INVESTIGATING RESIDUAL RHOTICITY IN A NON-RHOTIC ACCENT

Esther Asprey

Abstract
This paper reports on preliminary findings of a study conducted in the Black Country area of the west midlands of England. The small number of linguistic studies carried out in this region in the last 40 years have not found evidence of the continuing existence of variable rhoticity in the local speech variety. The *Survey of English Dialects* in the 1950s found low levels of rhoticity among speakers in the location closest to the Black Country, and I examine here similar findings from a detailed study of the variety, carried out between 2003-2006. [1]

1. The Black Country region: an overview

The Black Country lies to the immediate west of the city of Birmingham: its eastern border adjoins that city. Figure 1 shows its location within the UK. The region is unusual in that it is not an area delimited by political, physical or economic boundaries, nor, unlike some areas with names unconnected to physical or political regions, does it have criteria for being a resident like that of, for example, being born within the sound of Bow Bells for Cockneys. Since the first known written use of the name 'Black Country' by Walter White in 1860, residents have been disputing amongst themselves exactly where its boundaries lie. The name 'Black Country' is generally acknowledged to stem from the pollution created in the Industrial Revolution. Modern day historians have put forward several definitions of the area's boundaries. Their theories can be categorised under two main headings: those using the iron industry to define the area, and those using the South Staffordshire coalfield to do so. The debate among historians and residents which continues today centres on the fact that the heaviest industry was centred around the extreme south east of the Black Country, so that Dudley and areas to the south of it are the major steel and iron producing areas in addition to the coal mining which they have in common with the rest of the Black Country. Debates can be seen online on the *BBC Black Country* website:

1. Andi of the Bonk
   I am from Quarry Bank. I believe The Black Country to be the areas from Dudley, Wednesbury, Tipton to Blackheath, Oldhill, Cradley, Lye and good old Quarry Bank to be the true Black Country. Wolverhampton is a separate place entirely and Stourbridge is just outside - or so I have always been lead to believe. Seems like a lot of places are trying to cash in on what some once looked down there noses at!!!!!

[1] I wish to thank Warren Maguire and Barry Heselwood for their advice on the analysis of rhoticity, and David Britain for permission to reproduce the map shown in Figure 3. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier draft version of this paper.

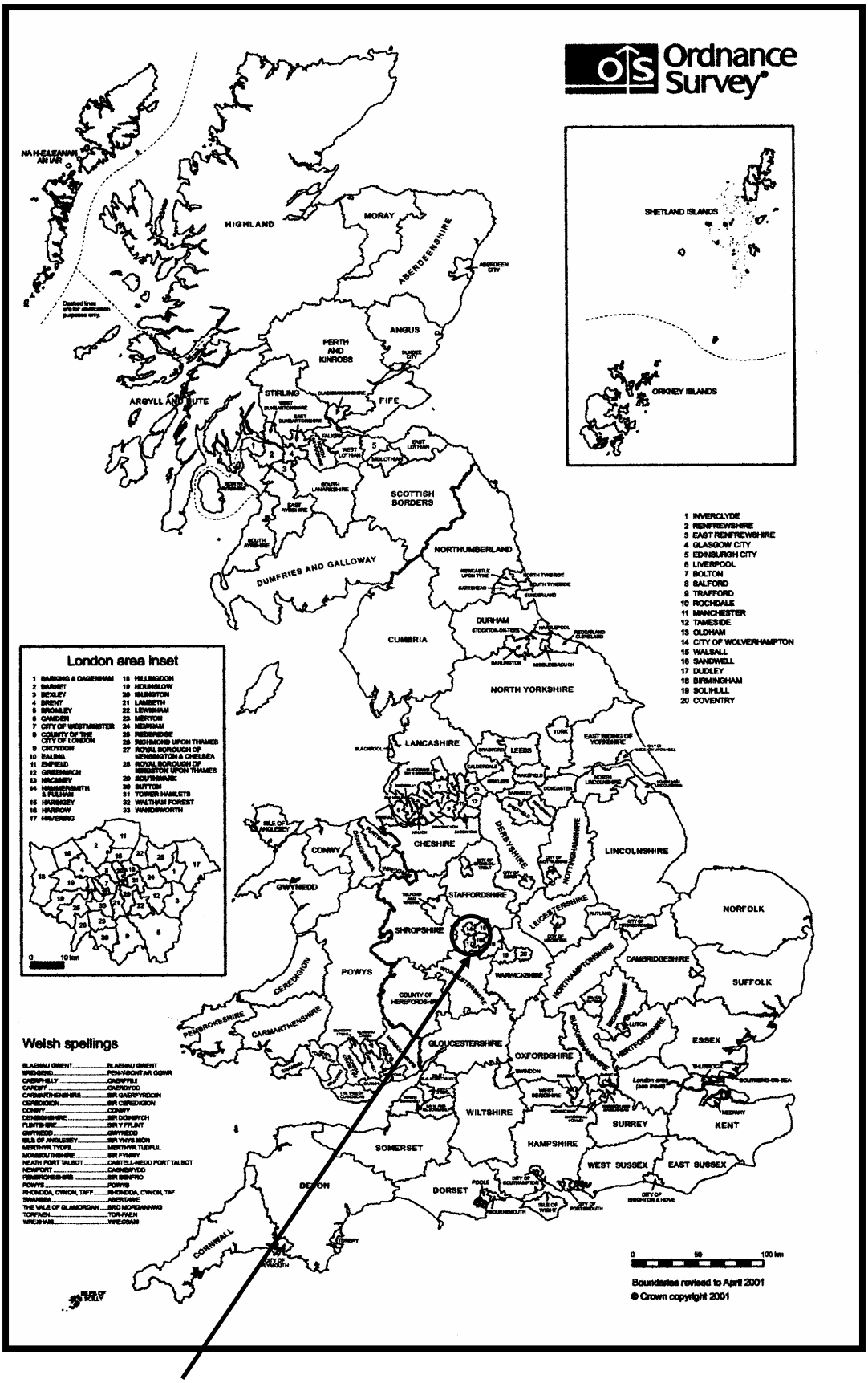


Figure 1. The location of the Black Country (reproduced by kind permission of the Ordnance Survey)

DJ Andy Hicks
I agree with Andi of the Bonk. All of a sudden, all the people who used to cringe at BC, now want to be a part of it. Well its ours, an we bay gunna let it goo [we aren't going to let it go]. Where is it? Dudley, Wednesbury, Oldbury, West Brom, Tipton and the like. Stourbridge, NO. Wolves, NO.

Tracey B
I was born and raised in Old Hill and Dudley Wood and now live in Kingswinford. As far as I am concerned the road running from Old Hill Cross to the Fiveways in Cradley Heath is the centre of the Black Country if not the Universe! Forget the wannabees of Wolverhampton, Walsall and anywhere on the Birmingham side of the M5 motorway.

(British Broadcasting Corporation 2006)

Local historian Barnsby (1971: 220) concludes that the Black Country is an area about 100 miles square, including the towns of 'Dudley, Walsall…West Bromwich, and Wolverhampton, together with Stourbridge and Halesowen.' I use this definition here for my discussion of rhoticity. It has as its basis the fact that the 10-yard coal seam stretched under all these towns. Barnsby's map is given in Figure 2, and Appendix 1 places the map in its administrative context, showing the Metropolitan Boroughs of the West Midlands.

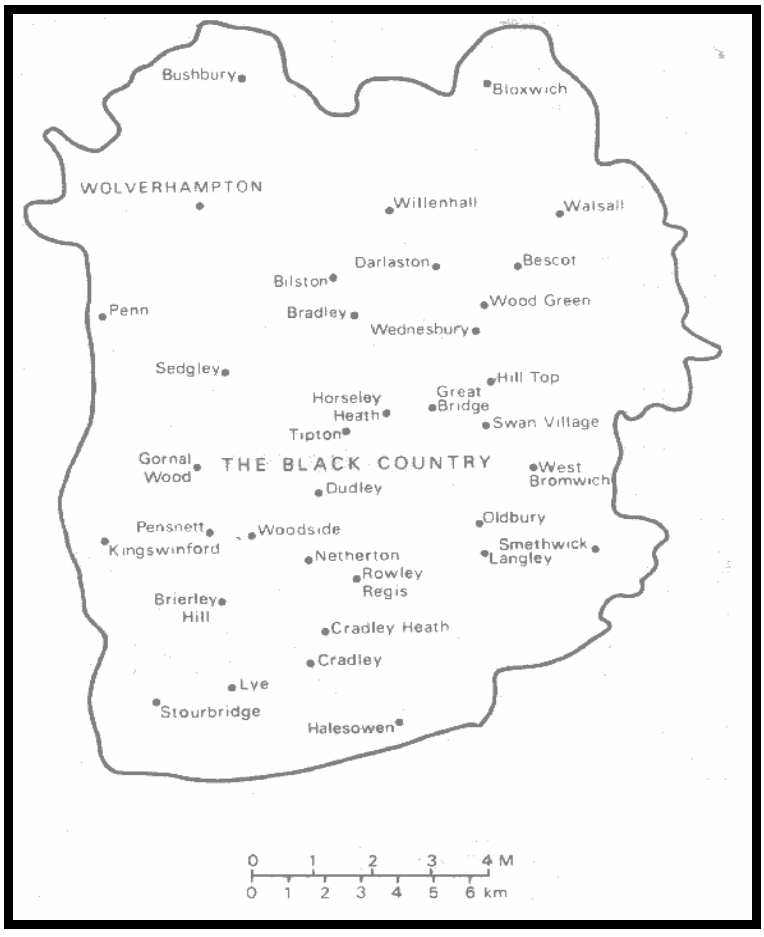


Figure 2. The Black Country (Barnsby 1980)

2. English in the Black Country

The Black Country is considered by linguists and non-linguists alike to have associated with it a variety of English which is remarkably conservative. Wells (1982: 364) reports that the variety is 'linguistically notable for its retention of traditional dialect forms.' There exists in the Black Country a continuum from 'Standard West Midlands English' (a slightly regionalised accent coupled with standard grammar), to the broadest variety of local speech (by broad I understand here that which in traditional terms of difference is furthest from the standard). There is distinctive lexical variation. The modern data I collected across the region I have defined as the Black Country suggest that distinctive lexical items such as <wammal> for *dog*, <suck> for *sweets* and <bostin> for *very good* are in use even by younger speakers. In its grammar the local Black Country variety contains morphological forms which differ radically from those of Standard English. Most notably, ablaut is used to mark negation in modal and support verbs, as well as in full verbs *have* and *be*, In some verbs this strategy exists also in the past tense. Table 1 shows a selection of these forms.

Table 1. Ablaut negation of verb forms in the Black Country

Standard English	Black Country local variety
I cannot/can't	I [kɔː]
I do not/don't	I [dəʊ]
I will not/won't	I [wəʊ]
I have not/haven't	I [eɪ]
I am not	I [eɪ]/[beɪ] (older)
I did not/didn't	I [deɪ]
I was not	I [wɔː]

As well as being linguistically distinctive, the local variety has a great stigma attached to it by those outside the region, and many inside it. Coupland and Bishop (2007: 79), found that of all the 34 accents they investigated, only Asian accents and Birmingham accents ranked lower than Black Country, which was ranked at 33 on the mean scale of 'social attractiveness' and at 32 on the mean scale of 'prestige.' This last result was in spite of the fact that respondents from the Midlands of England form a total of 39% of all respondents. Indeed, the only factor which Coupland and Bishop report as influencing informants to respond more positively to the Black Country accent in terms of prestige is their own rating of what they term 'diversity'; that is, their self reported evaluation of their willingness to respond positively to diversity in accents (2007: 82). The Black Country linguistic variety, then, is distinctive, but disliked by many.

3. Rhoticity in English – an overview

Wells (1982:75-6) describes the difference between rhotic and non-rhotic accents thus:

2. In the rhotic accents /r/ can occur…in a wide variety of phonetic contexts, thus farm [fɑrm], far|| [fɑr]. In the non-rhotic accents /r/ is excluded from

> preconsonantal and absolute final environments, thus farm [fɑːm], far|| [fɑː]…There are also accents that can be classified as semi-rhotic, having lost pre-consonantal /r/ but retaining it in certain word-final environments: thus Jamaican, with *farm* [fɑːm] but *far*|| [fɑr].

/r/ loss in English is an innovation, with rhotic accents being for North America the norm, reflecting the former dominance of rhotic varieties in the Old World. The critical difference is that for much of the USA and Canada, rhoticity is, or in certain areas is becoming, the prestige norm, while in England the prestige target variety is non-rhotic. Figure 3 shows the area of England which could be considered rhotic towards the end of the nineteenth century, based on the fieldwork of Ellis (1889).

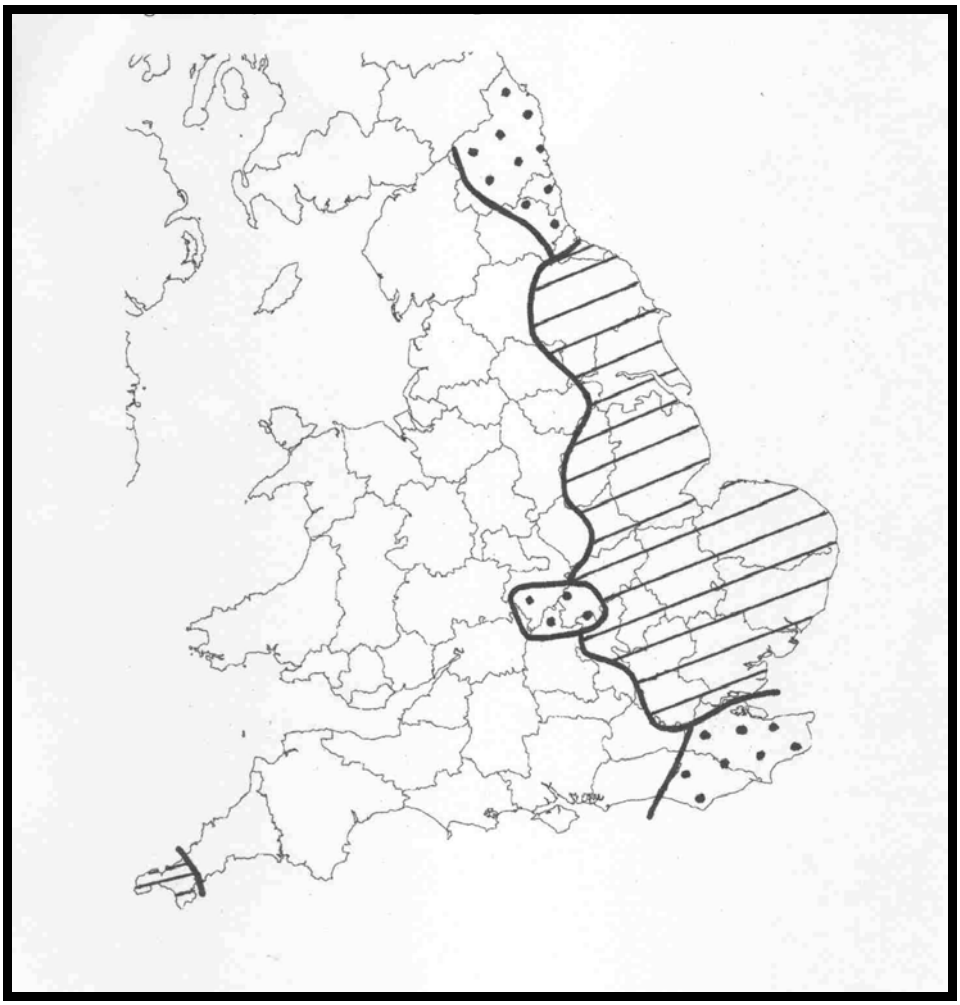


Figure 3. Non-rhoticity according to Ellis's survey of 1889 (after Britain 2002:53). Shaded areas indicate non-rhoticity, dotted areas variable rhoticity.

By the 1950s when the *Survey of English Dialects* was conducted (Orton and Barry 1969; 1970; 1971), rhoticity had been pushed further westwards still, so that Chambers and Trudgill (1998:95) draw up the map given in Figure 4. Britain (2002:52) suggests that in reality, overall levels within communities may have been even lower in the 1950s, since the *Survey of English Dialects* had deliberately targeted "the most conservative speakers of the community – old rural non-mobile men."

Though no large-scale studies of rhoticity in England have been conducted since this time, there is evidence to suggest that rhoticity has declined even further in its strongholds. Britain (2002: 52) reports the findings of Sullivan in Exeter (1992), who found only 8% rhoticity among her middle class sample of speakers. He also cites Dudman (2000), working in Cornwall, who found that "rhoticity levels among a group of working class adolescents born in 1987 were half of that of a group of elderly speakers born between 1906 and 1924, but despite this, still reached 25% of all tokens among the young" (Britain 2002:52) Though he gives evidence from a study conducted in Lancashire (Vivian 2000) of "high levels of rhoticity being retained, even among young people, and especially in Accrington and Burnley", Britain's conclusion for Lancashire is that "the trend is nevertheless towards loss" (2002:52).

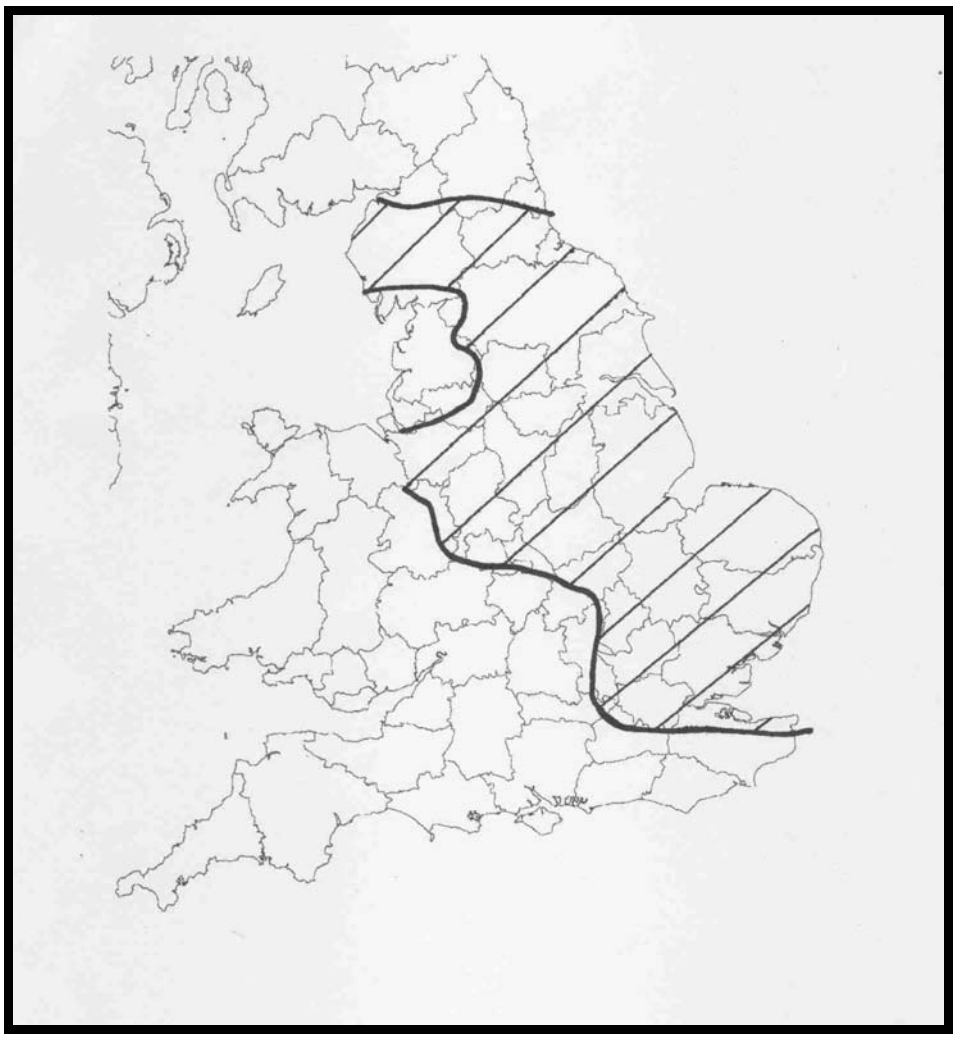


Figure 4. Non-rhoticity in the Survey of English Dialects *(after Chambers and Trudgill 1998:95)*

Studies concerning the loss of rhoticity in England are not hard to locate. The major problem is that many focus on the overview of whether or not rhoticity exists in any form, rather than the contexts in which rhoticity is most and least likely to be preserved. Turning to Scotland, a country where a rhotic accent is both the norm and the prestige target, Romaine (1978:151) reports on the loss of post-vocalic /r/ among

Edinburgh schoolchildren. She finds that of her sample of 24 children of working class origin, the move towards loss is being led by males, and that the most prestigious form of /r/, [ɹ] is less favoured by males, who favour the tapped variant [ɾ]. Her analysis of the most likely contexts to favour the retention of /r/ is based on the position of the word in relation to the following segment, thus analysis of running speech in reading passages and interviews, rather than word lists. There is no report which details the effect of quality of the preceding segment on /r/ preservation or loss.

She finds that among girls, utterance final [ɹ] is most likely to be retained, while [ɹ] following a vowel and then followed by a word beginning with a vowel is least likely. The environment of consonant +[ɹ], which is then followed by a word beginning with a consonant, falls between these two extremes. For boys, consonant +[ɹ], which is then followed by a word beginning with a consonant is the most likely environment for retention, and utterance final [ɹ] the least likely. The main difference between the boys and the girls, she concludes, is that "girls are almost always rhotic and most frequently use [ɹ], while boys are less frequently rhotic and tend to use [ɾ]. Clearly in Edinburgh, there is social stratification of both quality of /r/ and use of any kind of /r/.

Studies of the acquisition of /r/ by speakers in an area which previously contained a majority of speakers using a non-rhotic variety can also offer insights into the phonetic contexts which prompt or inhibit the introduction of /r/. Some studies which show this continuum of contexts, from those in which /r/ is being most readily introduced; to those which are slowest to become rhotic include that of Feagin (1990) in Anniston, Alabama. Table 2 shows her findings in hierarchical format, with stress marked by an acute accent.

Table 2. Contexts for the analysis of /r/ (after Feagin 1990)

	Most /r/	Variable /r/		Least /r/
Environment	1	2	3	4
	schwa+ŕC	schwa+ŕ	V́+r(C)	Unstressed r
Vowel	NURSE	FUR	NEAR SQUARE START NORTH FORCE	letteR

In the non-rhotic speech of Anniston, then, the most likely environment for /r/ to be introduced is the context schwa+ŕ+C, and second most likely is schwa+ŕ final. Less likely is the appearance of /r/ following a stressed vowel. Least likely as a context for reintroduction is /r/ appears in unstressed position, Feagin's given example being letteR.

A detailed study of the introduction of rhoticity into a non-rhotic variety was conducted in Boston Massachusetts (Irwin and Nagy 2007). Preliminary results from the study indicate that unlike Feagin's results, the data do not demonstrate a neat 'step' pattern, in which one linguistic context is clearly differentiated from the next by a corresponding decline in rhoticity. Instead, they report (2007: 143-4) that while the

most likely context in which /r/ appears is, like that found by Feagin, schwa+ŕ+C, and the least likely context is unstressed /r/, there is little difference in Boston in the scores for rhoticity between contexts 2, 3 and 4, and in contrast with Feagin's findings, "[b]ack vowels favour an [r]-ful pronunciation in Boston. This finding differs sharply from the pattern that Feagin found in Anniston, in which front vowels favoured [r[, and back vowels disfavoured [r]" (Irwin and Nagy 2007:143). They conclude that this may be "partially due to the different vowel qualities in Boston and Anniston" (2007:143).

From these two studies, I hypothesise that the contexts isolated in Anniston and Boston as being most favourable to the introduction of rhoticity might be the most favourable contexts for the retention of rhoticity in the Black Country variety. If this hypothesis is correct, we would expect to see the lowest levels of rhoticity in items with the linguistic context of unstressed /r/, and the highest in items containing the context schwa+ŕ+C. The middle of the hierarchy is unclear, though it seems that in the two different studies looked at here, there is a discrepancy between varieties in which back vowels are favourable to the retention of rhoticity, and those in which front vowels are favourable.

Irwin and Nagy designed their methodology to take into account as many linguistic factors as possible; in particular they coded their sample according to the morphological position of /r/ in a word. They differentiated on a detailed level between word-final, morpheme final but word-internal, and morpheme-internal. Rather than finding that these different positions were the most significant factor in the production or non production of post-vocalic /r/, they report (2007:141) that "the most significant internal factor was the phonological context. Our speakers were most likely to pronouce [r] in NURSE words with a tautosyllabic following consonant, the same environment that Feagin (1990) found was the first to re-introduce [r] in Anniston. They also report that "of the other linguistic factors, the position of /r/ with respect to word boundaries matters most: speakers were more likely to pronounce word-final and more likely to delete non-final [r]."

Having explored this research, I turn now to a discussion of the status of post-vocalic /r/ in the Black Country.

4. Post-vocalic /r/ in the Black Country – a methodology for the investigation

I examine first the previous linguistic research conducted in the Black Country. Ellis's work at the end of the nineteenth century found very high levels of rhoticity in all possible linguistic contexts at the locations within the area he classes as the " eastern south midlands" (Ellis 1889). The *Survey of English Dialects* (*SED*) in the 1950s (Orton and Barry 1969; 1970; 1971) found much lower levels of variable rhoticity in the one location closest to the Black Country which was visited by its fieldworkers, Himley in Staffordshire. Both surveys are referred to in detail in Sections 6 and 7 of this paper. The last positive mention of rhoticity comes in 1963 (32) from Painter, who reports that "[ɹ] is rare". Manley (1971) reports no rhoticity from the south west of the region. Mathisen (1999:111), working in the centre of the Black Country concurs with these findings, remarking that 'Sandwell has a non-rhotic accent.' Clark's work (2004) makes no mention of rhoticity. In this paper then, I call upon my own more recent work as well as earlier work to address the following issues:

Is Black Country English still rhotic?

If so, then what are the linguistic contexts in which post vocalic /r/ still occurs?

Where post-vocalic /r/ is present, what is its quality?

To answer the first question, I examine evidence which indicates that Black Country English still has some speakers with variably rhotic accents. The second question can be investigated using Wells's lexical sets (Wells 1982). There are 10 possible contexts after which /r/ might be expected to occur. The contexts in which post-vocalic /r/ might occur are

- The long vowel NURSE [ɜː], which I equate with the vowel described by Feagin (1990) and Irwin and Nagy (2007) as stressed schwa. [ɜː] and [əː] appear in free variation in the Black Country in words of the NURSE set.
- The long vowel START [ɑː], and its older Midlands reflex [aː].
- The long vowel NORTH [ɔː] (in the Black Country, unlike the US varieties mentioned, the FORCE and NORTH sets are merged at the value [ɔː]).
- The diphthong NEAR [ɪə]
- The diphthong SQUARE [eə]
- The diphthong CURE [ʊə]
- The PRICE set [aɪ ~ ɑɪ] (though in practice even rhotic realisations of this diphthong are smoothed in the Black Country variety, so that the FIRE set might be a more accurate description. For ease of interpretation however, I follow convention here).
- The unstressed vowel in letteR [ə]

The third question investigates whether the phonetic value of /r/ in the Black Country is closer to the alveolar approximant [ɹ], or to the post-alveolar approximant [ɻ]. I begin here with purely auditory analysis, and leave aside distinctions of colouring versus full /r/ to focus on a broad picture as a starting point.

Since, as will be seen in the next section, this paper compares the *Survey of English Dialects* material (which consists predominantly of words in isolation, rather than in running speech), to data gathered at interview (thus running speech), it will not be possible to compare in detail all possible contexts in running speech which predict retention or loss of /r/. I therefore focus on vowel quality in all tokens which do contain post-vocalic /r/, rather than giving an analysis of the influence of word boundaries on rhoticity based on a small data set.

6. Older historical evidence

For older historical evidence I turn to Ellis (1889). He collected data from several locations in and near the modern Black Country. Figure 5 below shows these locations, as well as that of the village of Himley (which is the location for the *SED* fieldwork). Ellis reports on several locations in and near the Black Country as I define it in here. Cradley (not to be confused with Cradley Heath – the two are approximately 1.5 miles apart), Darlaston, Dudley, Hagley, Selly Oak and Walsall. Hagley lies some 4 miles south of Stourbridge. Ellis considers (1889: 485) that towns on the southernmost fringe such as Stourbridge are 'outside the Black Country proper.' He divides the "eastern south Midlands" as he calls it, into several dialect divisions, three of which are pertinent here. His understanding of the area which is the Black Country again differs from that of some other historians and researchers: since my detailed analysis looks at areas in both what he calls "the Black Country" and in that which he terms "near Black Country proper", this discrepancy is not a concern.

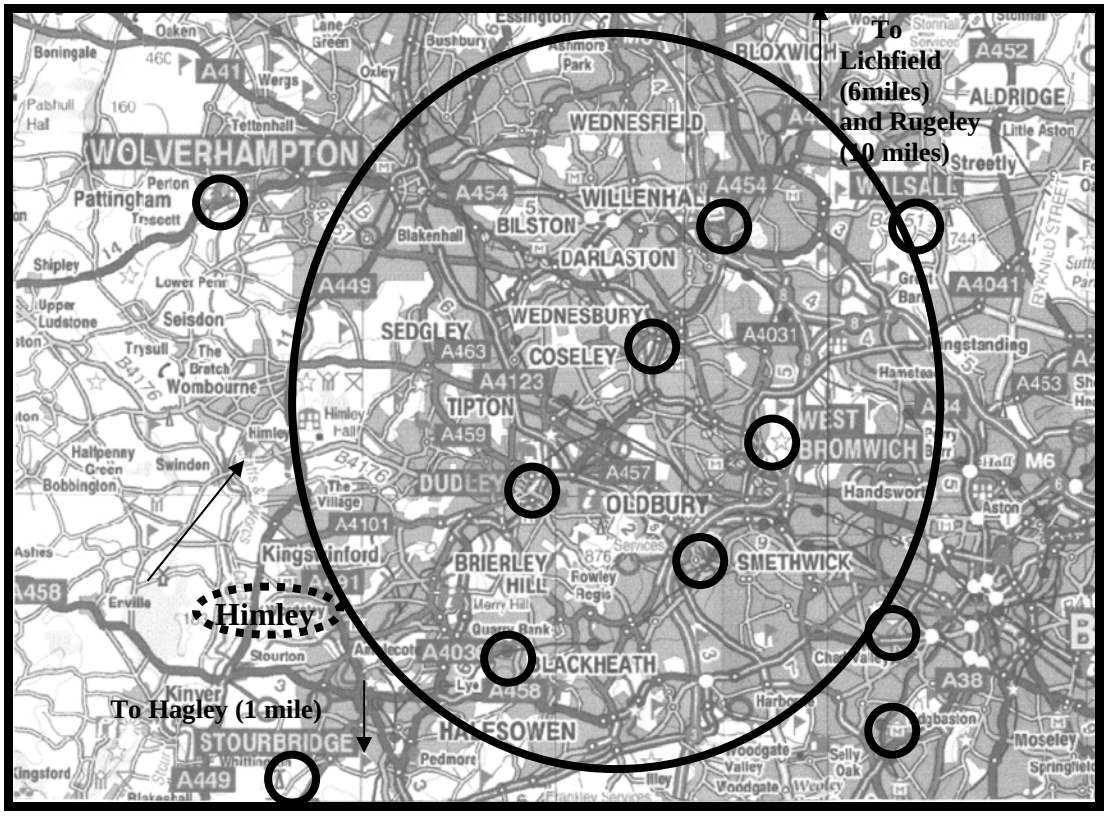


Figure 5. The Black Country and surrounding areas showing locations visited by Ellis (1889).

Ellis identifies three regions which are of interest to this study:

3. Var. i*b*. west mid Staffordshire [this includes Cannock Chase]
   Var. ii*b*, The 'Black Country' of South Staffordshire [this covers Walsall, Willenhall, Wolverhampton, Darlaston, and Dudley]
   Var ii*c* north Worcestershire – Near Black Country proper [this covers Cradley, Stourbridge, Selly Oak and Hagley] (1889: 463-485)

In analysing his data it is important to remember that some reports were collected by sending a reading passage to a resident and asking them to provide an accurate transcription of the variety. On several axes of variation this causes problems. If we accept that members of lower social classes may be more likely to use the local variety on a day-to-day basis, then we have the problem of possible inaccuracy on the part of those doing the describing. Certainly sending reading passages presupposes literacy, cutting out a possible section of informants. They were also asked to give a *typical* rendering of the passage, which risks over-reporting of levels of usage, and certainly leaves no room for marking speaker variation in the community. Perhaps the biggest problem for the informants who were chosen, however, was that they were constrained to using a set of symbols (Melville Bell's Visible Speech Table) with which they were wholly unfamiliar. (Ellis did however supply a huge amount of description concerning the symbols to help them choose). These caveats acknowledged, Table 3 shows possible patterns within the data.

Table 3. Rhoticity levels in the Western Midlands (Ellis 1889)

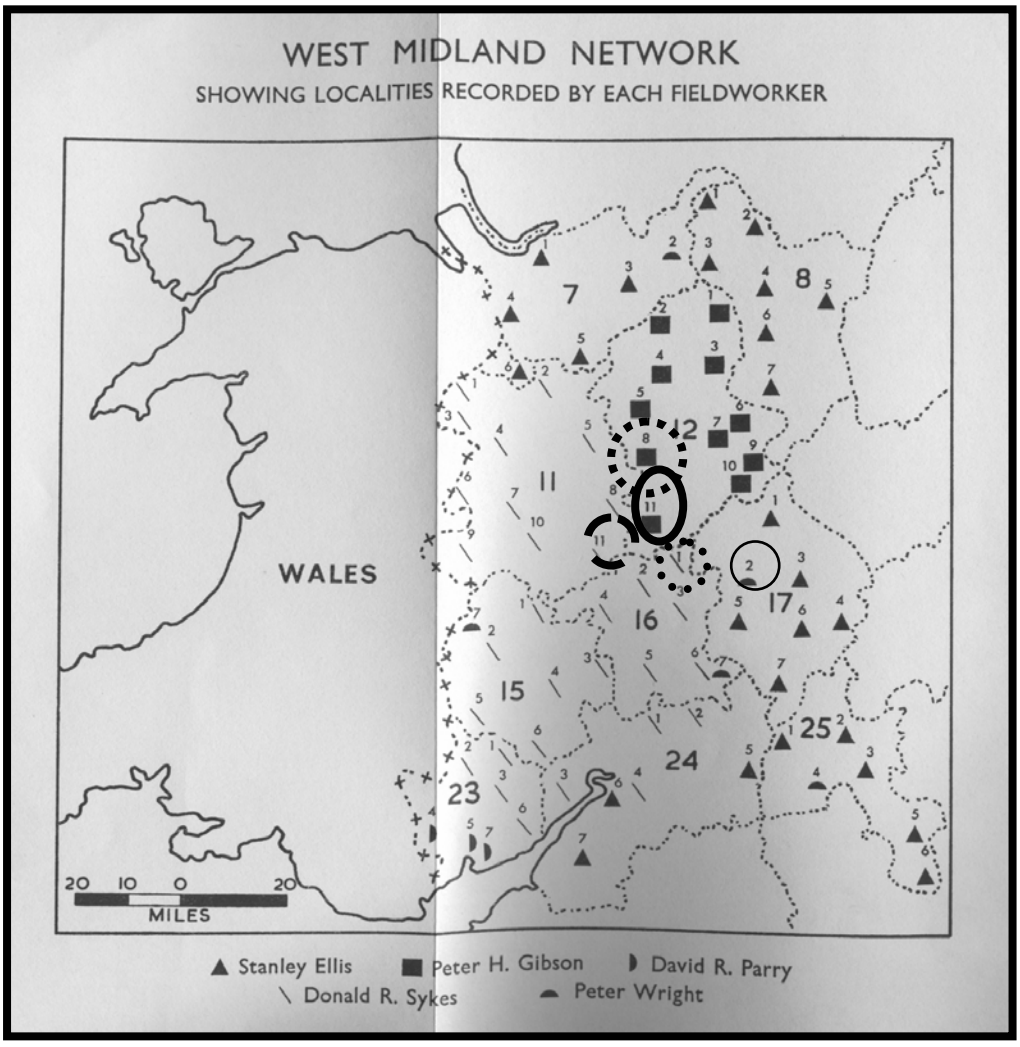
Location	spoken or written?	when collected and from whom	rhotic tokens/ total tokens	% rhoticity
RUGELEY ("CANNOCK CHASE")	spoken	Native truck shop keeper at colliery born 1823	43/43	100%
LICHFIELD	spoken	Native labourer born c1840	3/7	*43%*
WALSALL	spoken	Native servant girl collected 1877	3/4	*75%*
DARLASTON	spoken	Native foreman ironroller born 1833	7/7	*100%*
WILLENHALL	spoken	Native keystamper born 1825	5/5	*100%*
WEDNESBURY	spoken	Collected 1879	1/1	*100%*
WEST BROMWICH	spoken	Collected 1877	1/1	*100%*
WOLVERHAMPTON	spoken	Collected 1879	8/8	*100%*
DUDLEY	written	Sent to A.E. by a Worcester solicitor	41/45	91%
CRADLEY	spoken	Unknown, 1880	3/3	*100%*
STOURBRIDGE	spoken	1879	1/1	*100%*
HAGLEY	spoken	Native workman, born 1815	6/6	*100%*
SELLY OAK	spoken	Unknown, 1885	10/10	100%

Rhoticity is possibly being lost from the north east. Lichfield has variable rhoticity, yet Cannock Chase (the village of Rugeley representing this), has 100% rhoticity and is further north. Walsall also has variable rhoticity. All other locations (except Dudley, the accent of which, it will be remembered, was reported in writing by a non-native speaker) have full rhoticity (percentage terms where the number of tokens is lower than 10 are given in italics). The two informants in Lichfield and Walsall are younger than the other informants, which suggests that increasing age may correlate with higher levels of rhoticity. The dominant pattern is one of stable rhoticity. The Dudley result is variable as a consequence of four counts of the letteR set being non-rhotic, this is noteworthy, given that speakers in all the other geographical locations are rhotic in this context.

Regarding the quality of the /r/ in phonetic terms, Ellis himself is uncertain. He comments throughout his work that this is a hard sound to transcribe. He reports that at Hagley Worcs, there is "no reverted (R) [ɻ]" though he finds [ɻ] in post-vocalic position in more southerly locations in Worcestershire. Throughout all the locations of interest in relation to the Black Country, he reports only (1889:485) what he calls the "mild Midlands (ɾ)", which I have transcribed in the IPA as [ɹ].

7. More recent historical evidence

There is no evidence of rhoticity in the Black Country following Painter's brief aside in 1963. We must move back to the south-western edge of the Black Country in 1955, to the village of Himley, investigated in the *Survey of English Dialects*. The map in Figure 6 shows the area containing Himley and the three locations closest to it, together with the location closest to Birmingham, Hockley Heath. He records variable rhoticity in the speech of all three of his Himley informants.



KEY:

12/11 Himley, Staffordshire

12/8 Lapley, Staffordshire

17/2 Hockley Heath, Warwickshire

16/1 Romsley, Worcestershire

11/11 Kinlet, Shropshire

Figure 6. The range of the SED in the southern Midlands (Orton and Barry 1969)

A breakdown of the biographical data of his informants, (as well as their ages were they still alive today), is given in Table 4. Informants completed one or more of nine books of questions, giving an answer which was transcribed on the spot by the fieldworker. For the most part, questions centred on daily life, and informants were asked to report to the interviewer their words for farm implements, crops, plants, animals, and similar subjects. From a sociolinguistic point of view the interview might be argued to be a formal situation. Informants focused on specific lexical items, and covered a great deal of questions in a short time. On the other hand it could be argued that they were interviewed in their own homes; that they did chat with fieldworkers, and that they were not recorded. They were also providing knowledge which only they had, which might have evened out the power imbalance in the interviewer/interviewee roles. The sociolinguistic situation in which data were gathered, then, can be said to be 'semi-formal'.

Table 4. Biodata for Himley informants in the SED

INF. INITIALS	AGE IN 1955	AGE 'NOW'	M/F?	NATIVE?	BIRTHPLACE OF SPOUSE	OCCUPATION
FS	63	115	F	YES	WOMBOURNE	FACTORY WORKER
GB	67	119	M	YES	HIMLEY	MARKET GARDENER
TP	72	124	M	YES	HIMLEY	FORESTER

For the informant GB, there is also a short recording made in the following year by Stanley Ellis. This takes the form of relatively unstructured narratives about the informant's early life and several amusing incidents at his workplace.

At the same time as Gibson was interviewing in Staffordshire, interviews were taking place in Shropshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire with informants of similar ages and backgrounds. We have therefore the opportunity to compare levels of rhoticity in the neighbouring locations. Any differences might again pinpoint for us the geographical direction in which post-vocalic /r/ loss occurred. Fieldworkers in each location for the *SED* found as many speakers in an area as were needed to complete nine books of questions. Clearly it would be our wish to compare like with like. That is, GB in Himley completed the whole of Book One and Book Two, yet a different informant in Hockley Heath completed Book One to the informant who completed Book Two. To run those two informants together risks obscuring detail about whether age, gender or occupation have a part to play in the retention or loss of rhoticity. Table 5 gives a comparison of the results for Book One, taken from all answers which could contain rhoticity in all five locations. All those completing the task for Book One were male and over 65.

Table 5. Levels of rhoticity in Book 1 of the SED at 5 locations

LOCATION	LEVEL OF RHOTICITY - %	QUALITY OF /r/	n = number of tokens/total
LAPLEY	3.4	ɹ	1/29
HIMLEY	**6.7**	**ɹ~ɻ**	**2/30**
HOCKLEY HEATH	3.4	ɹ~ɻ	1/29
ROMSLEY	45.2	ɻ	14/31
KINLET	96.7	ɻ	29/30

Levels of rhoticity in the north (Lapley, Staffs) are very low, and have a consistent value of [ɹ]. In the same way, to the east in Hockley Heath informants have extremely low levels of rhoticity. This time the quality of /r/ varies between [ɹ~ɻ]. To the south in Romsley, informants have variably rhotic accents at a much higher level (45.2%), all instances with the quality of post-alveolar voiced approximant [ɻ]. Finally to the west in Kinlet, Shropshire, all five informants have what can be described as almost fully rhotic accents, with /r/ always at the phonetic value [ɻ]. We may conclude that rhoticity is strongest in Kinlet, and that Romsley to the south east has high levels of variable rhoticity. It seems again that rhoticity loss is moving in from the east. Table 6 below shows that the linguistic contexts for rhoticity in these locations are as follows (there are no tokens of [ɔː] in Kinlet because the local reflex of this is a merger with the START set at [aː]).

Table 6. Linguistic contexts for rhoticity at 4 locations (after SED)

LEXICAL SET	LAPLEY	HOCKLEY HEATH	ROMSLEY	KINLET
NURSE [ɜː~əː]	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**
START [ɑː ~ aː]	NO	NO	NO	**YES**
NORTH [ɔː]	NO	NO	NO	**YES** (Merger with START set)
NEAR [ɪə]	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**
SQUARE [eə]	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**
CURE [ʊə]	**YES**	NO	NO	**YES**
PRICE [aɪ ~ ɑɪ]	NO	NO	NO	**YES**
letteR [ə]	**YES**	NO	**YES**	**YES**

We examine now the Himley data in more detail. The results shown in Table 6 below concur with the findings of Hubbard, working in Albrighton, Shropshire, (eight miles northwest of Wolverhampton) in 1960. She concludes through auditory analysis that by that time "when ME –er, -ir, -ur, -ē²r, -ē¹r before a consonant are represented by

the central vowel [əː] almost a third of the examples occur with r-colouring [the value of which is /ɹ/], but in the other examples ME –r is lost" (1960: 204). From the *SED* data we can see linguistic contexts for rhoticity among Himley informants. It is also to be noted that although the fieldworker in Himley claims that the quality of /r/ is always [ɹ], at least one speaker also has [ɻ].

Table 7. Linguistic contexts for rhoticity in Himley (after SED)

LEXICAL SET	FS	GB	TV
NURSE [ɜː~əː]	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**
START [ɑː] (Midlands [aː])	NO	NO	**YES**
NORTH [ɔː]	NO	NO	NO
NEAR [ɪə]	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**
SQUARE [eə]	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**
CURE [ʊə]	**YES**	NO	NO
PRICE [aɪ ~ ɑɪ]	NO	NO	NO
letteR	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**

All three Himley informants have variable rhoticity. Table 8 shows this clearly. FS, the female Himley informant, has the lowest levels of rhoticity of all the Himley informants. She has variable rhoticity following the NURSE, CURE, SQUARE and letteR sets. She supplies the response (1970: 512):

4. *When your …cakes come out [of the oven] all black, then you say they are* [bəːɹnt].

Table 8. Rhoticity levels among Himley informants

INFORMANT	FS	GB	TP
/r/ present %	18.2%	25.4%	37.3%
/r/ present (n/n all tokens)	(6/33)	(18/71)	(47/126)

GB does not have /ɹ/ following the START set (represented for him either by the standard [ɑ] or more commonly his traditional Midlands variant [a]), in words like 'farm' and 'stackyard.' Like FS he has rhoticity following the NURSE, SQUARE and letteR sets. He gives for example [pɛəɹ] 'pair' [ɤnloɤdəɹ] 'unloader' and [rɪkəɹ] 'ricker.' TP has the highest levels of rhoticity of all three informants. He gives for example [θɜːɹsti] on p.687 showing again rhoticity following the NURSE set, and he too has variable rhoticity in the SQUARE, NEAR, and letteR sets. He is the only

speaker with an instance of [ɻ] following the START set in [tʃəːɹtʃjaːɻd]. It is he who has the only examples recorded by Gibson of the post-alveolar approximant, since he gives also *core* [kɔəɻ] and *thunder* [θʊndəɻ].

Looking at analysis of GB's 7.30 minute recording shows that his levels of rhoticity in 'freer' speech (he relates several tales to the fieldworker without interruption from them) lie at 17/64, giving an average figure of 26.6%. This is close to his word list level of 25.4%. The recording tells us more regarding the contexts in which his speech is variably rhotic; again he exhibits post-vocalic /r/ following the SQUARE, NURSE, and letteR sets, but this time it can also be seen that he has variable rhoticity following words of the NEAR set.

Levels of rhoticity rise with age. TP as the oldest informant has the highest levels of rhoticity. FS as the youngest has the lowest. Perhaps the most important information concerning social mobility is that GB has a job which takes him to the surrounding areas. He speaks of going to nearby Hagley (Worcestershire) to sell fruit and vegetables. FS, the female and youngest informant, is a factory worker with a husband from Wombourne, who may have come into contact with more people from outside the region than a locally based forester like TP The only definite pattern, then, is that of increasing rhoticity being linked to increasing age.

8. Present day evidence

Present day evidence (I term this the 'modern data') comes from work carried out between 2003 and 2006 across the Black Country. The speaker sample consists of 39 informants, 20 male and 19 female, ranging in location from Walsall in the north to Stourbridge in the south, from Wolverhampton in the west, to West Bromwich in the east. They are subdivided into 5 age cohorts, from 16-26 through to 71+. Speakers were recorded in dyads, using a semi-structured interview technique. They completed a three page questionnaire about words they used everyday and their variants for these words. They then discussed these words at interview. I did not restrict informants to the structured questionnaire, and many preferred to chat about other topics they found interesting. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. I focus here on two male informants from the south west of the Black Country, who fall into the 71+ cohort, and who self-declared working class origin.

FB (b.1921) is a retired stamping engineer. He is from a tight knit family of chainmakers and blacksmiths. FB's mother and father were born in the two neighbouring villages of Netherton and Old Hill, both half a mile away. CP (b.1928) is a retired heating engineer from the Lye, one mile north of Stourbridge. CP's mother and father were born respectively in the Lye and in Oldswinford (1 mile south). The quality of /r/ used by FB varies between [ɹ~ɻ], that of CP is [ɹ]. The following examples are typical of their speech:

5) CP "but Aynuk and Ayli was the real [peəˠ wəɹnʔ] they?"
6) CP " of [kɔˠːs]
7) CP "Dad was a [bʊkitbɒstəɹ] (sheet metal worker)
8) FB "we kept [fɔːɹ] pigs"
9) FB "what was the name of the [fɜɻm]?
10) FB "she used to come round to have her [eəˠ] done"
11) FB "A tin bath in front of the [faɪɹ]"

Backup evidence from other speakers comes from the *Millennium Memory Bank* (1999), accessible electronically from the British Library's dialect archive. (www.collectbritain.bl.uk). Speaker RB (recorded in 1999) is from Quarry Bank, the village on the road between Cradley Heath and the Lye. RB is male, born in 1928 (thus like CP 79 years old), and also has a variably rhotic accent. He has lived all his life in Quarry Bank, and worked as a scrap yard foreman and miner. His interview is more evidence that certain speakers still realise post-vocalic /r/ albeit variably. Grading by age, we can add his data to that which we already have. Table 8 shows a detailed comparison of rhoticity including context, quality and frequency.

The levels of rhoticity for FB are high. He also has one instance of rhoticity in each of the PRICE and START sets, which neither of the other informants does. He is the only speaker of the three to use the post-alveolar variant [ɻ]. CP also has high levels of rhoticity, though this time he only has rhoticity in the NURSE, NORTH, SQUARE and letteR sets. RB has rhoticity in the NURSE, NORTH and SQUARE sets, but his variety is categorically non-rhotic in the letteR set.

If we examine the sociological evidence we are presented with, we find that FB has spent all his life in the three villages/towns of Netherton, Old Hill and Cradley Heath. CP tells the interviewer that "Cradley is the **real** thick Black Country accent." (indeed the village is considered by many a crucial place in defining the Black Country). This perception is common within the Black Country; people in my fieldwork of all ages call the area 'inbred' and 'deep Black Country.' It is possible that low levels of regional mobility have stopped FB from coming into contact with outside influences. Certainly he has a dense and multiplex social network, living in close proximity to his brothers and socialising with them, and as a younger man helping his mother in the family chainmaking business.

Table 9. Rhoticity levels in the Black Country in 2004

	Recorded in	**% /r/**	**quality**	**context**
FB	2004	38.6%	[ɹ ~ ɻ]	NURSE, NORTH, SQUARE, NEAR, letteR, PRICE, START
CP	2004	33%	[ɹ]	NURSE, NORTH, SQUARE, letteR
RB	1999	18.7%	[ɹ]	NURSE, NORTH, SQUARE

CP on the other hand, married a lady from Kidderminster (not in the Black Country), and moved out of the Lye to Stourbridge; a market town with considerable numbers of incomers arriving to trade and work. RB is harder to place. He has been foreman of a scrap metal yard and his first job was as an ostler in a local pit, but further sociological data about him are lacking.

The phenomenon of ongoing rhoticity then, is not a chance relic or an anomaly caused by incomers from other areas. Quite the opposite, for the rhotic speakers have very strong local connections dating back over generations. They also have backgrounds of limited regional and social mobility. It would be possible to shed more light on the *quality* of /r/ were there more data. As it is, we can say that the quality is usually [ɹ] and sometimes [ɻ]. Figure 7 shows us that the area in which rhoticity is found in my data has shrunk since the time of Ellis (the circle surrounding Quarry Bank includes the Lye to the south, and Netherton and Cradley Heath to the north east, which are too small to be marked):

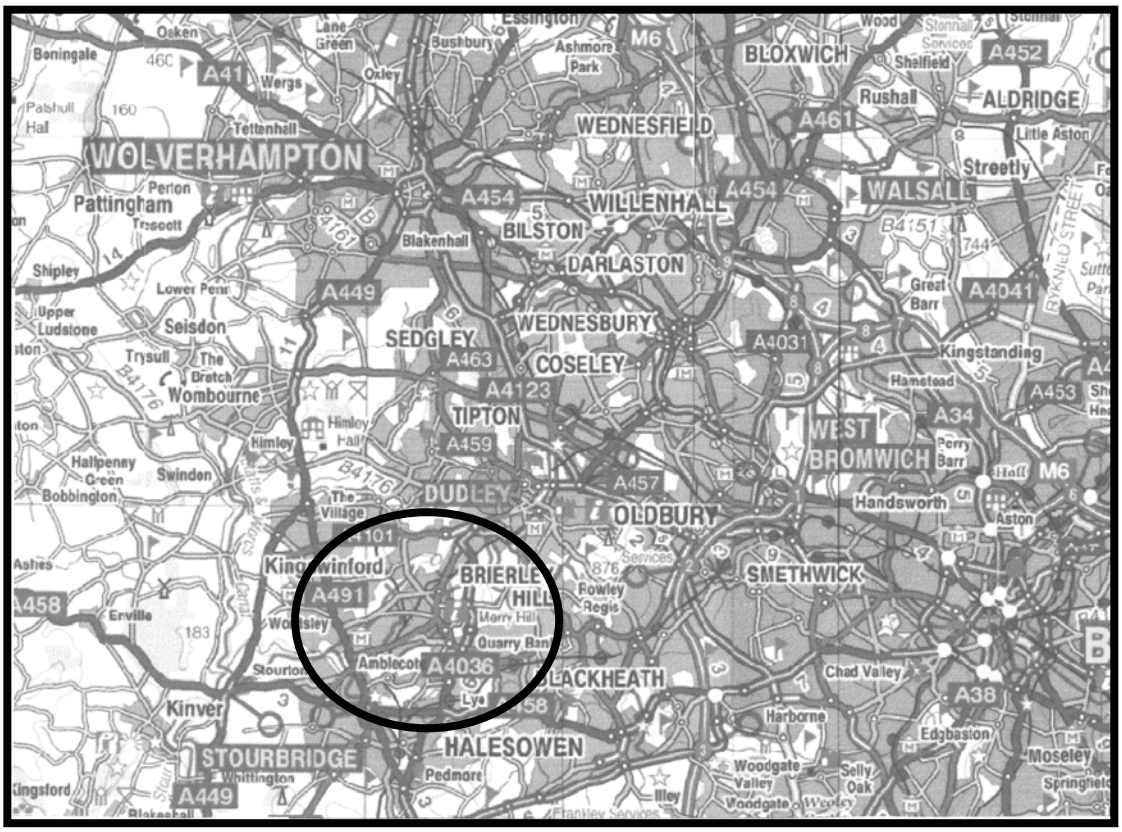


Figure 7. The spread of rhoticity in the south of the Black Country in 2004

10. A comparison of results across time

Looking first at the *SED* data, and collating all tokens given by the three informants, but excluding GB's recorded speech, which is running speech, rather than words in isolation, one can construct a hierarchy for the retention of post-vocalic /r/ which is comparable to those of Feagin (1990) and Irwin and Nagy (2007). Table 10 shows this hierarchy. In the *SED* data, schwa+ɾ́C is the most favourable context for the retention of rhoticity, with 75.4% of tokens being rhotic. Second is schwa+ɾ́ at 55.5%, followed by unstressed r at 37.0%. Least favourable for the retention of /r/ is the context V̈+r(C). In other words, the vowel which most clearly favours the retention of following /r/ is the mid-central schwa, which varies between [ə ~ ɜ] in the Black Country. Table 11 shows the same data, but this time with the addition of GB's recorded data, which is running speech taking the form of three mini narratives. It does not alter the results greatly; the overall hierarchy remains the same.

Looking at the patterns for the *SED* data (running speech and word list style combined), Figure 8 shows the hierarchy of vowels that can appear in the context V̈+r(C) (the least likely context to support the retention of /r/). There are insufficient tokens of the CURE, PRICE and NEAR sets (one token of PRICE and NEAR only) to analyse these vowels. It is also necessary to split the START set into the RP reflex [ɑː] and the older Midlands reflex [aː]. This Midlands reflex is hardly found in my modern data. I call the Midlands reflex the START (MIDLANDS) set, since it can appear in all the same positions as the newer START set.

Table 10. Contexts for the retention of /r/ in the SED data – word list style (source: Orton and Barry 1969-1971)

	Most /r/	Variable /r/		Least /r/
Environment	1 (75.4%) n=57	2 (55.5%) n = 9	3 (37.0) n=78	4 (3.84%) n=74
	schwa+ɾ́C	schwa+ɾ́	Unstressed r	V́+r(C)
Vowel	NURSE	FUR	letteR	NEAR SQUARE START NORTH CURE PRICE

Table 11. Contexts for the retention of /r/ in the SED data - word list and running speech combined (source: Orton and Barry 1969-1971)

	Most /r/	Variable /r/		Least /r/
Environment	1 (78.8%) n=71	2 (55.5%) n=9	3 (30.2) n=86	4 (11.9) n=111
	schwa+ɾ́C	schwa+ɾ́	Unstressed r	V́+r(C)
Vowel	NURSE	FUR	letteR	NEAR SQUARE START NORTH CURE PRICE

The graph shows that SQUARE is the set most likely to favour retention of a following /r/. NEAR, then NORTH and finally START (MIDLANDS) are the contexts in which /r/ is most readily retained. Preliminary indications seem to be that front vowels are more favourable to the retention of /r/, since the Midlands reflex of START is also a front vowel [aː]. There are no tokens of /r/ following the [ɑː] variant. In order to prove this initial finding convincingly, more data for the vowels in the lexical set CURE need to be collected.

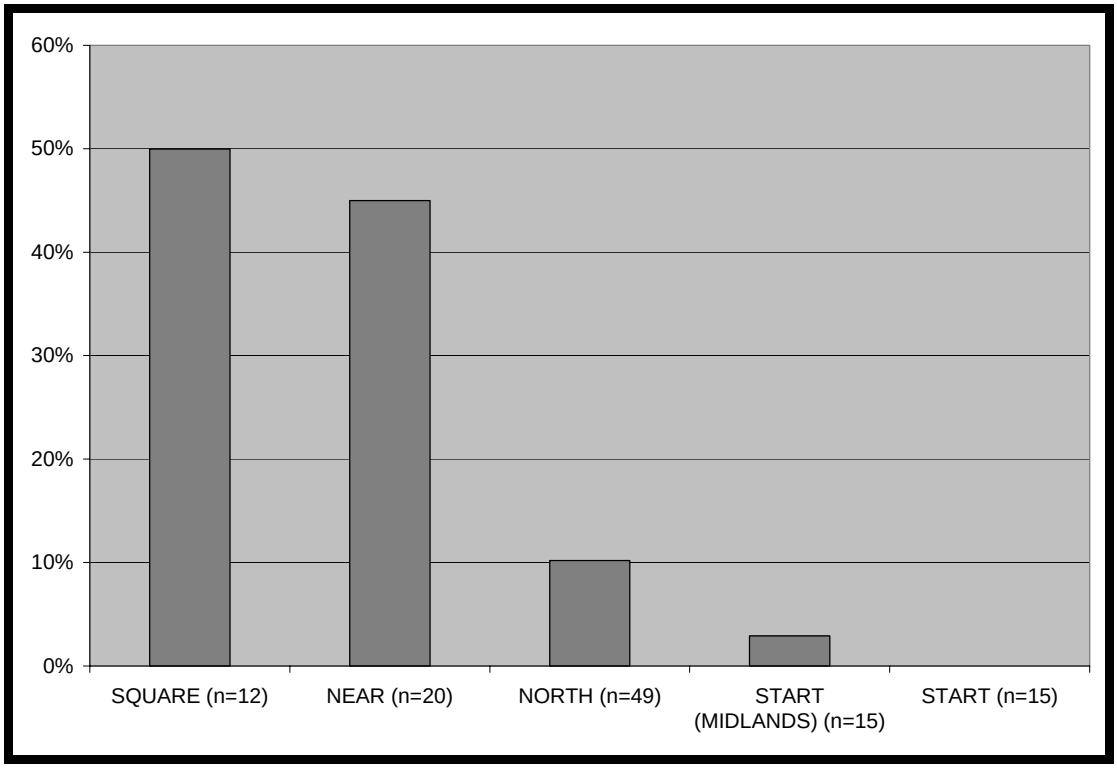


Figure 8. Hierarchy of retention of /r/ in the context V+ɾ(C) in the SED data (source: Orton and Barry 1969-71)

The modern data in Table 12 show a hierarchical patterning which is exactly the same as that in the *SED* data, though with some difference between percentage levels of rhoticity in each case. Again, the least likely context for preserving rhoticity is V+r(C), and the most likely schwa+ɾC. In the more recent data, however, the level of rhoticity in this category is higher. Figure 9 shows the hierarchy of vowels within the context V+r(C) which are most to least likely to promote the retention of rhoticity. There are no instances of rhoticity following the START set in the modern data, though there is one token given of the START (MIDLANDS) set, which is followed by rhoticity [staːɹtəd]. This token is not included in the graph format, since a figure of 100% would be misleading, but it mirrors the earlier findings of the *SED* data, since no rhoticity was again recorded following [ɑː]. There are again insufficient tokens to analyse certain contexts (there are no tokens of the CURE or PRICE sets), but the contexts analysed indicate that the hierarchy itself remains stable over time. It is also clear is that unlike Irwin and Nagy's findings in Boston, all the Black Country data at both time points has more in common with Feagin's findings in Alabama, and that all indications point to front vowels favouring the retention of /r/.

Table 12. Contexts for the analysis of /r/ in the southwestern Black Country (my modern data).

	Most /r/	Variable /r/		Least /r/
Environment	1 (73.5%) n=34	2 (66.6%) n=9	3 (35%) n=40	4 (24.5%) n=77
	schwa+ŕC	schwa+ŕ	Unstressed r	V́+r(C)
Vowel	NURSE	FUR	letteR	NEAR SQUARE START NORTH CURE PRICE

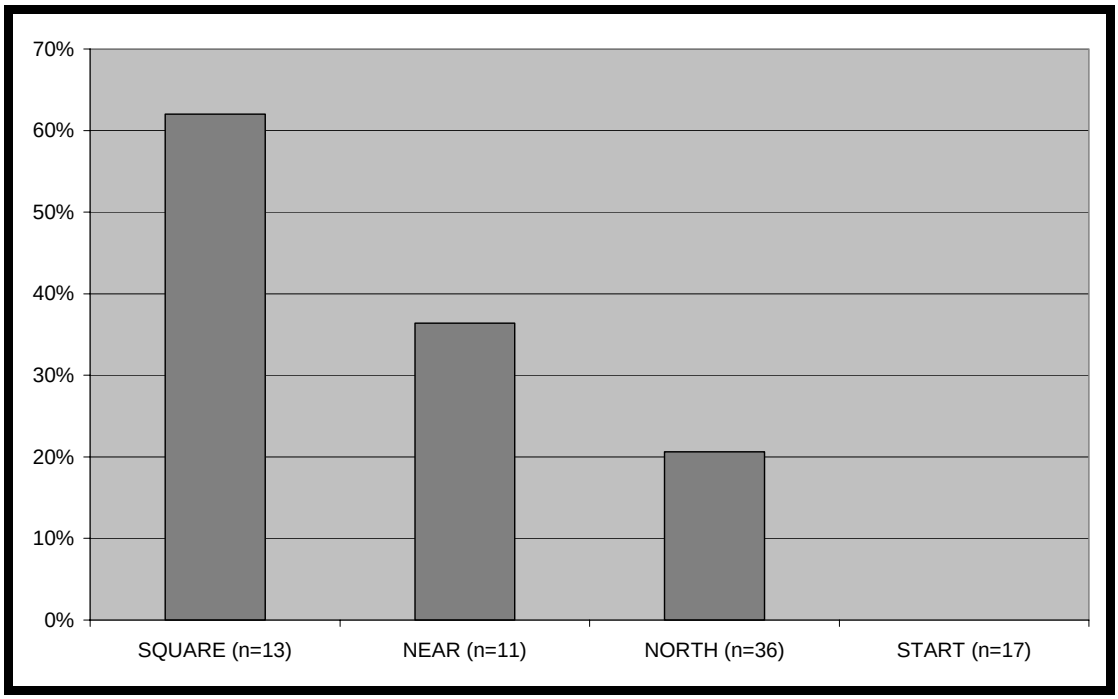


Figure 9. Hierarchy of retention of /r/ in the context V́+r(C) (my modern data)

11. Conclusions and suggestions for future research

Though my results show variable rhoticity among elderly speakers in the southeastern Black Country, Manley's 1971 study of the south east of the Black Country cannot be discounted. Of the four elderly speakers Manley interviewed, all were from the same area as my rhotic informants. Mathisen's work with data collected in the 1980s from informants ranging between 16 and 80, showed no rhoticity among the 15 oldest informants, and the results of the *Black Country Dialect Project* (BCDP) carried out at the University of Wolverhampton (Clark 2004) show no evidence of rhoticity either. It seems that rhoticity is restricted to the south, and then only to certain older speakers.

Preliminary auditory analysis suggests that the quality of /r/ in the Black Country variety is predominantly [ɹ], with occasional use of [ɻ]. This situation can now be investigated in greater detail using acoustic analysis techniques. Finally, the contexts in which /r/ is most readily produced suggest that it is the quality of the preceding vowel which is of greatest significance, and that the central and front vowels are those contexts in which /r/ is most likely to be retained.

I suggest that the lack of research in what is an area with dense and multiplex social networks means that the continued presence of variable rhoticity among older informants in the extreme south of the area has been overlooked. The evidence I present here points to lucky encounters with those informants whose speech is variably rhotic, and that the speech of the overwhelming majority is non-rhotic. The link between the past and the present evidence for rhoticity in the area is too strong to ignore, particularly in view of the very deep local connections and relative lack of mobility of the two informants I discuss here from my own fieldwork.

Trends of vanishing rhoticity continue those shown by Ellis 130 years ago. Non-rhoticity continued to move from the general direction of the east as his data suggested. What happened on the ground requires closer attention. In the neighbouring village of Kinlet to the west of Himley, levels of rhoticity were almost 100% in the 1950s, yet by 1960 Hubbard, also working in Shropshire, found that levels had dropped massively in the village of Albrighton, twenty miles north of Kinlet. Data from Romsley suggest that in spite of its closeness to the borders of Birmingham rhoticity levels in the NURSE, SQUARE, letteR and CURE sets were still high in the 1950s, which leaves the question of how communities managed to exist side by side with such apparent differences in levels of rhoticity. More work is needed in the acoustic analysis of existing data, and in collecting new data from the southern Black Country and the areas which border it.

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Esther Asprey
Department of English
University of Leeds
LS2 9JT

e.c.asprey@leeds.ac.uk

Appendix 1. The location of the Black Country within the Metropolitan Boroughs of the West Midlands