

## Transitioning Between Dialects: Variable r-lessness in a Canadian border community

R-vocalization (r-dropping) is a well-known, though currently receding, characteristic of certain American varieties of English, particularly in New England and other cities along the East Coast. (Labov, Ash and Boberg 2006) In Canada, r-lessness has been reported only in certain isolated enclaves in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, but has never been considered a characteristic of the general variety of Canadian English spoken throughout most of the country.

The Eastern Townships is a historically English-speaking rural region located in Southern Quebec along the border with the United States. Geographically surrounded on three sides by an overwhelmingly francophone population, the region is isolated from other English-speaking parts of Canada. Further, its location along the border means that residents of this region likely have as much, if not more, contact with speakers of varieties of American English as they do with other Canadians.

This paper presents data from the region surrounding the town of Stanstead, Quebec, located on the Vermont border. Data from interviews conducted by amateur historians in the late 1970s shows variable production of post-vocalic /r/ to be present in the speech of elderly members of this community at that time. I present a sociolinguistic analysis of the rate of r-vocalization for 13 speakers from this community.

An analysis of linguistic constraints on r-vocalization shows it to be most likely in unstressed syllables, morpheme finally, and in the environment preceding a semi-vowel. An examination of social factors found men to vocalize /r/ almost twice as much as women. Similarly, speakers in the lower socioeconomic group dropped /r/ almost twice as often as those of the higher class.

Stanstead is revealed to be a community in transition from r-vocalization to rhoticity-- a change which has since been completed. The presence of r-lessness in this Canadian community likely traces back to the first American settlers who emigrated from New England. However, while r-vocalization was still a prestige variant in Eastern New England when the speakers in this study were acquiring their variety of English, it is clear that in Stanstead, the community norm had shifted toward the Canadian r-pronouncing standard. Thus, despite being the descendants of New Englanders living in a border community, the residents of Stanstead clearly identify as Canadian, and express this identity through their speech.

### References:

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