy one like the French 'r'; it may or may not have been by direct influence from France. Within a few decades it had taken over almost completely. It went to the next level in Brazil: depending on where you are and who you're talking to, you might hear 'r' as something like a Dutch 'ch,' or a 'h,' or – in some contexts – no sound at all. So the Brazilian version of the heavy 'r' means that 'carro' sounds to us like 'ca-hoo', and 'Rio' sounds like 'hee-oo.'



The Brazilian pronunciation of 'r' varies from region to region (Credit: BBC)

Meanwhile, that other 'r,' the light one, stayed more or less the same... until recently. Now some urban speakers in Portugal are starting to say it the American way after vowels. Rural speakers near São Paulo, Brazil, have been doing that for years, but it hasn't spread because they're not fashionable – people call their accent *fala caipira*, 'hillbilly talk.'

The Scots not only don't drop the 'r', they trill it

We English speakers have insisted on going our own way. By a thousand years ago, English probably had several versions of 'r' across the country; historical linguists are still arguing about the details. What we know for sure (thanks to variant spellings) is that by the time of Shakespeare, people in some parts of England were starting to drop it after vowels for economy of effort. But 'r'-dropping didn't get the endorsement of the 'right' sort of people until the late 1700s, at which point it caught on so briskly that colonials returning to England after the American Revolution expressed surprise at the change.



In Shakespeare's era, some people in England started to drop their 'r's completely (Credit: BBC/Getty)

The 'right' sort of people? Well, the 'upper-right' sort of people, if you look at a map. R-dropping came to dominate the part of England roughly north and east of the A5 motorway –plus London of course – excepting areas of Lancashire and Northumbria (and stopping at Scotland, where, as in Ireland, there is pride in not sounding English). The Irish don't drop 'r'; think of the word 'Ireland' – the English pronunciation sounds like 'island', whereas the Irish enunciate the 'r', so it sounds more

like 'oirrland'. And the Scots not only don't drop it, they trill it, so 'Fergus from Aberdeen' really sounds like 'Ferrgus from Aberrrdeen.'

The southwest English 'r' is internationally associated with pirates

The southwest English 'r' is internationally associated with pirates, thanks to actor Robert Newton, a native of Dorset, who played Blackbeard and Long John Silver in Disney movies in the 1950s. He's famous for 'Arrrr, matey,' but you'll hear every 'r' in 'There be treasure' too. Then there is the farmer stereotype ('Get orrf my land'.) Now the 'r'-dropping is spreading into the southwest as well.

And then there are the Geordies. Already by the 1700s the 'Northumbrian burr' – an uvular 'r' – was a point of pride. It remained one until the mid-20th Century, when, in the space of about one generation, under the pressure of popular culture, education and fashion, it almost completely disappeared.

The American way

Americans have not been immune to trends, either. Rich and well-educated people in port cities – most notably Boston and New York – soon picked up the British 'r'-dropping fashion. So did plantation owners in the South, and – from them – others in their area. Poorer people in the South who lived in the mountains away from the plantations did not. Their reward for keeping all their 'r's? Their accent is now – as in Brazil – stereotyped as 'hillbilly.' But don't assume a strong mid-mouth 'r' always goes with rural; heavy use of the same sound is also a distinctive mark of the Beijing dialect of Mandarin.

'New York' has often been rendered in print as 'New Yawk'

The prestige of 'r'-dropping lasted a long time in America, but it started slipping after the Civil War, and slid right downhill in the 20th Century. Nancy Elliott, of Southern Oregon University, studied the speech of leading men and women in US films from 1932 through to 1980, and found a steady decline in the rate of 'r'-dropping, even by the same actors: Fred Astaire went from 80% 'r'-dropping in the 1930s to 28% in the 1970s; Myrna Loy, from 96% to 7%. At first, more 'r'-dropping was associated with higher social status and more polite speech; leading men dropped their 'r's more when talking to leading ladies and less when getting into fights, and richer people dropped their 'r's more than poorer ones. But by the 1960s the prestige associations had switched: a few rich people (villains, for example) still dropped their 'r's, but it was increasingly a mark of lower class.



Portuguese – like Spanish – has two kinds of 'r', heavy and light (Credit: BBC)

The 'r'-dropping of New York can be heard in a New Yorker accent saying 'New York,' which has often been rendered in print as 'New Yawk.' The common joke phrase for the Boston accent is 'Ya cahn't pahk ya cah in Hahvad Yahd' ('You can't park your car in Harvard yard'). A well-known American actor who could be counted on to drop his 'r's was Humphrey Bogart. In "Here's looking at you, kid" you don't hear an 'r' in "here's". In the word 'world' sometimes he would say the 'r' but sometimes it would sound more like 'woild.' A more recent counterpart to Bogart is Harrison Ford, but he always says his r's – in Star Wars lines like "He's the brains, sweetheart" or "Never tell me the odds," you hear the 'r' in "sweetheart" and "never," which Bogart would have dropped ("sweet-haht," "nevah").



Hollywood film stars, such as Fred Astaire, dropped their 'r's in 1930s, but this was much less popular 40 years later (Credit: BBC/ Getty Images)

It's not ovah, though. The prestige of different 'r' sounds in different places is just going to keep shifting. It's about not just fashion but identity. We could call it the Doctor Who-Are-You of speech sounds

Language Transition Work

Task 1 Neologisms

Fill in the grid below about new words (neologisms).

Word	Definition	Have you heard or seen this word being used? Would you or your friends be likely to use it?	Origin of the Word
Heather			
Shadowbanned			
Gaslighting			
Mansplaining			
Cancel culture			
Influencer			
Capping			
Riz			

Task 2 Rhotics <https://www.bbc.co.uk/culture/article/20190315-what-a-single-sound-says-about-you>

Read the article in the link above (or from the school website) about pronunciation of the letter r (the rhotic sound), then complete the following:

Think of at least 5 people who pronounce rhotics differently. It could be friends, family, yourself, or famous people. Write their names and describe how they pronounce the rhotic (in your own words) and then explain why that might be. Is it described in the article? Is it because of where they're from? What other factors may explain it?

Task 3 Child Language Acquisition Watch the short video about Noam Chomsky's ideas on how children learn language. You can go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Cgpfw4z8cw> or look up 'Noam Chomsky on Language Acquisition' on YouTube (the video is about a minute and a half and is produced by BBC Radio 4). Write a paragraph or 2 addressing the following:

- Summarise Chomsky's ideas about how children learn to use language
- What is a Language Acquisition Device in your own words?
- Do you agree with this point of view. Why or why not? What are some flaws with this kind of thinking?
- Are there other ways of explaining how children learn to speak? Try to come up with your own ideas, but if you struggle you may want to look up B.F. Skinner's ideas about behaviourism and summarise this.

Task 4: Opinions and Arguments

Language gives rise to really strong feelings. Some people get furious about how words like 'so' are used to start sentences, while others get upset about 'like', 'sort of' and 'innit'. And when you get into more sensitive areas such as race, gender, illness, disability and war, arguments really start to kick off. That's because language is such a vital tool in expressing who we are but also how we represent others and how they feel about that. Language is rarely neutral and because we use it all the time – speaking, writing, online – we're surrounded by it and immersed in it, so it's always part of what we do and who we are.

Part of what you'll do on the English Language A Level is to think about some of these opinions and views and work out what you feel about them and why. You won't be asked to just pluck an opinion out of thin air, but to use your study of language to inform what you do and how you think. The course is designed to give you lots of ideas and evidence to base your opinions on.

You've not started the course yet, so it's a bit mean to ask you to do this now, but the good thing about language is that you already know a lot about it and will perhaps have some strong opinions about it already. In this activity, you are asked to offer some views about issues related to language.

- Read the five statements in the table below and on a scale of 1-5 make a note of how strongly you agree (5) or disagree (1) with each. Try to write a sentence or two in the final column to explain your view.
- If you can share ideas and interact with others, check your scores and see if you have agreed with your classmates. What different views have been offered?
- Why not keep a note of your own scores and see if your views have shifted by the end of the course?

Statement	Your view 1-5 (strongly disagree =1, strongly agree =5)	Your reasons
If English changes too quickly, we won't be able to understand each other.		
People who use slang sound stupid and uneducated and it's best to avoid it completely.		
Some accents are just better than others; that's a fact of life.		
There are some words that are so offensive, they should just be banned.		
When you're communicating online, it doesn't matter if you make mistakes or don't follow the normal rules of grammar; as long as people can understand, that's all that matters.		

Task 5: Opinions in the Media

As well as debating big ideas about the English language, you'll be studying what others say about it. Language is constantly being discussed online and in the press, with opinion pieces being produced all the time. This is great news for language students, because there's a never-ending supply of material to explore. But it can also be a little tricky to keep track of.

We've chosen 5 articles for you to have a look at, to give you a taste of the kinds of arguments people have about language. Some of these are by linguists (people who study language) and others are by journalists or commentators. We're not saying we necessarily agree with the views being offered, but they will give you a sense of some of the different arguments out there.

Have a look at the 5 articles and then choose one to respond to. In your response, explain the following:

- Do you agree with the argument? Why or why not?
- How does the author get their ideas across about language? Do they seem receptive to different points of view?
- Are there any clues in the article about why they think this way? Are there suggestions about their own background?

Five suggested opinion pieces:

1. If You Can't Embrace Regional Dialect, You Can Kiss My Chuddies:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/31/embrace-regional-dialect-kiss-chuddies-dictionary/>

2. The Ugly Rise of Accent Softening: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/mar/20/ugly-rise-accent-softening-people-changing-their-voices>

3. Calling Someone a 'Gammon' Is Hate Speech: <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/what-does-gammon-mean>

4. Saying No To Gizit Is Plain Prejudice: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/saying-no-to-gizit-is-plain-prejudice-8488358.html>

5. Text Speak: Language Evolution or Just Laziness?

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/9966117/Text-speak-language-evolution-or-just-laziness.html>

The Course

Paper 1: Language, the Individual and Society
What's assessed • Textual variations and representations • Children's language development (0-11 years) • Methods of language analysis are integrated into the activities
Assessed • written exam: 2 hours 30 minutes • 100 marks • 40% of A-level
Questions Section A - Textual Variations and Representations Two texts (one contemporary and one older text) linked by topic or theme. • A question requiring analysis of one text (25 marks) • A question requiring analysis of a second text (25 marks) • A question requiring comparison of the two texts (20 marks) Section B - Children's Language Development A discursive essay on children's language development, with a choice of two questions where the data provided will focus on spoken, written or multimodal language (30 marks)

Paper 2: Language Diversity and Change

What's assessed

- Language diversity and change
- Language discourses
- Writing skills
- Methods of language analysis are integrated into the activities

Assessed

- written exam: 2 hours 30 minutes
- 100 marks
- 40% of A-level

Questions

Section A - Diversity and Change

One question from a choice of two:

Either: an evaluative essay on language diversity (30 marks)

Or: an evaluative essay on language change (30 marks)

Section B - Language Discourses

Two texts about a topic linked to the study of diversity and change.

- A question requiring analysis of how the texts use language to present ideas, attitudes and opinions (40 marks)
- A directed writing task linked to the same topic and the ideas in the texts (30 marks)

Non-exam assessment: Language in Action

What's assessed

- Language Investigation
- Original Writing
- Methods of language analysis are integrated into the activities

Assessed

- Word count: 3,500
- 100 marks
- 20% of A-level
- Assessed by teachers
- Moderated by AQA

Tasks

Students produce:

- a language investigation (2,000 words excluding data)
- a piece of original writing and commentary (1,500 words total)

So the two exams will be 80% of your grades, and the two pieces of coursework will make up the other 20%.