

Exploiting r in Maltese English

Sociophonetics; social meaning; dialects; Maltese English; variation

Maltese English is a variety characterised within Schneider's Dynamic Model (2007) for postcolonial Englishes as being on the cusp of one of the later stages of nativization (Thusat et.al, 2009). This view is corroborated by further and more recent sociolinguistic research noting an increasing understanding of Maltese English being locally relevant and meaningful (Grech & Vella, 2018, Caruana & Mori, 2021). Although this variety presents variation on all linguistic levels (Bonnici et al), features in the phonetic/phonological domain are widely attested in the relevant literature, and the speed at which native speakers of the variety recognise another native speaker is further evidence for this (Grech, 2015). Recent efforts to exploit automated speech-to-text software generally targeting more well-established varieties of English yields interesting insights into which sounds may cause the systems to trip up and return errors (Vella et al., 2023). One such sound which seems to yield mis-representation in the automated systems is postvocalic 'r'. Initial sociophonetic investigations suggest that this feature is an important focus of study for sociolinguistic meaning, particularly as the variety is in the process of shifting from a non-rhotic to a more rhotic variety (for example, Bonnici, 2010, Grech, 2015).

How has Maltese English exploited 'r' as a function of social meaning? This paper investigates the case of 'r', and postvocalic 'r' in particular, as an instance of diachronic and synchronic variation and change in Maltese English, in an analysis of both historical and contemporary data. Across the various data sets, instances of 'r' are analysed in 6 speakers, of which 2 are obtained from older speakers recorded in 1992, and the remaining 4 representing variation in different local speech communities more recently (2015-2018). The 'r' data for each speaker is examined within the context of native listener perception ratings gathered for some of the same speakers by Grech (2015), allowing for another perspective on the interpretation of the data.

Early results indicate a shift away from non-rhotic, towards more rhotic realisations of postvocalic 'r', but this is not a wholesale shift. Instead, it is clear that 'r' (both postvocalic, and not) is exploited for rich social meaning, including whether the speaker is dominant in either English or Maltese, social status and education, and to some degree, also register. The related implication is that native Maltese English speakers use features such as 'r' to navigate their social realities in their speech communities.

Bonnici, L., Hilbert, M., & Krug, M. (2020). Maltese English. In *The Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English* (pp. 653–668). De Gruyter.

Caruana, S., & Mori, L. (2021). Rethinking Maltese English as a continuum of sociolinguistic continua through evaluations of written and oral prompts. *English World-Wide. A Journal of Varieties of English*, 42(3), 245–272.

Grech, S., & Vella, A. (2018). Rhythm in Maltese English. In Paggio, P. & Gatt, A. (Eds.), *The languages of Malta* (pp. 203–223). Language Science Press.

Grech, S. (2015). Variation in English: Perception and patterns in the identification of Maltese English [University of Malta, Institute of Linguistics].

Lawson, E., Scobbie, J. M., & Stuart-Smith, J. (2011). The social stratification of tongue shape for postvocalic /r/ in Scottish English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 15(2), Article 2.

Lawson, E., Scobbie, J. M., & Stuart-Smith, J. (2014). A Socio-Articulatory Study of Scottish Rhoticity. In R. Lawson (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics in Scotland* (pp. 53–78). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Schneider, E. W. (2007). *Postcolonial English: Varieties around the World*. Cambridge University Press.

Thusat, J., Anderson, E., Davis, S., Ferris, M., Javed, A., Laughlin, A., McFarland, C., Sangsiri, R., Sinclair, J., Vastalo, V., Whelan, W., & Wrubel, J. (2009). Maltese English and the nativization phase of the dynamic model. *English Today*, 25.