26.
The ‹whole truth› on English *r*

26.1. The English ‹/r/› phoneme is completely different from that of most languages, which have *alveolar* contoids: [r] (trill) [ɾ] (tap), while other languages have *uvular* contoids: [ʀ] (trill), [ʁ] (constrictive), [ʁ̞] (approximant), just to name a few.

Thus, it is extremely important to use a different symbol for English *r*, even at a phonemic level: /ɹ/. Furthermore, American and British English have two quite different articulations, although –from an auditory point of view– the impression is quite similar. However, there are some perceptible differences: suffice to say that the American type has a relatively higher intrinsic timbre than the British.

Even International English *r* is alike, since it has both the approximant type, [ɹ], and the semi-approximant, [ɹ̞], as well, which is similar, though weaker.

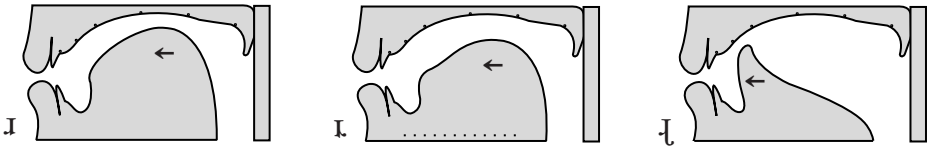
26.2. Once and for all, it is of paramount importance to establish the exact articulation of both kinds of approximants (and semi-approximant).

Unfortunately, except in very few cases, even among native English phoneticians, there exists odd and perhaps too-traditional ideas about the precise nature and articulation of /ɹ/, which are not based on real analyses of sounds and accurate kinesthesia as well.

It is true that the American *r* is articulated in a backer position than the British one, but its retraction refers to the dorsum not to the tip of the tongue.

26.3. It is proved that the American /ɹ/ is a prevelar approximant, [ɹ], with a very slight raising of the tip of the tongue towards the postalveolar region. It is (almost) uninfluential, and practically unavoidable,

fig 26.1. The taxophones of English /ɹ/: $^{i\prime a}$[ɹ] ^{b}[ɻ] and /ɻ/: ^{i}[ɻ] ^{a}[ɹ] ^{b}[∅].



because it is caused by the lateral contraction, which is tipical of both American (& International) and British /ɹ/, as we will see.

On the contrary, the British sound is decidedly postalveolar, [ɻ], in the specific meaning of an area after the alveolar one, approached by the tip of the tongue (not by the lamina, as in the unsatisfactory *IPA* official point of view). It is actually an apico-postalveolar articulation.

26.4. It will be very important to observe the orograms of these two approximants very carefully (*fig* 26.1). As we have already said, both of them are laterally contracted, just as real lateral contoids, but there is no contact with the roof of the mouth (as, instead, with real laterals).

The absence of such a lateral contraction would simply deprive these articulations of their typical timbre, which is so similar (in these phones), even though their actual articulations are relatively very different.

In addition, both [ɹ] and [ɻ] show a certain amount of lip rounding (more evident in stressed syllables), which –changing both towards a duller timbre– contributes in making them less different auditorily, while remaining articulatorily rather different.

26.5. Once the exact articulations are clear, it is easy to understand why, for /tɹ, dɹ/, the British pronunciation regularly undergoes assimilation, giving [tɻ, dɻ]. On the other hand, the fact that the auditory impression is so similar for these two types of phones, may explain why, also in the American pronunciation, [tɻ, dɻ] can be used, besides the more usual ones, [ʈɹ, ɖɹ].

Certainly, it is very strange that the majority of phoneticians (even native ones) keep on using the symbol [ɻ] to hint at the neutral American type, which is far from being postaveolar. By the way, the term *postalveolar* corresponds to the official one ‹retroflex›, which picturesquely tries hard to pass itself off as a real point of articulation, while, in fact, it is –at most– just a very peculiar articulatory *modification*.

But, as is well known, good kinesthetic, auditory (and even acoustic) skills are not the same for all people…

26.6. Up to now, we have seen several examples of /ɹ/ ^{i}[ɹ, ɪ] ^{a}[ɹ] ^{b}[ɻ], and several others will follow. Let us remember only that our diaphonemic transcription rigorously distinguishes between /ɹ/, which is always pronounced in all accents of English, and /ɹ̣/, which is pronounced, as such, only in American and International English (with a slight difference, though). As a matter of fact, in British English, /ɹ̣/ corresponds to ‹zero›, as *r* is pronounced only before vowels:

^{i}[ˈɪɹ˞ə˞ɪɹ] ^{a}[ˈɪɹ̣ɪɹ] ^{b}[ˈɪɻ˞ə˞ɻ] /ˈɪəɹ̣/ *rear*
^{i}[ˈɪɛ˞ə˞ɪɹ] ^{a}[ˈɪɛ˞ɹ̣] ^{b}[ˈɻɛ˞ɜ˞ɻ] /ˈɹɛəɹ̣/ *rare*
^{i}[ˈɹɔːɪɹ] ^{a}[ˈɹːɔɹːɹ] ^{b}[ˈɻɔːɻ] /ˈɹːɔɹ̣/ *roar*.

26.7. In American pronunciation, /əɹ̣/, preceded by vowels or consonants, is realized as [ɻ̩]. It is the same also for /ə̹ɹ/ (and, by and large, for /əɹ/), which occur before vowels. In addition, both /əːɹ̣/ and /əːɹ, ə̹ːɹ/ are realized as [ɻ̩ː] (although ^{a}[əɹ, əːɹ], for ^{a}[ɻ̩, ɻ̩ː], are acceptable, as well, even if less frequent).

In International English, we find [ɹ] before vowels, but the weaker taxophone, [ɪ], before consonants or pauses; besides, /əːɹ̣/ and /əːɹ, ə̹ːɹ/ are generally realized as [əːɪ] and [əːɹ], respectively:

^{i}[ˈməˑɪɖəɪ] ^{a}[ˈmɻ̩ˑɖɻ̩] ^{b}[ˈmɜˑɖə] /ˈməːɹ̣ɖəɹ̣/ *murder*
^{i}[ˈməˑɪɖəɹəɪ] ^{a}[ˈmɻ̩ˑɖəɹɻ̩, -ɖɻ̩ɻ̩] ^{b}[ˈmɜˑɖəˌɐɻ̩ɸ, -ɖˌɻ̩ɸ, -ɖɻ̩ɸ] /ˈməːɹ̣ɖəɹəɹ̣ː, -ɖəɹə̹ɹ̣/ *murderer*.

26.8. In normal American speech, /VVɹ̣/ (in a *pre*intoneme) generally changes into ^{a}[VVɹ] (for British English cf § 11):

^{i}[ˈʃhaʊəɪ] ^{a}[ˈʃhaʊɹ̣] ^{b}[ˈʃhaʊə] /ˈtɑɔəɹ̣/ *tower*
^{i}[ðəˈʃhaʊəɹ əvˈlɐnd̥ən] ^{a}[ðəˈʃhaʊɹ əvˈlʌnd̥ən] ^{b}[ðəˈʃhaʊəˌɻ əvˈlɐnd̥ən, -aˑəˌɻ] /ðəˈtɑɔəɹ əvˈlɐndən/ *the Tower of London*
^{i}[ˈphaʊəɪz̥] ^{a}[ˈphaʊɹ̣z̥] ^{b}[ˈphaʊəʒ̥] /ˈpɑɔəɹ̣z/ *powers*
^{i}[ðəˈphaʊəɪz əvˈd̥ɑˑɪknəs] ^{a}[ðəˈphaʊɹz əvˈd̥ɑˑɹknəs] ^{b}[ðəˈphaʊəʒ əvˈd̥ɑˑknəs, -aˑəʒ] /ðəˈpɑɔəɹ̣z/ *the powers of darkness*.

26.9. However, /ɹ̣/ is pronounced, also in British English, when it occurs final in a rhythm group before a following rhythm-group initial vowel (and there is no intervening pause, not even a short one). In this way, the two words are bound together, and /ɹ̣/ becomes /ɹ/ [ɻ]:

^{i}[ðəˈkhɑːɹ əˈɹaˑɛvd̥] ^{a}[ðɯˈkhɑːɹ əˈɹaˑəvd̥] ^{b}[ðɯˈkhɑːˌɻ əˈɻaˑəvd̥] /ðəˈkɑːɹ əˈɹaɛvd/ *the car arrived*

i [ˈʈhɛɪk ˈkhɛəɹ əvjəɪˈsɛɬf, -jɔˑɪ-] *a* [ˈʈhɛɪk ˈkhɛˑɻ əvjɻˈʂɛɬf, -jʊɻ-] *b* [ˈʈhɛɪk ˈkhɛˑɜɻ əvjɔˑˈsɛɬf, -jə-] /ˈtɛɪk ˈkɛəɹ əvjɔːɻˈsɛɬf/ *take care of yourself.*

26.10. On the other hand, in British English again, on the analogy of word-final /əɻ, ɪəɻ, ɛəɻ, ʊəɻ, ɔːɻ, ɑːɻ/, very frequently, also final /ə, ɪə, ʊə, ɔː, ɑː/ are realized as the previous ones, even if no etymological *r* is present in their spelling:

i [ðiaɛˈɖiiə(ʔ)əvɪʈ] *a* [ðiaəˈɖɪiə(ʔ)əvɪʈ] *b* [ðiaəˈɖɪə(ʔ)əvɪʈ; -ɪəɻəvɪʈ] /ðiaɛˈdɪəːvɪt/ *the idea of it*

i [əˈlaɛzə ˈɛləs] *a* [əˈlaəzə ˈɛləs] *b* [ɪˈlaəzə ˈɛlɪs; -zəɻ ˈɛlɪs] /ɻˈlaɛzə ˈɛlɬs/ *Eliza Ellis*

i [ˈʤiˑiˌbii ˈʃɔː ˈæs(k)ʈ] *a* [ˈʤɪiˌbɪi ˈʃɔː ˈæs(k)ʈ] *b* [ˈʤɪiˌbɪi ˈʃɔː ˈɑˑs(k)ʈ; -ɔːɻ] /ˈʤiibii ˈʃɔː ˈɑːskt/ *G. B. Shaw asked.*

26.11. This British use is very widespread, chiefly for /əɻ/, although good speakers try to avoid it, but many others use it airily, even teaching it to foreigners (who should avoid it, unless they are very fluent and have a very good command of British English).

In mediatic American English, we have a uvularized [ɹ], *ie* [ʁ]. In a broad New Zealand accent, /ɹ/ is a velarized version of [ɻ] (which is usual in neutral New Zealand English, too), *ie* [ɻ̟].

In addition to American English (except in typical Southern, Eastern, and Black accents) and Canadian English, also Irish English (in the whole island) has /ɻ/ = /ɹ/.

The same goes both for an area in the South Island in New Zealand and for the West Country in the southwest of England (as well as for some more limited areas in the North of England).

A typical Scottish accent, usually, has /ɹ, ɻ/ = [ɾ] (though, too often, it is still described as a trill, ‹[r]›).

26.12. As a speech defect, /ɹ/ is realized as a labiodental [ʋ]. This is so widespread, especially in Great Britain, that someone considers it to be normal (all the more so because it is frequent in the mediatic British accent).

Another defective realization is /ɹ/ → [ɯ̽], similar to [w] (*cf fig* 24.2), which can cause some communication problems, though not exactly alike:

i,*a*,*b* [ˈwɪʧ] /ˈwɪʧ/ *witch*

i,*a* [ˈɹɪʧ] *b* [ˈɻɪʧ] *i*,*a*,*b* ‹[ˈɯ̽ɪʧ]› /ˈɹɪʧ/ *rich.*

26.13. Besides [ɹ, ɻ, ɻ̝], given again for better comparisons with the other variants, *fig* 26.2 shows [ɾ, ɾ̝, ʋ]. In addition, it shows [a][ɹ̠̊] [b][ɹ̠̊˔], which can occur in the sequences /tɹ, dɹ/ (as seen in § 16.7-10), and [ɾ], as well.

fig 26.2. Various taxophones for English /ɹ, ɹ̝/.