Rhotic lenition as a marker of a dominant character type in northern Mandarin Chinese

Matthew M. Pankhurst
University of Western Ontario
mpankhur@uwo.ca

This paper looks at social identity with respect to two types of rhotacization: vowel rhotacization, in which a vowel is r-coloured, and consonant rhotacization (i.e. rhotic lenition). Recent studies (Zhang 2005, Zhang 2008) have investigated character type as a sociolinguistic variable affecting rhotacization in Mandarin Chinese speech. Rhotacization, in turn, has sociocultural associations that differ by both geographic region and regional character types (Lee 2007). I argue that in Northern China, there is a correlation between rhotic lenition and dominant, particularly masculine, social identities. In this study, I interview thirteen Mandarin speakers from Henan Province, a distinctly northern—but not northeastern—prefecture. Participants are interviewed and possible lenited tokens are counted. I hypothesize that a positive correlation between identity and lenition will be seen in speakers who perceive themselves as having dominant personalities; that people who identify with a dominant character type will exhibit more tokens of consonant rhotacization in casual speech. To explain this phenomenon, I take the view that there is a prevalent linguistic ideology linking vowel rhotacization with rurality, low social class, and Northeastern identity. I will show that among speakers of Henan Mandarin, vowel rhotacization is an overt marker of this identity, whereas consonant rhotacization (i.e. rhotic lenition) is less overt. Rhotic lenition is a unique and critical variable which functions as a marker of a dominant character type without establishing a Northeast identity.
Keywords: Lenition; Rhotacization; Rhoti; Chinese; Sociolinguistics

1.1 Introduction

Rhotacization among speakers of Mandarin Chinese has been shown to correlate with personal and group identity. Recent studies (Zhang 2005, Zhang 2008) have investigated character type as a sociolinguistic variable affecting rhotacization in Mandarin Chinese speech. Rhotacization, in turn, has socio-cultural associations that differ by both geographic region and regional character types (Lee 2007). I argue that in Northern China, there is a correlation between rhotic lenition and dominant, unrestrained social identities. This paper looks at social identity with respect to consonant rhotacization (i.e. rhotic lenition).

1.2 Rhotacization and Rhotic Lenition

Rhotacization is a word with two meanings. It can refer either to the r-colouring of a vowel (which occurs in rhotic accents) or the process in which a consonant becomes rhotic (a change in the manner of a consonant to become an approximant). The widespread variety of Mandarin Chinese spoken in the North of China exhibits both types: vowel rhotacization and consonant rhotacization (i.e. rhotic lenition). (1) and (2) are examples of the respective phonological processes:

(1)	/pan+ɻ/ →	[paɻ]	“dish”
	/pai+ɻ/ →		“card”
	/ɻ/ →	[Øɻ:]	“son”
	/san.ʂz̩/ →	[san.ɻz̩]	“thirty”
(2)	/ɕiaʊ̯.ʂz̩.hoʊ̯/→	[ɕiaʊ̯.ɻz̩.hoʊ̯]	“as a child”
	/ɕia.tʂʰaŋ/ →	[ɕia.ɻaŋ]	“homestyle”

Vowel rhotacization in Mandarin Chinese is commonly known as *Erhua* (Simplified Chinese: 儿化). Erhua refers to a tendency among Northeastern dialects—especially that of Beijing—whereby speakers add the suffix *er* (SC: 儿) to the last syllable in a word, usually to indicate a diminutive or endearing meaning (Zhang 2000). The addition of the diminutive suffix is peculiar in Standard Mandarin because it is the only non-syllabic morpheme accounted for by the writing system. According to Lin (1992), there are two suffixes in Chinese: *er* and *zi*, and they both occur as root morphemes, with the respective meanings of “child” and “infant” (Lin, 1992). However, in Standard Mandarin, *er* undergoes phonological change when attaching to a root morpheme; hence, the root-morphemic meaning of *er* is not present in affixing. Rather, the suffix may express an endearing meaning (*bao.benr*), change the literal meaning of the word altogether (*xi.fu* vs. *xi.fur*), or as shown in Zhang (2000), be socially (but not grammatically) obligatory (*huar*) or illicit (*panr*). It is noteworthy that whether this process expresses semantic diminutiveness, a change in literal meaning, or is considered obligatory or illicit is entirely based on regional and social variables. Rhotacization is a highly salient phonological feature which is stigmatized everywhere in China outside the Northeast provinces Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. It carries strong connotations of rurality, poverty, and Northeasternness. Erhua is known by Chinese speakers and linguists alike to be the “heavy r-sounding” feature which contributes to the Beijing accent Zhang (2000).

Consonant rhotacization in Mandarin Chinese is a much less salient feature and may also be described as *erhua* by some speakers. Rhotic lenition is simply the change of manner from a consonant to the retroflex approximant [ɻ].

It facilitates rapid speech and may be related to stress-timing and prosody, for along with Erhua, rhotic lenition is the other of the two Beijinger "smooth operator" social variables investigated in Zhang (2000). Chinese speakers often consider rhotic lenition to be *erhua*, and thus the same social stigmas that follow vowel rhotacization are associated with rhotic lenition. However, since it is a much less salient feature socially, it is unlikely to carry such strong connotations as *erhua*. Zhang (2008) shows a correlation between the two in Beijing speakers.

While Chinese phonologists generally agree that these features are different in nature, this paper proposes that there are some common characteristics between Mandarin Chinese vowel and consonant rhotacization.

1.3 Xenophobia and Nationalist Linguistic Ideologies of Rhotacization

The choice of using rhotacization in Mandarin Chinese is a site of linguistic and political struggle. While Beijingers may consider it a "gift of gab" (Zhang 2008), there is a strong resentment for this sound among Mandarin speakers across Southern China. This xenophobic (Li 2003) resentment of Erhua is deep-seated in the history of foreign occupation of China. Li (2003) outlines Mandarin Chinese as a "Tartar-Chinese dialect," highlighting that the [ɻ] sound in China is not a native sound. This in turn could help explain the stigmatization of rhotacization: since it is both foreign and non-obligatory, its use may be considered the result of an active choice to use a foreign element rather than Chinese element, or could be perceived as being intrinsically non-Chinese.

Standard Mandarin, meant to be exemplary of one of the varieties spoken in Beijing, is a written, artificial language ideal published in 1955, which accounts for the way people in Beijing speak and the way people across the country ought to speak. It has remained unchanged since its inception and thus does not account for language change. But the ideologies of the creators of the standard are minor issues when considering the number of speakers; more relevant are the popular ideologies of the masses who have been educated in Standard Mandarin and have bought into its imbedded connotations. With regard to rhotacization, this language ideology functions to help improve the social status of people who use vowel rhotacization within social constraints and to decrease the status of those who use it outside of the constraints—including rhotacization of consonants.

The constraints of when to use vowel rhotacization are very explicit in Standard Mandarin: some words either always have the diminutive suffix, while the rest never do. For example, *huar* ("flower"), *yi dianr* ("a little bit"), and *liaotianr* ("to chat") are all meant to be taught as having an obligatory retroflex suffix, while other words such as *panr*, *xifur* are taught as being necessarily bare: *pan* and *xifu*, respectively. In fact, there are no linguistic constraints governing which syllables speakers can and cannot add the diminutive suffix to in daily speech (Zhang 2005); if there are constraints, they are created socially, and since "language creates identity and discontinuity" (Blommaert 1998) socially-imposed constraints will be able to create identity through uniting and dividing those who

conform to and ignore the constraints.

However, since consonant rhotacization is less overt, the government officials in charge of creating Standard Mandarin in 1955 do not seem to have noticed this linguistic feature. (Alternatively, the feature could be a relatively new sociolinguistic phenomenon.) Standard Mandarin has no rules for rhotic lenition. In this light, rhotic lenition could have the effect of portraying a local accent without being associated with the negative qualities that come with rhotacizing outside of the limits of standardness. If this is true, then consonant rhotacization in Northern China may not be considered taboo at all. Although as shown by Zhang (2005) the two types of rhotacization seem co-related, the use of rhotic lenition could be interpreted as a rebellious, unrestrained response to a national standard. For the reasons discussed, such a response could not have such a strong connotation in the South, the Northeast, or Beijing; it would be indigenous to a certain character type in urban Northern China.

1.4 Ubiquity and Stigma of Rhoatacization in Henan Province

Henan Province is a Northern, but distinctly not Northeastern, province in China, situated to the south of Beijing. Collins (1998) states "ideology is generated in particular social sites, often sites of conflictual exchange." The idea that mild rhotacization is patriotic does not become part of an ideological belief until it is encountered displaying potential for conflict. A farm is hardly the place for social power struggles, especially among social classes, and thus it is unlikely to perpetuate an ideology associating a linguistic feature with a low social class. Wealth, culture, education, and fashion are often not tension-raising topics in daily farm life. However, a high school speech contest for scholarship admittance, a group interview for a reporter job, or a party with government leaders are three examples where tensions over wealth, culture, education, and fashion are easily created, and thus these are potential sites for the propagation of linguistic ideologies about those ideas. In a group interview for a job as a reporter in Zhengzhou, proximity of speech to the standard will be closely examined, and a careful thought to place rhotic vowels only on certain words could show not only a high level of compliance, but an air of fashion and education. A scholarship speech contest—in which language, education, and prestige are very explicitly linked—could instill the idea that a light (but standard) use of rhotacization is highly prestigious and cultured.

Henan Province is among the most populous and densest provinces in China, home to over 100 million people. Everyday life in the Henan's capital, Zhengzhou, is one where wages range from ten cents per hour to countless thousands of dollars per day; class consciousness is made glaringly obvious by the juxtaposition of peasants and government officials. Extending this notion, where there are more varieties of language spoken, the greater the potential for cultural differences between people. Cosmopolitan Zhengzhou, like Cosmpolitan Beijing, therefore, is an example of a site where ideologies of rhotacization are prevalent.

On one hand, Zhengzhou is a Northern province in which rhotacization is widespread. On the other hand, if the standard use of rhotacization creates a perceived association with an identity of an urban, educated, cultured, prestigious, and wealthy Beijinger, the complete disregard of the social constraints set by Standard Mandarin will associate a speaker with an opposite identity: an impoverished, non-prestigious, uncultured, uneducated, and rural Northeasterner. The jarring contrast between the associated character types attributed to the speakers of Henan's most and least rhotic accents could be expected to create a sociolinguistic divide between two groups of people in Zhengzhou.

2.1 Hypothesis

The purpose of the study is to see whether there is a correlation between character type and rhotic lenition in Mandarin speakers from Northern China. If a distinct correlation between language and personality is seen in two different groups, there is likely to be a sociolinguistic reason. I propose that there will be a divide between the percentage of rhotacized tokens between extroverted and introverted Mandarin Chinese speakers from Zhengzhou, China.

3.1 Methodology

For this study, 13 native Mandarin speakers from Zhengzhou, Henan Province attending the University of Western Ontario were asked to participate in individual interviews conducted in Mandarin Chinese. All speakers were aged 18-22 and had spent at least 15 years living in Zhengzhou. There were nine men and four women. Each interview lasted for 10-15 minutes.

The participants were each asked a series of five questions. Firstly, each participant was to mention whether he or she was introverted or extroverted, and whether he or she smoked. The participants were then asked to describe a particularly dangerous or life-threatening event from their past. Fourthly, they were asked to tell a story of memorable shopping experience from China, especially one involving conflict with a shopkeeper. Finally, they were asked to construct eleven sentences, each including an integer from 25-35.

The first question was phrased as “Are you introverted or extroverted? For example, how talkative are you with new acquaintances?” The purpose of this question was to gain a self-assessment of the participants' character type. Since rhotacization is stigmatized as being a marker of rurality, low social class, and lack of education, the men who choose use it may be considered to be crude and unrestrained. Many Chinese people remark that erhua is a particularly masculine feature, and mention that the men in the North are bigger and gruffer. While there is no way to empirically test for a variable as abstract as gradable masculinity, speakers who are more open may be less concerned with receiving negative judgment from others. Smoking is also strongly associated with masculinity in China, with the majority of men being smokers. Extrovertedness

was ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very introverted and 5 being very extroverted.

The third question was included to elicit for natural speech, especially the discourse marker jiushi. Each participant told a fairly involved story involving a personal near-death experience. Each participant produced several utterances of *jiushi* among many other tokens.

The fourth question was designed to elicit for *duoshao*, "how much?" and dangshi ("at the time"). Participants described a particularly memorable conflict with a shopkeeper in China. All participants described asking for prices using *duoshao* and several expressed some regret with *dangshi*.

The purpose of the fifth question was to elicit for *ershi* "twenty" and sanshi "thirty." While constructing each sentence, participants generally said the number once before the sentence and once mid-sententially. Non-sentential utterances were not counted, but any utterance that could be interpreted as part of a phrase was counted. Since *ershi* was the only environment in which rhotic lenition would take effect immediately following another rhotic sound, it was important to capture and contrast this token with sanshi.

At the end of the interview, if there were common tokens unsaid, the participants were prompted to say a sentence with a particular word. For instance, eliciting for duoshao, an effective question was "How do you ask for a price?" Speakers generally answered with *zhege dongxi duoshao qian* ("How much does this stuff cost?").

Following the interviews, I listened to each recording, scanning for all lenited and deleted tokens—not only instances of rhotic lenition. For each token, each speaker had two categories: lenited and non-lenited. All utterances of potentially lenitable tokens were recorded, whether they were said using a standard pronunciation or using a lenited form.

Upon counting the tokens, two token categories became apparent based on phonological environment: syllables with the null medial [ɻ̩] and those with the medial vowel [a]. Since the high-frequency tokens *jiushi*, *ershi*, and *sanshi* were the ones most elicited for, a new category was made specifically to look at these tokens. A category was also made to consider all tokens. Instances of non-rhotic lenition or deletion were not included in any of the four token categories. The percentage of lenited utterances was calculated for all individuals in all four categories.

3.2 Methodological Considerations: words

There is continuous debate among Chinese linguists regarding the existence of the word in Chinese. It has been argued (Duanmu 2000) that Chinese has neither derivational morphology nor words in the traditional sense. In fact, the word *ci* ("word") did not exist in the Chinese language until the 19th century. While many of the tokens examined in this study (e.g. *bushi*, *buzhidao*) do not necessarily conform to the Western idea of a word, for the sake of simplicity this paper will nevertheless refer to them as words. Although it may appear to be logically

circular to state that lenition only happens within a word and that the tokens that this study considers to be words all include lenitable consonants, there is in fact reason for making this distinction. Words such as *shi* ("ten") or *shitou* ("rock") are never lenited unless incorporated into a larger word. In turn, words such as *zhidao* ("to know") following random words are not candidates for lenition; for example, *wo zhidao* ("I know") can never lenite. Thus, there needs to be some lexical boundary in which consonants can undergo lenition. This paper will refer to utterances within these boundaries as words. I will not attempt to answer this problem, but only acknowledge that there is some lexical constraint on lenition in Mandarin Chinese.

3.3 Methodological considerations: lenition and syllable deletion in *ershi*

Like all lenition, rhotic lenition is a phonological process of manner in which a consonant is pronounced as a more sonorous sound. It often occurs in and facilitates rapid speech, in much the same way as deletion.

In the recordings from this study, the majority of utterances of the word ershi, "twenty," are pronounced ambiguously. In these utterances, the distinction between er and ershi is inaudible; the entire syllable seems deleted. This is due to the the first and second syllables both beginning with the retroflex approximant [ɻ]. This ambiguity is particularly evident in phrases such as ershi liu. By examining the phonetics of seemingly deleted syllables alone, one cannot make a strong case for lenition.

Traditional Chinese phonological inventories interpret the vowel in the word shi as an close-central unrounded vowel (Cheng 1973). This vowel is seen following these initials: [s], [ʂ], [tʂ], [tʂh], and [ɻ].A traditional phonological approach to syllable deletion would use the rules in (4) and (5) to account for the process in (6), and (3) to explain (7):

(4)	*[ʂ] deletion rule	[ʂ] → ∅ / φ__
(5)	*Nonfreestanding [ɨ] rule	[ɨ] → ∅ / #__
(6)	*Deletion	1. /əɻ.ʂɨ / → /əɻ.ɨ/
		2. /əɻ.ɨ / → [əɻ]
(7)	Rhotic lenition	/əɻ.ʂɨ / → [əɻ.ɻɨ]

While this explanation seems to explain the missing syllable, it does provide any underlying reason. The rules are created simply to explain the data and give no motivation for the deletion, especially in the face of variation. Although variation is seen in the ershi token, this topical description provides no common motivation for deletion and rhotic lenition. It describes everything but explains nothing. Furthermore, the vowel [ɨ] but this vowel would be the only close vowel in Mandarin Chinese that can exist with but not without an initial. Again, there is no explanation; Mandarin Chinese vowels are syllabic and, with

exception to ɨ, are all able to exist on their own. This analysis has more than one flaw.

Rather, an alternative explanation is to consider syllable structure, the unspecified initial [Ø] and the null medial [ʐ̩] (Duanmu 1990). [ʐ̩] describes a continuation of the sound produced by any of [s], [ʂ], [tʂ], [tʂʰ], or [ɻ̩]. It cannot exist without an corresponding initial.

In his account of vowel rhotacization, Duanmu proposes that [ɻ̩] can occupy both medial and final positions simultaneously: "[r] has a syllabic template and becomes [Ør:]. When used as a suffix, [r] has no independent syllabic template, so it replaces the last segment of the root" (Duanmu 1990). According to Duanmu, there are two types of [ɻ̩]: one is syllabic and one is not. He explains that the motivation for affixing is that an [ɻ̩] is not syllabic and must move to attach to another syllable; i.e. in affixation an isolated [ɻ̩] is motivated by a lack of syllabic medial. Thus, it is possible for an [ɻ̩] to occupy the initial, medial, or final position in a syllable. Using Duanmu's notation, the word er could be written as either [ɻ̩] or [ɻ̩̩] (i.e. [ɻ̩ː]), rather than [əɻ̩]. Consider reinterpreting (6) and (7) as a single rule in (8):

(8) Rhotic lenition (deleted syllable)

1. /ɻ̩.ʂʐ̩/ → /ɻ̩.̩ɻʐ̩/
2. /ɻ̩.̩ɻʐ̩/ → /ɻ̩̩.ʐ̩/
3. /ɻ̩.̩ɻʐ̩/ → [Øɻ̩ː]

To justify the rhotacization in (8), we must make some assumptions. Firstly, Duanmu (1990) states that in when rhotacizing, [ɻ̩] is nonsyllabic. If [ɻ̩] is nonsyllabic, and [ʐ̩] is a continuation of the preceding initial, [ʐ̩] would be the continuation of a nonsyllabic syllable. Therefore, in the nonsyllabic syllable [ɻʐ̩], [ɻ̩] would have motivation to attach to the preceding syllable. In the case of ershi, the preceding syllable has a syllabic [ɻ̩] and can accommodate another [ɻ̩] to become realized as [Øɻ̩ː]. The stranded [ʐ̩] will delete, being a continuation of a non-present initial.

It is due to this explanation that it is important to make the distinction between lenition and rhotic lenition, for the rules of rhotacization still apply to rhotic lenition, while they do not apply to regular lenition. However, to account for variation, it could be argued that they do not apply obligatorily. While the majority of utterances of ershi liu are realized as er liu (indicating a deleted syllable), this pronunciation is not completely ubiquitous. There exists variation in the token utterances. In cases where ershi liu seems pronounced erri liu, the following explanation would be sufficient. (9) is the result of the lenition process in (8) in which the [ɻ̩] is not obligatorily nonsyllabic.

(9) Rhotic lenition (deleted syllable)
1. /ɻ.ʂz̩/ → /ɻ.ɻz̩/
2. /ɻ.ɻz̩/ → /ɻ.ɻz̩/
3. /ɻ.ɻz̩/ → [Øɻː.ɻz̩]

The ambiguity between the end products of (8) and (9) is a result of being unable to distinguish [Øɻː] from [Øɻː.ɻz̩] (i.e. [Øɻɻ] from [Øɻɻ.ɻɻ]). The only audible distinction is the length of the utterance. Since the lenited tokens are usually found in rapid speech, it is not always possible to make the distinction between the end products of (8) and (9). However, since both results can be explained as processes of rhotic lenition, they should produce accurate results for the study.

The biggest criticism to this approach is that one could ask why rhotic lenition only causes affixing following a syllable ending in [ɻ]. Following obligatory affixing rules, this process should cause r-colouring of all syllables. This can be explained by the fact that the syllable [Øɻː] is already r-coloured, and pressure from prosody is a motivation for the initial [ɻ]to assimilate and attach to the preceding syllable. The finding of more r-coloured syllables besides [Øɻː] that cause rhotic lenition could prove this hypothesis.

4.1 Results: Environment

The gathered data show that rhotic utterances occur in the following base-form words: *ershi* (IPA: [ɻ.ʂz̩], translation: “twenty”), *sanshi* ([san.ʂz̩], “thirty”), *jiushi* ([tsiʊ̯.ʂz̩]“precisely”), *haishi* ([hai.ʂz̩], “still is”), kaishi (kai.ʂz̩, “to start”), dangshi (daŋ.ʂz̩, “at the time”), doushi ([doʊ̯.ʂz̩], all are), *bushi* ([pu.ʂz̩], “is not”), *xiaoshihou* ([ɕiaʊ̯.ʂz̩.hoʊ̯], “as a child”), *buzhidao* ([pu.tʂz̩.taʊ̯], “to not know”), jibenshang ([tɕi.pən.ʂaŋ], “basically”), wanshang ([wan.ʂaŋ], “night”), jiachang ([ɕia.tʂhaŋ), *tianshang* (in the sky), and *duoshao* ([tuo.ʂaʊ̯] how many). Because all of these tokens can be produced with or without lenition, they occur in variation. Lexically, these words do not have any common features except that they tend not to be nominal; linguistically, the immediate environment of this phenomenon can largely be attributed to phonological in addition to lexical constraints.

As shown in the data above, all of the token utterances are multisyllabic and begin their second or third syllables with a retroflex sibilant [ʂ], [tʂ] or [tʂh]. These sounds are always initials; the medial vowel of the corresponding syllable is always bare [z̩], or [a]. If the syllable is bare, there syllable has is no final; if the medial is [a], the final is either [ʊ̯] or [ŋ].

Thus, the data show that rhotic lenition only occurs in an initial retroflex syllabant following a ; i.e. the following:

3)[1] [+retroflex] [+retoflex]
[+sibilant] → [–sibilant] / σ__
[–rhotic] [+rhotic]

The only possible consonants that undergo lenition occur in the initials of the following syllables: , [ʂʐ], [tʂʐ], [ʂaŋ], [tʂhaŋ], and [ʂaʊ̯], and they must be preceded by a stress. Tone is not a significant factor in determining which sounds can potentially be lenited by Henan Mandarin speakers, but future research could investigate the role of tone, stress and intensity on the variation of these sounds.

4.2 Results: Variation

A total of 332 token utterances were counted over 17 different words. 16 of the tokens involved retroflex rhotic lenition; the remaining token (*dongxi*) saw alveolo-palatal deletion. This token was not included in numeric results, but offers interesting insight into the nature of deletion. Lenition is a change of manner in a consonant to a more sonorant sound, but it does not necessarily account for a change of place. Rhotic lenition appears to only occur in retroflex tokens because the rhotic approximant in Chinese happens to be retroflex as well. In Mandarin Chinese, the sibilant [ɕ] is the most sonorant alveolo-palatal consonant. Therefore, the sibilant in *dongxi* ([toŋ.ɕi]), in an attempt to lenite, has no option but to change to to Ø and is deleted. Therefore, all realized lenition in Mandarin Chinese seen by this study is rhotic in nature.

Among men, there was sharp divide between their percentages of lenited token utterances. Among instances of high-frequency tokens, the extroverted men tended to lenite 25% more than the introverted men. The men who were smokers tended to lenite 22.5% more than the non-smokers. And the extroverted men tended to be smokers (83%). In general, there was a divide between two groups of male speakers, which roughly corresponded both with both smoking and extroversion. There were no men who rhotacized between 18% and 35%. All male participants either had a heavy r-sounding accent with 35-43% rhotacized, or 0-18%.

[1] Since this analysis is grounded in syllable structure (Duanmu 2000), and lenition always at the beginning of a second or syllable in word, word boundaries are inadequate to describe this environment. I have used σ rather than # to explain this process more accurately.

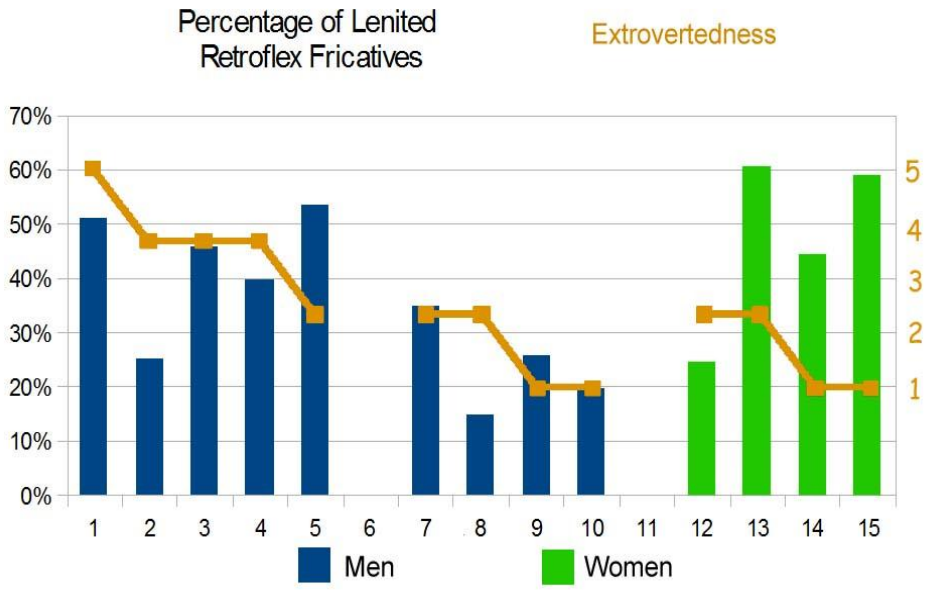

Figure 1.

This chart (Figure 1) compares the extrovertedness of the interviewed men and women with their total percentage of lenited token utterances. An apparent correlation is seen between extroversion and rhotacization in men.

Surprisingly, from this data, women from Zhengzhou tend to use rhotic lenition more often than men.

The following chart (Figure 2) displays the total number of token words uttered by each speaker involving the null medial [ʐ] "buzz" and the medial vowel [a].

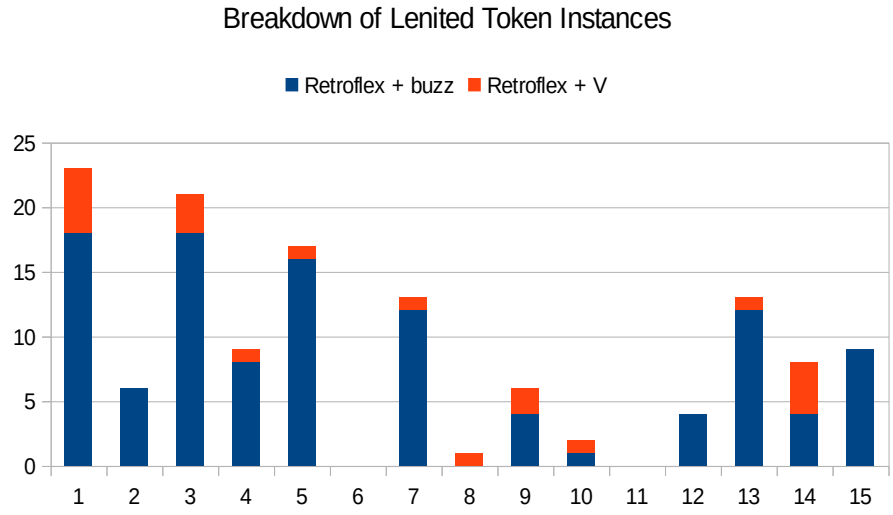

Figure 2.

In general, the more extroverted speakers spoke more than the introverted speakers. This may have had some effect on the data. The vast majority of tokens were [ʐ] party because the methodology elicited for them specifically, partly because they are common, and partly because there are more words that can be rhotacized with medial [ʐ] than with medial [a]. It is interesting that some speakers only lenite initials in words with certain types of medials. Further research could be done on a larger scale to see if this could be a significant factor.

4.3 Analysis

The data show that there is a strong distinction between the rhotacizing tendencies of two groups of Zhengzhou men. In general, the group that tends to rhotacize more also tends to smoke and be more extroverted. In Northern China, extroversion, smoking, and rhotacization are all signs of an unrestrained attitude affiliated with masculinity and social power.

Let us compare the social identity created by this sociolinguistic behaviour with that of using vowel rhotacization in excess. While an over-rhotacizing speaker from the North of China living in Zhengzhou necessarily violates the limit imposed by Standard Mandarin of which words should be r-affixed, a highly-leniting speaker will not violate any sociolinguistic norms. Using a high amount of rhotacization is likely to be interpreted as excessive (i.e. over-rhotacization), but there is no limit or gauge of excess for rhotic lenition. Language, after all, is a unifying force which can link several arbitrary identity traits together:

"That language is seen as a unifying force should be clear. Language assumes the character of a clear identity marker […] Yet, language is only one identity marker among others […] If feathers are predictive of beaks, eggs, and an ability to fly, so is a specific language predictive of a distinct history and culture." (Foucault, 1972)

In this light, it is natural that the production of variables with sociolinguistic weight will work to homogenize a speaker as either an included or excluded member of a group identity. While not as overt as vowel rhotacization, consonant rhotacization functions to establish the speaker as a member of a similar—but distinct—character type: one that includes a sense of local, urban unrestraint and a particularly masculine social dominance. Those who choose not to use rhotic lenition are instead associated with non-local attributes particular to the South of China and international communities, in line with Zhang (2008), which may be associated with being prestigious and refined.

While the sample of women from this study was too small to make any definite conclusions about women and rhotacization in Zhengzhou, their speech and personality were drastically different from the men; there was also much variation among so few speakers. It may be said that the unrestrained character type is not associated with women, who have different social expectations. Thus,

the sociolinguistic role of rhotic lenition is different between women and men.

4.4 Conclusion

By taking into consideration the roles of two sociolinguistic variables, and by contrasting their respective ideologies, it is possible to understand the way in which they are associated with character type. The capital of Henan Province, Zhengzhou is home to a particularly interesting variety of Mandarin Chinese: one that displays widespread rhotic lenition in the face of the stigmatization of vowel rhotacization. The result, among men, is a significant discrepancy between those who choose to lenite retroflex sibilants and those who choose not to. They are not just choosing between the sound of a tongue; they are choosing how they present themselves to the world.

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