

Rhotic variation in contemporary Modern Irish

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This paper investigates the status of rhotic consonant(s) in the phonology of Modern Irish (*Gaeilge, Nua-Ghaeilge*), a minority language indigenous to the island of Ireland (*Éire*). Despite the presence of [ɹ] as an allophone of the traditional rhotics /r^h/ and /r^ʲ/ having been recently attested in some studies, the nature and occasion of its appearance has been effectively ignored (Ó Sé 2000: 19; Hickey 2014; Kukhto & Nikolaev 2016; Welby *et al* 2017). Scholarship on the language has been slow to accept the reality of a rapidly changing Irish, with a shifting speaker base and media landscape. Most previous studies of Irish phonetics and phonology have focused on speakers living in a *Gaeltacht*, the rural traditionally Irish speaking geographic regions primarily located on the Atlantic fringe of the island. However, the expansion of private Irish-medium schooling in the form of *Gaelscoileanna* since the 1970's, as well as substantial sustained capital and political investment from successive Irish governments have produced a great number of high-level L2 users, as well as native speakers from non-*Gaeltacht* backgrounds. A part of the impetus to this research is to include these “new” speakers in the conversations around language change and variation in Irish as well, particularly as the *Gaeltachtaí* continue to be threatened and as “urban Irish” speakers begin to form a larger and larger portion of the language’s user base. There is also evidence uncovered in scholarly work that Irish phonology and phonetics are changing in other, broader ways, even amongst *Gaeltacht* speakers (Welby *et al.* 2017; Müller *et al.* 2019). Using the results of an experiment conducted with native speakers as well as high-level L2 users of Irish, I argue firstly that the inventory of Irish rhotics ought to be reconsidered to account for the wide variation present in the data, particularly as it relates to the predominance of the alveolar approximant [ɹ]. The experiment I conducted consisted of two reading tasks, a word list and short passage, yielding at least 150 tokens per speaker. The results showed a strong preference for [ɹ] and its variants across speakers and environments, eclipsing [r] and its variants. Even among native speakers with otherwise conservative speech patterns this remains true, although there is evidence that those speakers maintain the palatalized/non-palatalized distinction with the approximant. This points to an ongoing sound change occurring in Irish, one that is likely brought on through sustained contact with dialects of English now dominant on the island, which are by-products of over half a millennium of colonial occupation. Previous work of the rhotic of Montréal French has shown that changes like this can occur rapidly, sometimes within the lifetime of a single speaker (Sankoff & Blondeau 2007). As such, this paper serves as a pilot inquiry into the phenomenon with broad implications for Irish and may offer insight into other similar sound changes occurring in minority languages, and languages undergoing revitalization.

Keywords: Modern Irish, phonetics, rhotics, language change

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