

Leveraging 'r' for social meaning in Maltese English

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Post-vocalic 'r' has long been a prime candidate for indexing socially relevant meaning in Maltese English. Under British rule throughout the 1800s until independence in 1964, socially prestigious, non-rhotic RP was the high standard and the model taught rigorously in school. The next few decades saw RP upheld as the last remaining Maltese teachers taught by the British continued to model what they had been taught themselves. More recently, speakers are perhaps gravitating towards rhotic variants, and the continuum of variability from rhotic to not for post-vocalic 'r' allows for its exploitation. Using largely auditory analysis from noisy historical data, and more acoustically analysable later data, it's possible to capture change over the last 50 years. Both datasets show both intra- and inter-speaker variation in the realisation of 'r', with only 1 contemporary speaker displaying a strict preference for complete r-lessness. The data also strongly indicate a register effect, as speakers range from careful, camera-conscious speech to more unguarded behaviour. While difficult to fully test in lab conditions, the indications are tantalising enough to warrant further study.

References

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