

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](#).

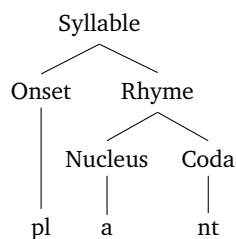
2 Labov's study

Description of the main features of New York English:

2.1 R-lessness

r-variable: [ɹ] is deleted/pronounced like a vowel in syllable coda¹ position. This feature is often referred to as *r-lessness*, and dialects which use this features are called *r-less*, or *non-rhotic*.

¹**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*.

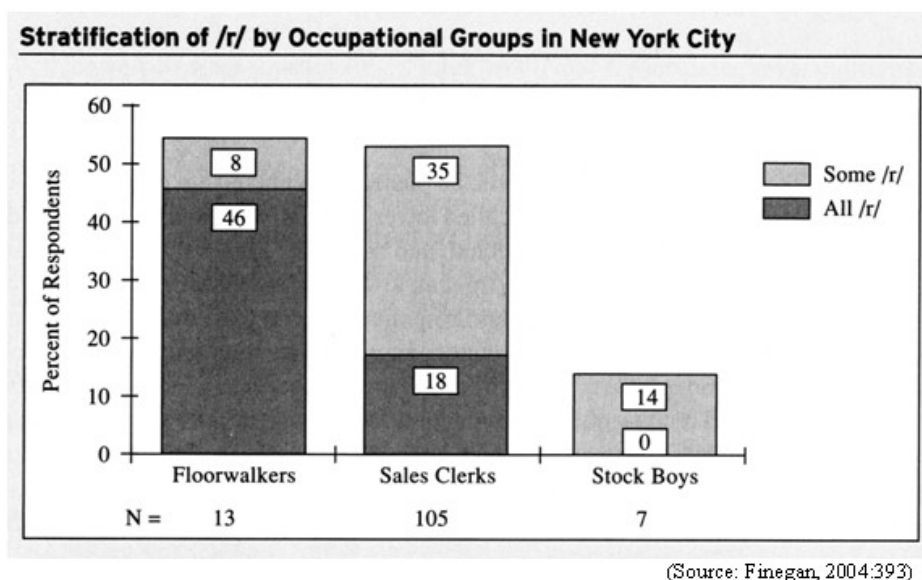


Spelling	Mainstream Pronunciation	New York Pronunciation
car	[kɑːr]	[kɑː]
careful	[kɛ.ɪfʊl]	[kɛ:fʊl]

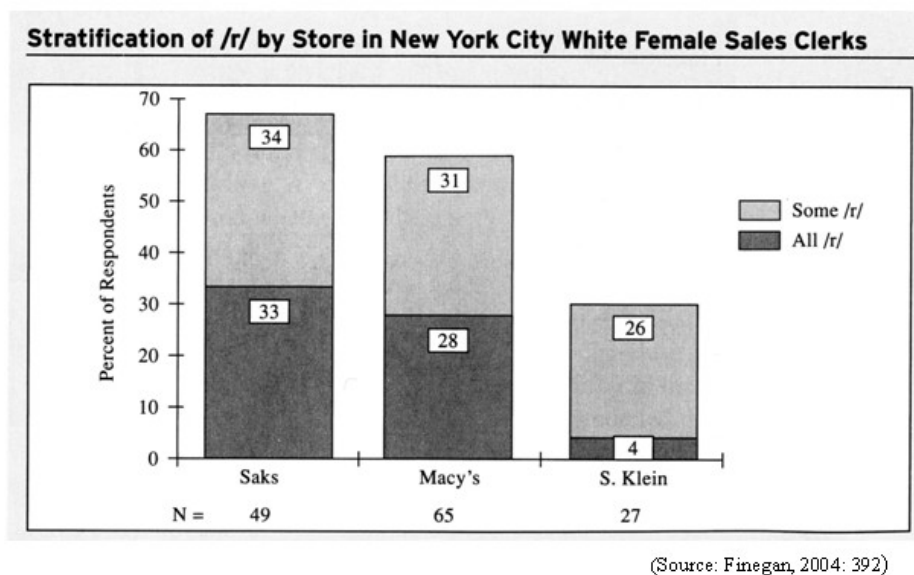
Origin: British English, brought to the US by British settlers to the entire Eastern Seaboard.

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

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



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



Change: r-less pronunciation is going away. Currently this is still a change in progress; more and more speakers produce *r*'s, but some stick to the classical pronunciation.

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].

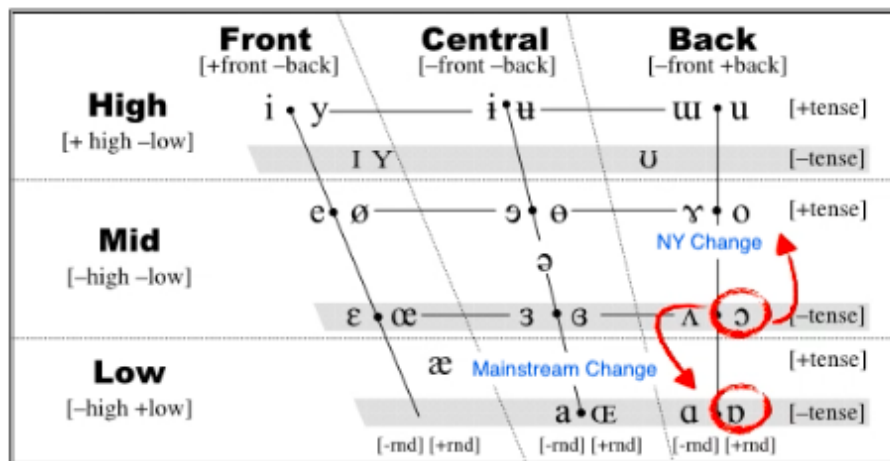


Figure adapted from Jason Riggle

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: *Ann*
- Open syllable²: *man*, but not *manner*

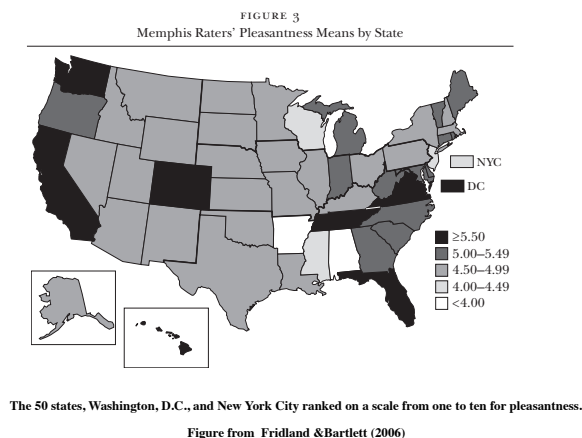
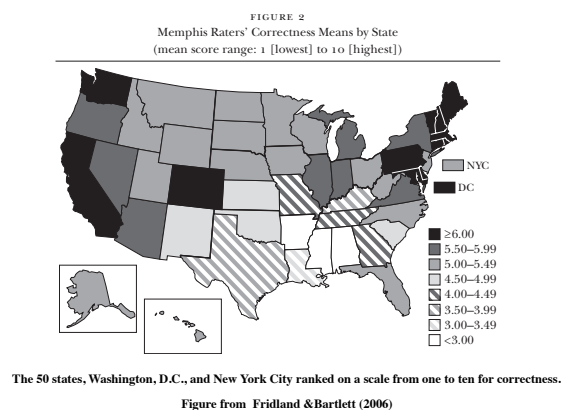
Change: We are seeing a move away from this classic system. Younger New Yorkers only apply this rule before nasals (*hang*, *man*), but not in other contexts.

²Open 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: it 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 NY population are maintaining some classic features, while others are moving away from them.

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

3.4 Change?

While three classic 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 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 ones already mentioned in the video? Think about social class, ethnicity, gender, age, geographic location.

References

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