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# Variation and change in the realisation of /r/ in an isolated Northumbrian dialect

## 1. Introduction

One of the most distinctive traits of the traditional dialects of northeast England is the pronunciation of /r/ as a uvular fricative [ʁ], a pronunciation known as the ‘(Northumbrian) Burr’ (Wells 1982: 368-9, Beal 2000). This pronunciation of /r/ in northeast England is almost unique amongst dialects of English, even though it is common (and increasing) in languages all over Europe (Chambers and Trudgill 1980: 186-189), and it has been around for at least the last 300 years. Although many geographical regions are indexically linked to linguistic features, as the papers in this volume demonstrate, the limited geographical scope of uvular /r/ results in a distinctive language-place association seldom found for other linguistic features. In late 19<sup>th</sup> and early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century descriptions of dialects from the northeast of England (e.g. Ellis 1889, Rydland 1998, and Orton and Dieth 1962-71), uvular /r/ was the only pronunciation recorded across most of Northumberland and north Durham, including the area in and around Tyneside. But something dramatic appears to have happened to the pronunciation of /r/ in the northeast of England in more recent times. If you travel or live there today, you will struggle to hear a single person utter a single instance of the Northumbrian Burr. This is certainly true of urban centres such as Newcastle, where, in 20 years of living and working there, I never heard it once from a native of the city, and this is increasingly true of rural Northumberland. In fact, in places such as Newcastle many people may be shocked to discover that such an exotic sound, more likely to be associated with French and German in the classroom, was used by their ancestors in the not so distant past.

But what is the reason for the striking difference between the pronunciation of /r/ in early 20<sup>th</sup> century northeast English dialects and its pronunciation in the region today? Have people in the northeast of England abandoned, over the space of a few decades, a pronunciation which was once synonymous with their region? Or do traditional dialect records give us a misleading impression of the state of affairs in northeast English dialects, over-emphasizing the degree to which speakers and communities in the past used the Northumbrian Burr? And is it true that, even in remotest Northumberland, people no longer pronounce /r/ this way? It is these questions that this chapter seeks to answer by examining in detail the pronunciation habits of a range of speakers in a corpus of recordings from one isolated rural location in Northumberland – the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. In section 2 of this chapter, I set the necessary background for this study, examining previous data for and studies of the Northumbrian Burr and introducing Holy Island and the corpus of recordings the analysis in this paper is based on. In section 3, I describe the analysis of /r/ in this corpus, and present the results that arise from it. In section 4, I discuss the relevance of these results for understanding the diachronic and synchronic status of the Northumbrian Burr in Holy Island, and what this tells us about the questions raised above. It will be seen that the Holy Island corpus sheds considerable light on this little understood phenomenon which is, it

would seem, about to disappear as a feature of everyday speech from the dialects of the northeast of England.

## 2. Background

In his early 18<sup>th</sup> century *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Daniel Defoe (1724-27, vol. iii: 232-233) made the following comment about Northumberland:

I must not quit *Northumberland* without taking notice, that the Natives of this Country, of the antient original Race or Families, are distinguished by a *Shibboleth* upon their Tongues in pronouncing the letter *R*, which they cannot utter without a hollow Jarring in the Throat, by which they are as plainly known, as a Foreigner is in pronouncing the *Th*: this they call the *Northumberland R*, or *Wharle*; and the Natives value themselves upon that Imperfection, because, forsooth, it shews the Antiquity of their Blood.

Here we have one of the earliest mentions of this peculiarity of Northumberland speech,<sup>1</sup> which has thus been around for at least the last 300 years, and was considered a defining feature of the region and a source of pride and identity by its users.<sup>2</sup>

By the time we get to the first linguistic descriptions of northeast English dialects in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (in particular Ellis 1889: 637-680, note especially pp. 641-644), the Northumbrian Burr was recorded as the only pronunciation of /r/ in the dialects of Northumberland (excluding the far southwest, and with variation between it and [r] at Berwick-upon-Tweed, right next to the Scottish Border), Tyneside and north County Durham. This is likewise the case in the dialects documented in the *Orton Corpus* (Rydland 1998, data collected between 1928 and 1939), though [ɹ] for /r/ is fairly common at Newburn, just west of Newcastle (and again, Berwick varies between [ɹ] and [r]). And in the last exhaustive survey of the traditional dialects of England, the *Survey of English Dialects* (SED) in the 1950s (Orton and Dieth 1962-71), uvular /r/ was the only pronunciation recorded for all of the Northumberland locations away from the southwest of the county and for the two northernmost locations in county Durham, including the three locations surrounding Tyneside: Earsdon (Nb6) and Heddon (Nb8) in Northumberland, and Washington (Du1) in Durham. It looks as if the Burr was a consistent feature of northeast English dialects until about 60 years ago, though there is some evidence of its decline in and around the Tyneside conurbation – note the case of Newburn referred to above, and Viereck (1966: 72), who, in his study of the dialect of Gateshead, found that [ɹ] and [ɹ̥] were in variation with each other in this urban area.

The story of the Burr since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century has continued to be one of decline, though we are lacking evidence for most areas in northeast England. Pålsson (1972) is the

<sup>1</sup> Wales (2006: 101) notes one other slightly earlier brief reference to the phenomenon, from 1724.

<sup>2</sup> Note that Heslop (1892: xxiv) refers to a suggestion by famed Scottish dialectologist and lexicographer, Dr. J. A. H. Murray, that Shakespeare indirectly referred to the phenomenon as a characteristic of the speech of Harry Hotspur in *King Henry IV*, 2<sup>nd</sup> part, Act II, Scene 3. Whether Hotspur's "speaking thick" actually refers to the Burr is of course unknown.

classic study of the feature in rural Northumberland (the village of Thropton, SED location Nb3), and he finds (p. 222) that “the Burr seems to be faced with fairly bleak prospects for the future, although it constitutes a prominent and vigorous feature of the dialect of the community at present”, since it is common in the speech of his older speakers but almost entirely absent from the speech of the younger members of the community (though it was also found in the speech of young children who were still under the direct linguistic influence of their parents). This appears to represent a striking change in the fortunes of this shibboleth of Northumberland speech given that the Burr was recorded as the only pronunciation of /r/ in Thropton in the SED, just 16 years before Pålsson carried out his fieldwork.

More recently, the Burr appears to have disappeared from most of the northeast of England entirely, especially in urban areas and the speech of the young. Beal et al. (2012: 40) note that “The ‘Northumbrian Burr’ [ɾ] is nowadays completely absent from urban areas and indeed very rare in rural areas, so much so that its use by speakers is said by Beal (2008: 140) to be little more than a ‘party trick’”. In the far north Northumberland town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, Llamas et al. (2009) and Llamas (2010) find that uvular articulations of /r/ are in the minority and are essentially absent in the speech of young speakers.

There is certainly some truth in Beal’s reference to the Burr as a ‘party trick’ – it is possible to find people in Northumberland who do not use the Burr but who have a folk memory of it (cf. Trudgill 1999) and who can produce phrases such as *Round and round the rugged rock the ragged rascal runs* with a series of (often hyper-articulated) uvular fricatives. This is reminiscent of the use of trilled [r] by middle-class speakers in Scotland as an overt Scotticism in the production of set Scots phrases and poetry (Aitken 1984: 107-108). In other words, the Burr appears to have changed, in the terminology of Labov (1994: 78), from being a sociolinguistic *indicator* (an unmarked linguistic variant not subject to stylistic stratification) or a *marker* (a regular feature in the speech community subject to stylistic variation) to a *stereotype* (a feature which is subject to overt comment and meta-linguistic usage), which can be used for purposes such as signalling identity and regionality without having any real linguistic life in the community (see Beal 2009 for discussion of such *enregisterment* of linguistic features). If the evidence in traditional dialect studies and Pålsson (1972) is anything to go by, this has been a very quick change, at least in rural Northumberland, where the Burr appears to have been a regular pronunciation feature until at least the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But as I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, there are many questions that remain unanswered about the history of the Northumbrian Burr since that time. Just to reiterate, was it really the case that traditional dialect speaking communities had such high levels of the Burr in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as traditional studies suggest? Was there, in fact, variation in these communities and, if so, of what type? Do traditional dialect studies, through their rather arcane methodologies (see the discussions in Trudgill and Chambers 1980, and Petyt 1980), give us a false impression of the frequency of the Burr at the time? And what has happened since then? Has the Burr disappeared from the rural dialects of northeast England as Pålsson (1972) predicts and as Beal (2008) suggests?

In order to address these questions, the rest of this chapter examines a corpus of recordings from the Holy Island of Lindisfarne in northeast England. Holy Island lies off the far northeast coast of Northumberland, 14 miles by road from Berwick and 60 miles from Newcastle. At ‘high water’, the Island is cut off from the mainland, but at ‘low water’ it is connected to the rest of Northumberland by a tarmacked causeway, which was constructed in the mid 1950s (prior to that access to the Island was over sand and mudflats, or by boat). Holy Island was, until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a traditional community of farmers and fishermen, but in the last 60 years the economy of the Island has been transformed to one based on tourism and hospitality (though fishing and farming still continue to a small extent). The population of the Island is currently about 180,<sup>3</sup> less than half of which are native, which represents a significant decline overall and in the number of natives from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Berger 1980 records a population of 230, 190 of which were native, in the early 1970s). In addition to the dramatic changes in its population and economy, education practices on the Island have changed considerably since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, from a situation where children were educated solely at the primary school on the Island to one where the few remaining children on the Island attend first school on the Island and (tide allowing) at Lowick on the mainland, followed by middle and high school in Berwick-upon-Tweed, requiring them to board in the town through the week. In other words, young people on the Island have, for the last few decades, had a rather different upbringing than their parents and grandparents, growing up in an Island dominated by tourists and spending much of their time away from the Island. This relatively fast change in Holy Island society mirrors the apparently rapid change in the pronunciation of /r/ in Northumberland discussed above, making Holy Island a fascinating place to study this important feature of northeast English dialects.

The dialect of Holy Island remained unrecorded until the early 1970s, despite its distinct character compared with other Northumberland varieties. But between 1971 and 1973, a Swiss PhD student, Jörg Berger, visited the Island and made a collection of reel-to-reel audio recordings of natives from the Island (see Berger 1980). This corpus of recordings consists of about 23 hours of conversations and of dialect questionnaire sessions (especially the SED questionnaire and the *Fishing Questionnaire* as detailed in Wright 1964 and Elmer 1973) between Berger and the Islanders. Berger gave me these recordings in 2003, and I have added further recordings to the corpus, two from the *Millennium Memory Bank* (MMB) collection and four made by myself on Holy Island between 2006 and 2013.<sup>4</sup> It is this corpus of recordings which is analysed in this paper. In addition, I have analysed the speech of a

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<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics,

<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=7&b=11124733&c=holy+island&d=16&e=13&g=6452883&i=1001x1003x1004&m=0&r=1&s=1417515923392&enc=1&dsFamilyId=2491>, accessed 02/12/2014.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Jonathan Robinson from the British Library for providing me with copies of the MMB recordings. Berger’s original recordings, along with two hours of the new recordings made by me, now form the *Dialect of the Holy Island of Lindisfarne* (DHIL) corpus, a corpus of time-aligned orthographic transcriptions and audio recordings hosted, via a password-protected interface, on the *Diachronic Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English* website (<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/decte/dhil.htm>). Potential users may request access to the DHIL corpus via the website. I would like to thank the British Academy (grant no. SG-112357) for providing the funds to construct the DHIL corpus.

selection of natives of the Island in the Tyne Tees (2007) television documentary *Diary of an Island*, which contains short stretches of speech by a number of males born in the 1940s, a number of males born in the 1960s and 70s, and one male born in the early 1990s (see section 3 for further details).

A key feature of Berger's data is that it contains recordings of speakers not only in 'normal' conversation with Berger and other Islanders, but also of many of those speakers giving answers to dialect questionnaires such as the SED. This means that we can get an insight into how speakers act, linguistically, when subject to traditional dialect elicitation procedures compared with how they speak otherwise (see Maguire *forthcoming* for further details). This is important, given the concerns expressed above about the nature of traditional dialect data, and these recordings provide an important check on the representativeness of traditional accounts and the extent to which speakers style shift under such questioning. In this chapter, I divide the speech of the speakers into the corpus into N (or 'normal') speech, which represents their speech when they are not specifically answering dialect questionnaire questions, and Q (or 'questionnaire') speech, when they are giving the answers to those questionnaires. Although N speech is available for all speakers in the corpus, Q speech is not. For full details of all of the speakers analysed in this paper, and the speech types that they produce, see Tables 1 and 2.

*Table 1: Speakers from the Holy Island corpus.*

| Speaker | Occupation                            | Source  | Speech types | /r/ Tokens |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------|------------|
| 1893F   | 'Herring girl'                        | Berger  | Q + N        | 256        |
| 1900M*  | Fisherman, railway worker             | Berger  | Q + N        | 22         |
| 1901M*  | Fisherman                             | Berger  | Q + N        | 67         |
| 1902F   | Shop keeper                           | Berger  | Q + N        | 151        |
| 1903M   | Fisherman                             | Berger  | Q + N        | 92         |
| 1904M   | Wireless operator                     | Berger  | Q + N        | 295        |
| 1905M   | Various jobs locally                  | Berger  | Q + N        | 125        |
| 1906M   | Fisherman                             | Berger  | N            | 174        |
| 1908M   | Driver                                | Berger  | Q + N        | 221        |
| 1908F   | Housewife                             | Berger  | N            | 289        |
| 1910M   | Fisherman, lifeboat man               | Berger  | Q + N        | 310        |
| 1910F*  | Housewife                             | Berger  | Q + N        | 46         |
| 1911M*  | Farmer                                | Berger  | Q + N        | 27         |
| 1913M*  | Farmer                                | Berger  | Q + N        | 36         |
| 1914M   | Various, inc. Navy                    | Berger  | Q + N        | 82         |
| 1926M   | Merchant Navy, painter and decorator  | MMB     | N            | 463        |
| 1942M*  | Fisherman                             | Berger  | N            | 18         |
| 1945Ma  | Fisherman                             | Berger  | Q + N        | 497        |
| 1945Mb  | Fisherman                             | WM 2006 | Q + N        | 234        |
| 1947M   | Fisherman, bus driver (on the Island) | WM 2013 | N            | 384        |
| 1963F   | Hotelier                              | WM 2013 | N            | 100        |
| 1965F   | Priory attendant                      | MMB     | N            | 100        |
| 1967M   | Navy, publican                        | WM 2013 | N            | 100        |

Speakers in Table 1 are identified by a code consisting of four numbers (their year of birth) and a letter (M for ‘male’, F for ‘female’). The number of tokens of /r/ analysed for each speaker is indicated (see further below; note that speakers marked \*, though included in the analysis, only contribute a small amount to Berger’s recordings and the number of tokens they produce is consequently somewhat low compared to the other speakers). Note also that 1945Ma and 1945Mb are the same individual, who was recorded by Berger in the early 1970s and by myself in 2006. I have kept the analyses of these two data sets separate for the purposes of this investigation.<sup>5</sup>

*Table 2: Speakers from Diary of an Island.*

| Speaker      | Decade of birth | Occupation   |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|
| OM1          | 1940s           | Unknown      |
| OM2          | 1940s           | Businessman  |
| OM3          | 1940s           | Farmer       |
| OM4          | 1940s           | Farmer       |
| OM5 (=1942M) | 1940s           | Fisherman    |
| YM1          | 1960s           | Tour guide   |
| YM2          | 1960s           | Shopkeeper   |
| YM3          | 1960s           | Fisherman    |
| YM4          | 1970s           | Publican     |
| YM5          | 1990s           | School pupil |

The precise dates of birth of the speakers in Table 2 is mostly unknown, but their decades of birth are reasonably secure. Note that OM5 is the same speaker as speaker 1942M in Table 1.

In addition to the speakers in Tables 1 and 2, the analysis in Section 3 includes the data, both phonetic transcriptions and the accompanying short audio recording, from the nearest SED location, Lowick (Nb1), which is seven miles west of Holy Island in mainland Northumberland.<sup>6</sup> Although there are differences between the Lowick and Holy Island dialects, they, like most other places in Northumberland, are traditionally characterised by the Northumbrian Burr, and the inclusion of the SED and its comparison with the speakers in the Holy Island corpus allows us to determine the extent to which this traditional dialect survey reflects what rural communities were really like with respect to this feature. The SED data for Lowick was supplied by three speakers whose average year of birth was 1881. For the purposes of this analysis, they are treated as one data point, as they do not differ from each other with respect to this feature (or indeed significantly for others features).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The recordings of 1945M made by me in 2006 include an added wordlist task designed to elicit traditional Holy Island dialect pronunciations, as per the method described in Maguire et al. (2010). These elicited pronunciations are grouped with Q speech for the purposes of this analysis.

<sup>6</sup> In this case, the phonetic transcriptions from the SED are taken to represent Q speech, whilst the data from the recording are of free conversation (N speech).

<sup>7</sup> Berger (1980) contains a substantial number of phonetic transcriptions of words as pronounced in the Holy Island dialect, drawn from the same corpus of recordings as is analysed in this chapter. These transcriptions are not analysed here, since they indicate that /r/ was pronounced as [ɾ] 100% of the time in the corpus, which is

### 3. The analysis

The purpose of this section is to explain the analysis of the pronunciation of /r/ in the Holy Island corpus, and to present the results of this analysis. Given that the Holy Island dialect is partially and variably rhotic, the pronunciation of /r/ is analysed in onset position only. Up to an hour of speech was analysed for each of the speakers in Table 1, with the pronunciation of /r/ in N and Q speech assessed separately (only the first 100 tokens were analysed for the three speakers born in the 1960s, as they had no uvular pronunciations of /r/ whatsoever in their speech). In the case of the *Diary of an Island* speakers, however, all data were analysed owing to the short stretches of speech involved. The analysis of /r/ divides pronunciations into the following three categories:

- 1) Uvular (e.g. [ʁ])
- 2) Alveolar tap [ɾ] or trill [r]
- 3) Anterior approximants (e.g. [ɹ])

Figure 1 represents the results of the analysis for the speakers in the Holy Island corpus, whilst Figure 2 gives the results for the analysis of the pronunciation of /r/ in the speech of the *Diary of an Island* speakers (these are graphed separately due to the small number of tokens involved).

*Figure 1: The frequency of uvular /r/ in the Holy Island corpus.*

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clearly not the case (see Figure 1). It seems that Berger was presenting a selection of the data in the Holy Island corpus only in order to illustrate certain local characteristics of it.



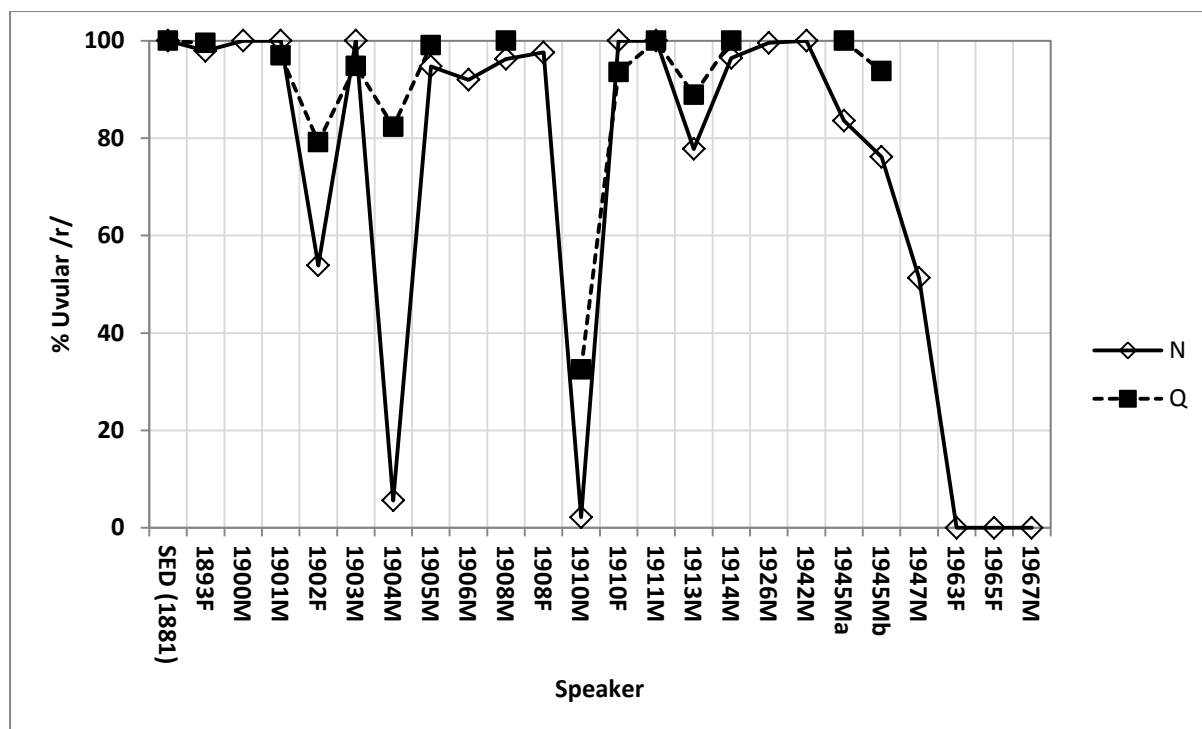


Table 1 reveals that the Northumbrian Burr was a common feature of the speech of most of the speakers recorded in Holy Island in the early 1970s, with some obvious exceptions, but that the uvular pronunciation is entirely absent in the speech of people born in the 1960s. Overall, the frequency of uvular /r/ in the corpus is 69.20% ( $n = 4189$ ). Excluding the younger speakers in the sample, who have no uvular /r/ at all, the overall frequency is 74.20% ( $n = 3889$ ). Looking at the difference between N and Q speech, and comparing only those speakers who produced speech of both sorts, uvular /r/ occurs at a frequency of 64.00% ( $n = 1225$ ) in N speech in the corpus, and at a frequency of 87.63% ( $n = 1213$ ) in Q speech. The difference between the frequencies for the two speech types is highly significant ( $\chi^2(1) = 185$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), with uvular /r/ more likely to occur in questionnaire speech than in everyday conversation. This indicates that the methodologies of traditional dialect surveys such as the SED were having the desired effect, of eliciting more localised forms of speech (though it will be necessary to check a wider range of features and types of features to see whether this holds across the board), and it is noteworthy that some speakers in particular (1902F, 1904M, 1910M and 1945M) increase their levels of uvular /r/ in Q speech quite significantly ( $\chi^2$ ). As a result, it is likely that traditional methodologies do not give a completely accurate picture of the *actual* (rather than *potential*) levels of traditional features in the dialects under investigation. On the other hand, levels of uvular /r/ in everyday speech are also rather high, and some speakers have up to 100% frequency of the traditional pronunciation regardless of speech type. Thus, for example, 1893F, 1901M, 1903M, 1905M, 1908M, 1910F and 1914M have no significant difference between the two different speech types and have nearly 100% uvular in their speech, whilst 1900M, 1906M, 1908F, 1926M and 1942M, for whom we have no Q data, all have almost 100% (in some cases exactly 100%) uvular /r/ in their everyday speech.

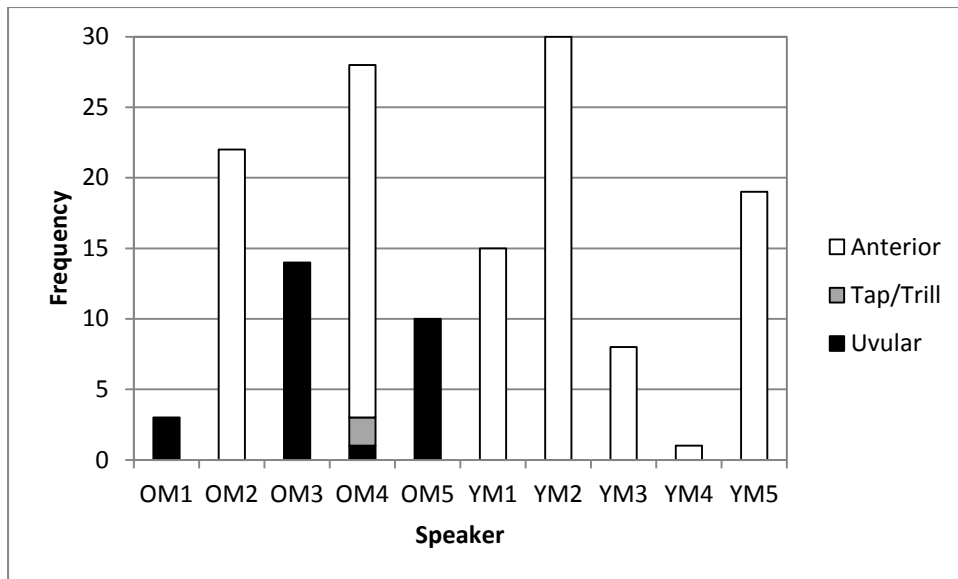
Amongst the older speakers in the sample, 1904M and 1910M (and, to an extent, 1902F) stand out rather sharply – these speakers have much lower rates of uvular /r/ in their speech in everyday conversation (the two males have almost none, in fact), but when asked to give Holy Island pronunciations in the questionnaire they produce much higher levels of the feature (especially 1904M, who is almost ‘bidialectal’ in this respect – see Smith and Durham 2012 for a discussion of this phenomenon). In effect, they don’t use the Northumbrian Burr, but they know that it is a feature of the dialect and can use it when required.<sup>8</sup> And, of course, the three younger speakers in the sample have no instances of uvular /r/ in their speech whatsoever. Although they only provided N speech in the interviews, my impression from speaking and listening to them and to other residents from the same generation is that they are about as likely to produce a uvular /r/ as a younger speaker from somewhere like Tyneside (i.e. not at all), their speech being almost entirely devoid of traditional Holy Island features (see Maguire *forthcoming* for further discussion).

The analysis of the pronunciation of /r/ in the speech of the *Diary of an Island* speakers is given in Figure 2. As the number of tokens is small for each speaker, raw frequency of each variant is given. The overall frequency of the three variants in *Diary of an Island* is as follows: 18.67% uvular; 1.33% alveolar trill/tap; 80.00% anterior approximant. There is a clear difference between the behaviour of the older males (36.36% uvular) and the younger males (no uvular pronunciations at all), even though one of the older males has no uvular pronunciations at all and another has only one. The results in Figure 2 match the results in Figure 1 quite well (especially the complete lack of uvular /r/ in the speech of younger natives of the Island), but they give an added insight into the variable linguistic behaviour of speakers born in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Figure 2: The pronunciation of /r/ by the Diary of an Island speakers.*

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<sup>8</sup> 1910M is the only speaker in the corpus to produce a significant number of pronunciations with [r] or [r] (14.84%). Other than him, 1947M is the only speaker to produce more than one or two such tokens (and most speakers produce none), at 3.65%.



#### 4. Discussion

This chapter examines the rather striking disparity between traditional accounts of dialects in the northeast of England, which almost exclusively record uvular pronunciation of /r/, and modern accounts of dialects from this area, which find that uvular /r/ is essentially absent from them. To reiterate, the questions asked earlier in this chapter were as follows: (1) Did people really speak this way in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, using the Northumbrian Burr all the time, as the traditional dialect surveys suggest? (2) Do traditional dialect surveys give a misleading impression of how common this feature was as result of their methodological practices? (3) Have people been abandoning the Burr in Northumberland, and is it true that this quintessential feature of the northeast of England has disappeared?

The answer to the first of these questions is clearly yes. For many of the older people in the Holy Island corpus, born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, uvular /r/ was normal in everyday speech. Quite a few of them have levels of it at or near 100%, whether they are speaking normally or answering SED-style questions. For them, then, the Northumbrian Burr is quite possibly a sociolinguistic indicator, not subject to stylistic variation, which is not surprising if it is the sole realisation of /r/ in their speech. This is true even for some speakers born as late as the 1940s. 1942M, in both Berger's recordings and in *Diary of an Island*, has 100% uvular /r/ in everyday speech, whilst 1945M has levels which are not far below this (and, since there is much more data for him than for 1942M, this is probably a truer reflection of the kind of variation that can be found amongst some fishermen of his generation). However, this is not the whole story. Even amongst Berger's sample of older natives from this isolated location, three show much lower levels of uvular /r/. In fact, 1904M and 1910M have almost none of it at all in their everyday speech, even though they produce it at higher levels when under questioning. Although these two speakers have somewhat different life histories than some of the other speakers in the corpus (1904M trained and worked in a specialist job away from the Island in his youth, whilst 1910M was a

local expert on the history and wildlife of the Island), the same is true of several other speakers in the sample. 1893F was a ‘herring girl’ who followed the herring fleets around the coasts of Britain from Lewis to Great Yarmouth for many years, 1914M worked in the navy and appears to have been stationed in and around Italy for a substantial period, and 1926M spent 30 years of his life as a painter and decorator in London before retiring back to Holy Island. Nevertheless, these speakers have retained very high levels of uvular /r/. But the fact remains that, even for speakers from deepest rural Northumberland born at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, uvular /r/ could be absent.

This is one way that traditional dialect surveys such as the SED misrepresent the linguistic situation in rural Britain in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Through a careful selection of their informants, they excluded precisely those speakers, however locally based they might be, whose speech was not characterised by traditional features such as the one under investigation here (see Orton 1962 for a description of the SED’s informant selection criteria, and Chambers and Trudgill 1980, and Petyt 1980 for a critical analysis of these methods). Traditional studies do not allow us to gauge how common speakers of the sort they record were in the community (the Holy Island corpus suggests that for this feature at least they weren’t uncommon, but that this is only part of the story). And that is even before we consider the other kinds of speakers that lived in these rural communities – in particular, children and non-natives. Berger’s Holy Island recordings do not really help us with finding out how children on the Island spoke, but the evidence from the younger speakers in the corpus and in *Diary of an Island* suggests that some of these speakers were more likely to have lower levels of uvular /r/, even in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Berger’s recordings do, however, give us some insight into the linguistic behaviour of non-native residents and visitors on Holy Island at the time. In addition to the native speakers in Table 1, the recordings contains brief stretches of conversation by non-natives, such as a publican from southeast England, a bar-worker from Yorkshire, a partner of one of the natives from Tyneside, a woman with a near-RP accent, a tourist from the United States, and a visitor from somewhere else in north Northumberland. Apart from this last individual, none of these non-natives uses uvular /r/ (or other traditional Northumberland features) at all.

But traditional dialect surveys mislead us in another way. As the analysis in Figure 1 reveals, and as socio-dialectologists such as Chambers and Trudgill (1980) and Petyt (1980) argue, traditional dialectology surveys may over-emphasize the extent to which traditional features were current in the speech of the informants being recorded. This was intentional. The aim of traditional dialect surveys was to record the most old-fashioned forms of speech still current in rural Britain (see Ellis 1889 and Orton 1962) in order to determine endogenous patterns of change (see also Milroy and Gordon 2003: 12). The elicitation methods they used were developed to encourage speakers to produce their most localised forms of speech, even if this was not how these people spoke all of the time (see, for example, Orton 1962: 15-16, where he discusses using “bilingual” speakers for the SED). This is quite apparent for some of the speakers in the Holy Island corpus, who understood that the purpose of the SED-style questionnaire sessions was the elicitation of their most local pronunciations; the result was that they produced higher levels of uvular /r/ (see Figure 1). The upshot of this and the very

careful selection of informants is that we can't assume that everyone spoke in the way that traditional dialect surveys imply in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It is clear that this is one reason why there is a striking difference between the frequency of the Northumbrian Burr in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century accounts and later reports.

Nonetheless, this is only part of the story. It is clear from the analyses of the Holy Island data in this chapter that there has also been a dramatic change in the pronunciation of /r/ there in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The younger speakers in the corpus and in *Diary of an Island* have no uvular /r/ in their speech whatsoever (in the same way that their speech is essentially devoid of traditional Holy Island dialect features more generally). Although the number of speakers so far analysed is small and work remains to be done (though it is worth pointing out that there are not in fact many young natives left on Holy Island), this is indicative of a whole-scale change in the pronunciation of /r/ in this part of northeast England, as has been indicated to be the case elsewhere (Påhlsson 1972, Beal et al. 2012, Llamas et al. 2009, Llamas 2010). Amongst these younger speakers, [ɹ] is the norm, though [v] can also be heard (see Foulkes and Docherty 2000). What we appear to be dealing with here is a case of 'dialect levelling' (see Beal 2010: 74-82 for a discussion). As Williams and Kerswill (1999: 149) put it, this is "a process whereby differences between regional varieties are reduced, features which make varieties distinctive disappear, and new features emerge and are adopted by speakers over a wide geographical area". In particular, loss of uvular /r/ is a case of what Kerswill (2003) calls 'levelling', the loss of a highly localised variant as a result of contact and accommodation between speakers of different dialects. It is not difficult to see how this has happened for these younger speakers, who were schooled in Berwick (including boarding there through the week) and have often had to leave the Island for periods of training and work. In fact, the extent to which the younger speakers from Holy Island have abandoned local traditional dialect forms suggests that this is not just a case of dialect levelling, but one of 'dialect death' (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999, Britain 2009).<sup>9</sup> These young speakers don't speak the Holy Island dialect at all, which is now really only typical of a small and dwindling number of older (mostly retired) farmers and fishermen on the Island (e.g. 1942M, 1945M and 1947M). In a couple of decades, uvular /r/ will have disappeared from use on Holy Island, as it has elsewhere in northeast England.

Although the degree to which the Northumbrian Burr has been lost in Holy Island is relatively new, it is apparent in the analysis of the Holy Island corpus that this loss has been on-going on a smaller scale for some time. Speakers such as 1904M and 1910M did not really use it either (nor do some of the older males, born in the 1940s, in the *Diary of an*

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<sup>9</sup> It is tempting to relate the variability in rates of uvular /r/ production amongst the Holy Island speakers to the idea that there are high rates of inter-speaker linguistic variability during the process of language death (see Cook 1989 for discussion and Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999 for the connection to dialect death). But it is not clear that such a claim can be made based on these data, which in fact show high levels of uvular /r/ production for most speakers, then a complete disappearance of it in the speech of speakers born in more recent decades. The three older speakers who have atypically low levels of the Burr (1902F, 1904M, 1910M) have somewhat different life histories and social characteristics compared to the other older speakers in the sample, so their divergent linguistic behaviour need not necessarily be interpreted as an example of increased variability as a result of dialect death.

*Island* sample), whilst speakers such as 1902F, 1913M, 1945M and 1947M show evidence of its loss to one degree or another. For these speakers, uvular /r/ is likely to be a sociolinguistic marker, subject to stylistic variation, as Figure 1 indicates. But uvular /r/ has likely ceased having this sociolinguistic status for the younger members of the sample who, if they recognise the pronunciation at all, are likely to view it as a feature of old-fashioned farmer and fisherman speech (i.e. it has almost certainly become a stereotype, assuming it has any linguistic salience for them at all).

There appears to be something else going on with the Burr on Holy Island as well, however. Two speakers in the older sample who otherwise are not particularly dialectal in their speech (1914M and 1926M) nevertheless have uvular /r/ at extremely high levels in their everyday speech (96.43% and 100% respectively). These are two speakers that we might actually expect to have much lower levels of the feature. 1914M appears to have spent a period of his youth in the navy, stationed in an around Italy, and gives the impression that he has educated himself to a fair degree. Other dialect features, such as the traditional monophthong /u/ in the MOUTH lexical set (Maguire *forthcoming*) are uncommon in his everyday speech (he has 12.50% monophthongal MOUTH). The same is true for 1926M, who spent at least 30 years of his life away from the Island, first in the Merchant Navy and then as a painter and decorator in London (where his wife comes from), before retiring to Holy Island (he has 15.48% monophthongal MOUTH). Is it likely to be the case that these two speakers, especially 1926M, retained their exotic uvular pronunciations of /r/, at least at such high levels, when they lived away from the Island, surrounded by people who never used this feature? It is possible that they did, as a way of enregistering their Northumberland and Holy Island identity, but it is also possible that they did not and that they picked up the feature again when they returned to the Island and used it at levels which we would not expect someone with their life history to do. In this case, the Northumbrian Burr had become for them not just a stylistic marker but an essential marker of local identity, not quite a stereotype, but at least a way of showing that their absence from the Island and the absence of other, more stigmatized, traditional dialect features in their speech did not mean that they were not Islanders. This reminds us of Defoe's comment that "the Natives value themselves upon that Imperfection, because, forsooth, it shews the Antiquity of their Blood" (1724-27, vol. iii: 23-33); the Northumbrian Burr was something to be proud of as a Northumbrian, not something to be suppressed in the same way as other non-standard dialect features. That this social meaning of the Northumberland Burr has come to an end is suggested by the complete absence of a similar phenomenon in the younger speakers of the Island.

## 5. Conclusion

The Northumbrian Burr was still a common feature of at least some dialects in Northumberland in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, constituting, as Pålsson (1972: 222) says, "a vigorous feature". With a history of over 300 years, it had become a unique shibboleth of the speech of natives of the north-easternmost reaches of England, and one which acted as a marker of local identity in a way that other non-standard features of their dialect did not. It

seems likely that it was afforded a special status as a result, making it resistant to loss and a feature which could be maintained by those who otherwise were not particularly local in their speech. But in the face of wide-ranging social changes, especially the transformation of the local economy, populations and educational practices, the Northumbrian Burr began to lose its privileged status. This effect is evident even in the speech of people born in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in isolated places such as Holy Island, where, by the middle of the century, there is evidence that the Burr was in decline. But it was in the second half of the last century that the inexorable forces of dialect levelling and dialect death really had an effect on the way people spoke on the Island, leading to a complete loss of the Burr and other traditional features of speech from the community. Unlike larger places such as Newcastle or even Berwick, which have large enough populations for some traditional features to survive amongst certain social groups, the effects of these exogenous changes on this small community have been far-reaching. But although the Northumbrian Burr is absent in the speech of the younger generations in places like Holy Island, it still survives in the speech of older local males in such out of the way places as a normal feature of their speech. However, it will not be long before this unique feature of the dialects of northeast England disappears as a genuine feature of the speech of the people of that region, and it will indeed become, as Beal (2008: 140) suggests, no more than a “party trick”.

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