

What's With The New Yawk Accent?

BY ARIKA OKRENT JULY 15, 2015



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In the 1960s, Columbia University graduate student William Labov headed into New York City's department stores in search of something. He scoured Saks, Macy's, and S. Klein, asking all the employees he encountered a single question. He'd ask things like, "Where are women's shoes?" and "Where is sportswear?" but he wasn't really looking for either. Labov already knew the answer—those items were on the fourth floor—but he wanted to hear the salesperson say it. He was hunting for something more elusive: the New York *r*.

The *r*-less New "Yawk" accent is as classic as "Rockefella Centa" or the East "Rivva," but when linguists tried to study *r*-dropping among native New Yorkers, the

results were inconsistent. The *r* showed up in some words but not others—even for the same person, even for the same word. Its appearance, or lack thereof, seemed a matter of chance.

R-dropping had once been a mark of upper-class prestige along the East Coast, a connection to the “veddy propuh” British habit. But at the beginning of the 20th century, as it mixed into the rough-and-ready developing dialect of arriving New York immigrants, its status changed. By the 1960s it had become the opposite of prestigious. Labov thought the missing *r* might be better explained by social factors, which is why he picked Saks (a luxury store), Macy’s (a mid-range store), and S. Klein (a bargain store) for his investigation. As it turned out, employees at Saks pronounced the *r* in “fourth floor” more often than those at Macy’s, and much more often than those at S. Klein. The classier the joint, the more common the *r*.

After Labov got the “fourth floor” response he was looking for, he would say, “Excuse me?” The employee would then repeat the phrase, more slowly and carefully. At all three stores, fewer *r*’s were dropped the second time around. This was especially true at Macy’s, where employees presumably had a bit more status anxiety, being close to, but not quite in, the truly high-status group.

Shifts in the perception of “good speech” can cause language to change from generation to generation. Every decade since Labov’s study has seen more *r*’s make their way into the average New Yorker’s speech. Even so, when the study was repeated in 1986 by Joy Fowler, with May department store standing in for S. Klein (which had closed), and in 2009 by Patrick-André Mather, with Loehmann’s and Filene’s Basement taking May’s place, everyone used more *r*’s overall, but the same difference between the stores persisted. More prestige? More *r*.

If New Yorkers associate *r*’s with prestige, why are any dropped at all? Recently, Maeve Eberhardt and Corinne Downs studied *r*-dropping on the TV show *Say Yes to the Dress*—and they may have found an answer. Sales staff at New York’s bridal

salon Kleinfeld, where the show is filmed, are well aware of the prestige factor (the higher the client's budget, the more likely the salesperson is to retain the *r*). However, they drop the *r* when providing emotional support. For example, when a sales associate comforted a bride who was upset about her dead sister's absence, the difference was pronounced: "She's theah though. Just always remembah that." Dialect is solidarity, and solidarity is comfort. Prestige ain't always the most important thing.

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