

Abstract: Regional variation of /r/ in Hessian dialects: influence of spontaneous vs read speech, pre- vs post-vocalic position, and urban vs rural areas

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German /r/ can be realized in several ways (Schiller, 1998, Wiese, 2003). Although there has been a general change from a trilled alveolar rhotic to a uvular continuant rhotic in Standard German (SG) over the past 60 years or so, the SG rhotic is not the dominant variant. We examine /r/ in Hesse, with a particularly large number of variants. The present study is carried out to see (i) what variants are still used, which were replaced, (ii) if the use of different variants depends on the dialect competence of the interlocutor, (iii) the resulting mode of speech (natural vs read speech), (iv) differences in urban vs rural regions.

We collected data from 48 participants in three different recording sessions. In session one, participants were paired up with a known person speaking the same dialect. In session two, participants interacted with one of the authors. They had to make up a story using pictures displaying words containing /r/. In session three, participants were asked to translate a short text into their own dialect and to read both versions out loud. We used 12 words, four in each of three positions: initial position, *Rampe* (ramp), prevocalic consonant cluster, *Treppen* (stairs), post-vocalic position, *Birke* (birch), since in SG post-vocalic /r/ is realized as /ʁ/ whereas in pre-vocalic position consonantal realizations of /r/ prevail in most varieties (Ulbrich, H. & Ulbrich, C., 1998). We examined the distributions of /r/ in the two cities (urban, N=18) and in seven villages (rural, N=30). In total we analyzed 1278 /r/ sounds in the dialect and 1172 /r/ sounds in SG. Transcriptions were done by the authors (Cohen Kappa = 0.85). We found alveolar [r, ɾ, l, ɭ] and uvular articulations [ʀ, ʁ, x].

Statistical analysis revealed a clear distinction between the /r/ produced in urban vs rural regions. Whereas in the cities uvular fricative realization /ʁ/ prevailed in both the dialect and in the Standard, in rural areas it was significantly more frequently found in SG. These results suggest a potential stratification of urban vs rural regions in Hesse. There were no significant differences between read vs spontaneous speech. The interlocutor, however, had a significant influence as expected. The dialect variant of the /r/ sound also played a significant role in that alveolar retroflex realizations were not replaced by uvular fricatives, trilled alveolar sounds only in some regions. Finally, post-vocalic /r/ sounds were significantly more frequently replaced by /ʁ/ in SG in urban varieties, consonantal realizations were significantly more often produced in rural areas.

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