New England /r/ — a linguistics problem set

Credit: This problem was first presented by Walt Wolfram of North Carolina State University, modified by Maya Honda (Wheelock College) and Wayne O'Neil (MIT), modified again by Jeff Reaser (North Carolina State) and Wolfram, and modified yet again here by David Pippin.

David Pippin (Billings Middle School, Seattle) *davep@billingsmiddleschool.org*

In some dialects of English, like the Eastern New England dialect, the /r/-sound in words like *car* or *park* can be dropped so that these words sound like /cah/ and /pahk/. This feature is perhaps most strongly associated with the city of Boston, which leads to stereotypical phrases such as, "Pahk the cah in Hahvahd yahd." However, not all /r/-sounds can be dropped. As you will discover, some words can drop the /r/ and other words may not drop it. By comparing lists of words where the/ r/ may be dropped with lists of words where it may not be dropped, you can figure out a pattern for /r/-dropping. And also learn why the phrase mentioned above is a misrepresention of NE English.

List A: Words that can drop /r/

car
father
card
bigger
cardboard
beer
court

List B gives words where the *r* sound may NOT be dropped. In other words, speakers who drop their/ r/s in **List A** would pronounce the /r/ in the words in **List B**.

List B: Words that cannot drop *r*

run
bring
principal
string
okra
approach
April

Generate a hypothesis that you feel addresses the problem of New England /r/-dropping. You should start with something along the lines of an ***If-then*** statement.

If [a set of conditions that you decide], speakers will drop /r//

—or—

If [a set of conditions that you determine], speakers will keep /r/.

Preliminary hypothesis:

Use your hypothesis to predict which of the words in **List C** will be pronounced with the /r/ and which will be pronounced without the/ r/. Circle *drop* if the word can drop the /r/ or *keep* if it cannot drop the /r/.

List C: Applying the rule for /r/-dropping

bear	drop	keep
program	drop	keep
fearful	drop	keep
right	drop	keep
computer	drop	keep
party	drop	keep
fourteen	drop	keep

Think of two other words that you think can drop an /r/ and two new words that cannot drop an /r/.

Words that CAN drop /r/:

Words that CANNOT drop /r/:

Like many problem sets, deriving the rule for this pattern requires looking at lots of data. Consider the following phrases.

List D: Words that **keep** /r/

bear in the field
car over at the house
garage
caring
take **four** apples
pear on the tree
far enough

List E: Words that **drop** /r/

bear by the woods
car parked by the house
parking the bus
fearful
take **four** peaches
pear by the house
far behind

Are there **counterexamples** to your first hypothesis in these lists? Do you need to revise your hypothesis? If so, please redo it below. Try to keep it simple and elegant. A good hypothesis is **parsimonious,** or frugal, with the words.

Revised hypothesis:

You will now use your hypothesis to **predict** which words in **List F** will drop /r/. Circle *drop* if the word can drop the /r/ or *keep* if it cannot drop the /r/.

> **List F**: Words that May or May Not Drop /r/
>
> | | | |
> |---|---|---|
> | **pear** on the table | drop | keep |
> | **pear** by the table | drop | keep |
> | **park** in the mall | drop | keep |
> | **program** in the mall | drop   keep | drop keep |
> | **car** behind the house | drop | keep |

Does your hypothesis work with the following data, in which some seemingly vulnerable /r/s may not be dropped and from which others must be dropped in this variety of English. Those that may not be dropped are indicated by *r*.

> They live in the Fields Corner neighborhood of Dorchester. Fields Corne*r* is part of Dorchester, and Dorcheste*r* is part of Boston. They live in Fields Corner, but one of them works at MIT in Kendall Square. They don't own a car, so he *r*ides the subway between Kendall Squa*r*e and Fields Corner.

Getting close…almost there…how is your hypothesis holding up?

Practicing the /r/-Dropping Pattern

How would a speaker of this dialect pronounce the following sentences? Draw a line through the /r/s that a speaker of New England English would drop.

- The teacher picked on three students for an answer.

- Four cars parked far away from the fair.

A final question…So why is it a misrepresentation to say "Pahk the cah in Hahvahd Yahd."

Closing…a few words about dialect prejudice

Dialect is one of the few areas where people feel comfortable expressing prejudice. And for native speakers, dialect often becomes a point of shame. Many of Wayne O'Neil and Maya Honda's students in Boston speak this variety of English, but not proudly. For example, many students mistakenly refer to this way of speaking as slang, and display great unease when asked to read the data aloud with the dialect-appropriate pronunciation. Moreover, their students often displace their own knowledge of this variety of English to other family members, saying such things as, "That's the way my mother talks with her friends – rough," and "That's the way my dad talks – I can't stand it!" However, an occasional student enjoys coming to understand why, for example, she and her brother can be not only "GinaR and Pet/ah/" but also "Peter and Gina," but never *"Gina and PeteR" or *"Pet/ah/ and GinaR." (See below for a problem on Intrusive /r/.) Establishing the systematicity of New England /r/ goes a long way to validating this way of speaking and then to trying to understand why it is held in such low repute. Does class have anything to do with it, for example?

Appendix

1.0 Why /r/?

So why is /r/ a sound that New Englanders drop in the first place? The answer to that question has to do with way the sound is produced. Like /l/, /m/, and /n./, it's sound referred to by linguists as a *liquid*. Ask Wayne about the difficulties of finding Vietnamese coriander in Pike Place Market for a more complete explanation.

2.0 Intrusive /r/

Consider the following passages, in which R indicates an inserted, or intruded, /r/:

1. Emma works in another part of Boston: at Wheelock College on the Riverway, near the Fenway. EmmaR also rides the subway to and from her job.

2. On the telephone today, the weather-person said, "It's going to be bright and sunny all day, so leave your umbrellaR at home." He was wrong; I needed my umbrella.

3. Eliott Richardson worked long and hard on drawRing up a new lawR of the sea, but we're still stuck with the same old law.

4. JFK (as were other U.S. presidents, but in a different pronunciation) seemed threatened by CubaR and by "Red" ChinaR in particular, but not by the other China -- Taiwan, or by Miami's Cuba.

Can intrusive /r/ be explained by the hypothesis of /r/-dropping or retention that you formulated above?

If not, how is intrusive /r/ to be accounted for? Before formulating a hypothesis for intrusive /r/, consider the following data, sentences 5-9 in which R **cannot** be inserted, and 10 in which it can.

Hint: pronounce sentences $5-9$ without the extra /r/, noting the transition between the words *Hindi, sundae*, etc. and the following *is*. Contrast these pronunciations with those of *tuna on* and *law is* in sentence 10.

Places where /r/ is **not** inserted…

5. *HindiR is a language spoken in India.
6. A *sundaeR is made with ice cream and other good things.
7. *piR is greater than 3 but less than 4.
8. There is a *kangarooR in the yard.
9. The *siloR is empty.

But R is added here…

10. TunaR on rye is standard back East, but the new lawR of the sea will change all that.

What do you make of this? What is your hypothesis for Intrusive /r/?