

# New York City English

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## 1 Introduction

New York City English is a well studied dialect, the first publication is [Babbitt, 1896](#). First major linguistic study is [Labov, 1966](#) and its second edition [Labov, 2006](#).

## 2 Labov's study

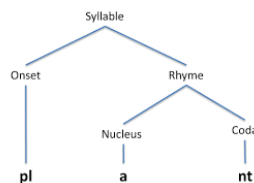
Description of the main features of New York English:

### 2.1 R-lessness

**r-variable:** [r] is deleted/pronounced like a vowel in syllable coda<sup>1</sup> position. Often referred to as *r-lessness*, and dialects which use this features are called *r-less*, or *non-rhotic*.

Spelling	Mainstream Pronunciation	New York Pronunciation
car	[kɑr]	[kɑ:]
careful	[kɛrful]	[kɛ:fʊl]

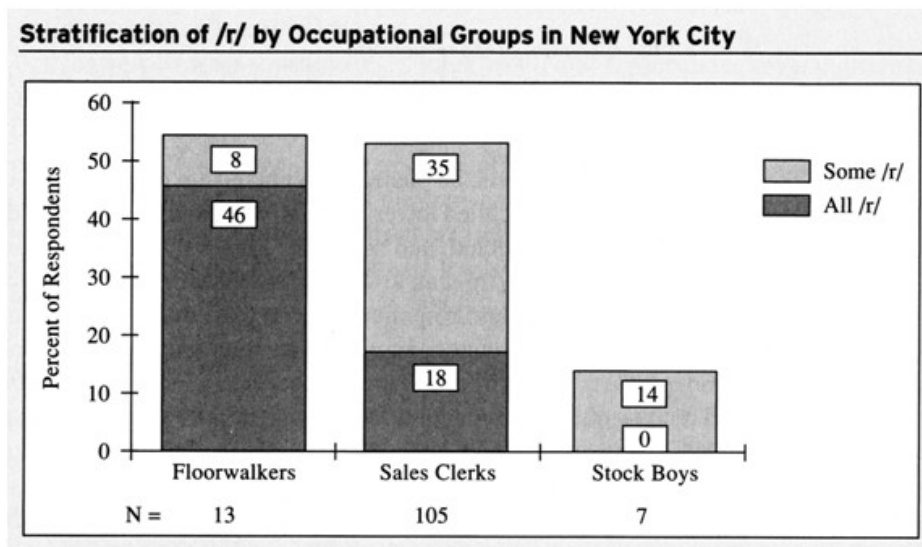
<sup>1</sup>**Syllable coda** is a part of the syllable that comes after a vowel. For example, in the monosyllabic word *plant* the coda is *nt*. The part of the syllable that comes before the vowel is called an **onset**: in *plant*, the onset is *pl*.



**Origin:** British English, brought to the US by British settlers to the entire Eastern Seaboard.

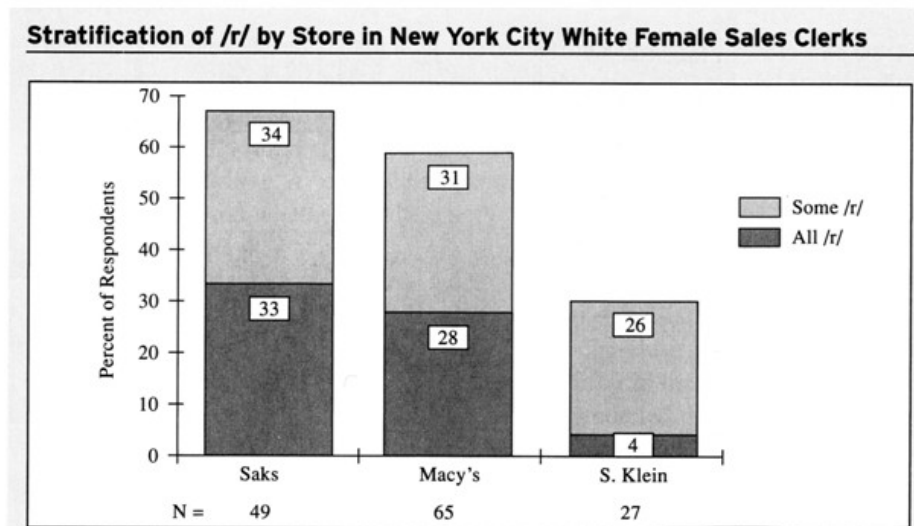
**Labov, 1966's findings:** Factors influencing *r*-lessness:

- Class and socioeconomic status determines the frequency of *r*-less pronunciations: more prominent among lower class.



(Source: Finegan, 2004:393)

- Gender: males are more *r*-less.



(Source: Finegan, 2004: 392)

**Change:** *r*-less pronunciations is going away. Currently this is still a change in progress; more and more speakers produce *r*'s.

## 2.2 Coffee/Thought-vowel

**coffee-vowel:** Low back rounded vowel [ʊ] in NY City English is raising and merging with [o], while in the most of the other places in the USA it is lowering towards [ɒ].

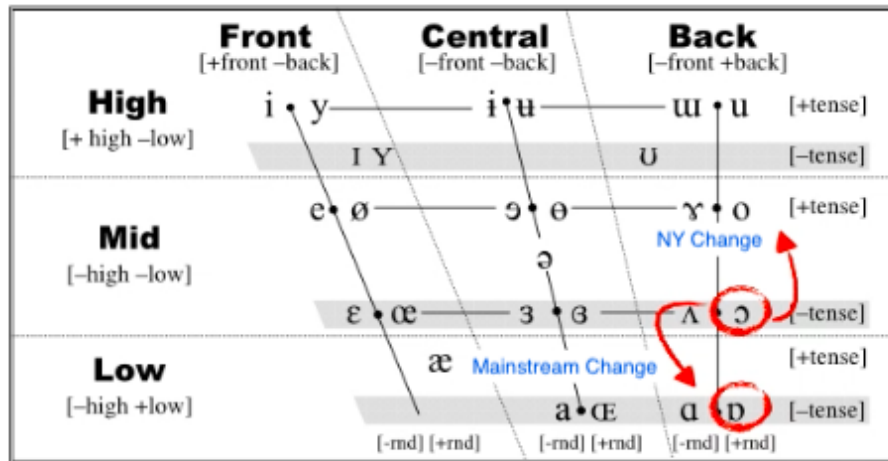


Figure adapted from Jason Riggle

It occurs in words like *coffee*, *thought*.

**Change:** During Labov's study, it was becoming more and more prominent feature (unlike *r*-lessness!). Currently, according to Becker, this feature is decreasing in popularity.

## 2.3 Short *a*-split

**Short *a*-split:** in some contexts, the vowel *a* stays as in Mainstream US English, and in some cases it tenses, fronts, and raises.

- Before front nasal(*n*, *m*): *ban*, *ram*, but not *bang*, *rang*.
- Before voiceless fricatives (*f*, *θ*, *s*, *ʃ*, etc.): *bath*, *pass*
- Before voiced stops (*b*, *d*, *g*): *mad*, *bag*, but not *back*, *Matt*.

Rules do not operate if:

- Vowel is word-initial
- Open syllable<sup>2</sup>: *man*, but not *manner*

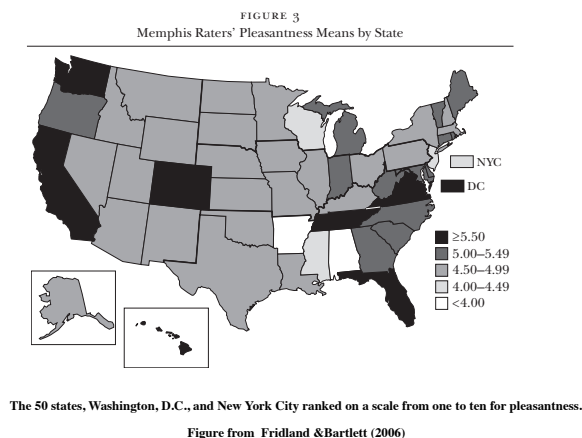
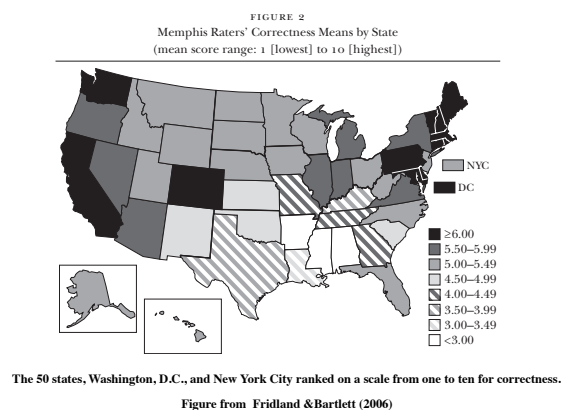
**Change:** We are seeing a move away from this classic system. Younger New Yorkers only apply this rule before nasals (*hang*, *man*), but not in other contexts.

<sup>2</sup>Open syllable are syllables with no codas, i.e. syllable that end in a vowel.

### 3 Future of the NY City English

#### 3.1 Stigmatization

NY City English is one of the most stigmatized dialects of American English: often gets low rankings on reception of *correctness* or *pleasantness* (Fridland and Bartlett, 2006):



New Yorkers are aware of this stigmatization, and react to it: speakers consciously or subconsciously switch away from classic New York features.

#### 3.2 Recession

Classic features are in recession, but the dialect is not disappearing, contrary to some #BadLinguistics media publications (i.e. NPR, 2015).

#### 3.3 Group Differences

Some subgroups of the population are maintaining the features, while others are moving away from them.

- African-Americans are maintaining the *coffee*-vowel

#### 3.4 Change?

While three classical features are in recession, it is possible that new features will appear in NY City English and be used by the New-Yorkers to project their identity.

### 4 Questions

- Can you think of how NY City speech changes?
- Do you see any innovations and changes in NY City English?
- If you speak are from NY area, do you speak differently than your parents or grandparents?

- Which popular movies and movie characters speak NY City dialect? Is their character in any way correlated with their accent?
- Are there any other NY City English features that you are aware of?
- Do you notice any other group differences than the one already mentioned in the video? Think about social class, ethnicity, gender, age, geographic location.

## References

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