

## [r]-dissimilation in American English

In many varieties of American English, it is possible to drop one /r/ from certain words that contain two /r/s, such as *su(r)prise*, *pa(r)ticular*, *gove(r)nor*, and *co(r)ner*. This type of /r/-deletion is done by speakers who are basically ‘rhotic’; that is, who generally do not drop /r/ in any other position. It is a type of dissimilation, because it avoids the presence of identical segments within the word. It is often regarded as a minor, sporadic, unpredictable process.

This talk has two goals. The first is to expand the description of American /r/-dissimilation by bringing together previously published examples with new examples from my own or other linguists’ observations. This data set, which is far larger than has appeared in any single source, reveals several generalizations: for example, dissimilation of /ər/ or /rə/ to /ə/ usually occurs between a labial consonant and a coronal consonant (as in *ape(r)ture*, *the(r)mometer*); it is almost always the first /r/ that deletes (unless the first /r/ is intervocalic); deletion of a prevocalic /r/ is more likely to be triggered by another prevocalic /r/; there are no blocking effects by intervening segments such as /l/. These generalizations show that the pattern, while clearly not regular, is not quite as arbitrary as is usually assumed.

A surprising property of American /r/-dissimilation is that it is not structure-preserving, contrary to claims that dissimilation is universally structure-preserving (Ohala 1993, Kiparsky 1995). Some American dialects have dissimilatory dropping of coda [r] in stressed syllables, as in *co(r)ner*, and this deletion may indirectly create new vowel contrasts. The phone [o], which occurs as an allophone of /oo/ or /ɔ/ before /r/, can stay behind when the /r/ is dropped through dissimilation, as when *order* [ˈorrər] dissimilates to [ˈorər]. The resulting vowel is not identical to that in *odor* [oʊdər], so dissimilation in effect creates a new [oʊ]/[o] contrast.

The second goal of the talk is to contribute to the long-running debate over why and how dissimilation happens, and particularly long-distance dissimilation. There is dispute over whether long-distance dissimilation is part of the grammar at all, and whether its functional grounding is a matter of articulatory constraints, processing constraints, or perception. Data from American /r/-dissimilation are especially important for this debate, because the process is active and non-morphologized, and occurs in a living language whose phonetics can be studied.

In this case, I argue that the data support Ohala 1981’s contention that dissimilation stems from perceptual errors, when a listener hypercorrects for perceived assimilation. English /r/ has drawn-out acoustic ‘resonances’, spanning several syllables, which can make a listener unsure how many /r/s a word contains. Perceptual dissimilation occurs when the anticipatory resonances of one /r/ mask an earlier /r/. Drawing on phonetic studies, I argue that /r/ tends to disappear precisely where it should be most phonetically masked. For example, flanking labial and coronal segments contribute to masking an /r/ by obscuring the labial and coronal elements of the /r/’s own articulation.

Resonances can also cause listeners to err on the side of perceiving too many /r/s, if the resonances of one /r/ are mistaken for independent rhoticity on another segment. I argue that this kind of mistake does occur in American English, and present data on a hitherto-undescribed pattern of rhotic assimilation: colloquial insertion of /r/ in words already containing an /r/, such as *farmiliar*, *perservere*, *Christerpher*, and *intergral*. A number of examples of such insertion are found in the Buckeye Speech Corpus, and some inserted /r/s have been lexicalized, as in *sherbert* and *frustrum*.