

## Near-Merger Revisited: *ferry* and *furry* in Philadelphia

Near-mergers – the situation in which speakers produce two sounds differently, but consistently report them to be “the same” – have long been a puzzling topic. They call into question the assumption that linguistic contrasts are discrete and binary, and that production and perception are symmetrical (Labov, Karan and Miller 1991).

This paper examines the phonological status of stressed /er/ and /<sup>^</sup>r/ in Philadelphia, twenty-five years after it was first studied in the Linguistic Change and Variation project (reported in Labov 1994). With the benefit of at least thirty years’ study of near-mergers we were able to conduct what is to our knowledge the first study of /er/ and /<sup>^</sup>r/ in real time. Our new data are taken from a year-long study of a conservative white speech community in Roxborough, a lower middle class neighborhood in north-west Philadelphia.

Near-mergers are classically defined as filling the fourth logically-possible cell in a table comparing speakers’ production to their perception, cell *b* below (Labov 1994):

		Spoken	
		Same	Different
J u d g e d	Same	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>
	Different	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>

Table 1: Judgements on production and perception

Previous studies of lax-tense mergers in Utah (Di Paolo and Faber 1990), /oh/ vs. /ohr/ in New York City (Labov, Yaeger and Steiner 1972), and /ihr/ and /ehr/ in Norwich (Trudgill 1974), *inter alia*, have contributed to our understanding of near-mergers, and defined several characteristics of the phenomenon. Two characteristics are specifically relevant to our study: (i) even in minimal pair tests speakers judge the sounds to be the same, and consequently fail commutation tests; (ii) there is individual variation within the community – some speakers show a complete merger, others a distinction, and still others a near-merger. We took these characteristics as axiomatic in designing our study. The first was used as the methodology for detecting near-mergers (if a speaker had failed a commutation test while showing a clear phonetic difference between the phonemes, s/he would have been classified as having a near-merger). The second was known to be true of /er/ and /<sup>^</sup>r/ in Philadelphia from at least one previous study, and thus served as our null hypothesis. In particular, Labov (1994: 398) found that 6 Philadelphia speakers out of 21 fell into cell *b* with the remaining 15 in cells *a* and *d*.

Contrary to our expectations, the cell *b* speakers found by Labov have disappeared from this sample (N=16): the speakers either have a full merger (cell *a*) or a clear split (cell *d*). Our results suggest that the confused situation found previously in Philadelphia with respect to *ferry* and *furry* is being resolved, with age being the most important independent variable: 3 of our 4 speakers under 35 had the phonemes separate and 11 of our 12 speakers older than 35 showed the merger. In addition to this, there is a gender effect: all the speakers with separate phonemes were women. Since young women have

been found to be leaders in many linguistic changes (Labov 1990, among others), we conclude that their behavior with regard to *ferry* and *furry* may be an indication of the destiny of this near-merger in the community.

## References

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