

How strong was the (linguistic) prescription? Influences of inherited accents on Transatlantic speech

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Abstract. How did the Transatlantic accent, an artificial blend of features from American and British dialects, persist among members of the educated class in America for the better part of the twentieth century? While there are many popular resources on the history and features of the accent, there exists little to no academic literature on this question. In this paper, we present two data sets, collected from analysis of videos of speakers considered Transatlantic, that can help solve the problem of the Transatlantic phenomenon. First, speakers not from New England (where a non-rhotic accent has dominated) are more likely to exhibit rhoticity, even in “Transatlantic” speech. Second, “Transatlantic” speakers do not consistently follow the codified rules of the accent. We conclude that the Transatlantic accent persisted because a non-rhotic accent was already present in New England and because its speakers did not consistently follow its own rules.

Keywords. Transatlantic accent; Mid-Atlantic accent; linguistic prescription

1. Introduction. Fans of early- to mid-twentieth century films will notice something strange about many actors’ accents: it sounds like they are speaking British English, even though they are definitely from America. Fans (including us) who dig into this phenomenon will discover that the accent is called the “Transatlantic” or “Mid-Atlantic”² accent. A blend of British and American accents, it was taught to actors and other members of the educated class, such as politicians, across the country. Its rules were codified in books such as Daggett’s *Spoken Word Course* (1924) and Edith Skinner’s *Speak With Distinction* (1942).

In this paper, we will argue that many speakers traditionally considered Transatlantic habitually broke many of these rules, and we present evidence that this may be explained, in part, by the speakers’ inherited accents, particularly from New England. We also argue that the fact that Transatlantic speakers regularly broke the accent’s rules explains the accent’s persistence, despite being an artificial accent with no government support.

2. Previous research. There are many online resources in the forms of YouTube videos or magazine articles on the Transatlantic accent for a popular audience (e.g., LetThemTalkTV 2022; Keizer 2023). Yet, there exists comparatively little academic literature analyzing the usage of the Transatlantic accent, as opposed to merely comparing accents “across the Atlantic”, that is, comparing American and British accents. Indeed, Joe Salmons has remarked to us (personal communication) that the Wikipedia page may currently be the best source of information.

Notably, Elliott (2000) and Boberg (2018) analyze the use of non-rhoticity in twentieth-century American film and attribute its decline to a decline in prestige. However, they do not situate their analysis of this feature within the Transatlantic accent as a whole.

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² Note that “Mid-Atlantic” here is unrelated to what Labov *et al.* (2006) call “Mid-Atlantic”.

3. History and distinguishing characteristics of the Transatlantic accent. Deacon (2007) details how the accent was constructed by a language teacher named William Tilly out of an amalgamation of American and British features to be a “World English” free of dialectal impurities. (Tilly himself was Australian.) Pitts (1986) notes that one feature of the accent, yod-retention, “has apparently been favored for a long time by elocution instructors teaching elegant speech”.

There are several primary sources detailing features characteristic of the Transatlantic accent, most notably Skinner’s *Speak With Distinction* (1942). Many of these rules went against the standard American dialect of the time. Four examples, as prescribed in *Speak With Distinction*, are

- *non-rhoticity*, or lack of the /r/ sound, at the ends of syllables in words like *farther* “because of the forward, released vocal energy that comes from keeping the tip of your tongue free of tension” (Skinner 1942:169);
- retention of the *yod*, or the /j/ sound, before the /u:/ in words like *new* and *tune*; however, in many words, such as *suit* and *lute*, it was deemed optional (Skinner 1942:116);
- the WINE-WHINE *distinction*, or the tendency to pronounce the *w* in words like *wine* as /w/ and the *wh* in words like *whine* as /ɹ/ (Skinner 1942:305); and
- HAPPY-*laxing*, or the tendency to pronounce the *y* at the end of words like *happy* (or even the *ay* of *Tuesday*) as /ɪ/, a “bright, crisp vowel [that] has been called ‘the diamond of good speech’” (Skinner 1942:61).

However, New England accents, especially upper-class ones, tended and still do tend to keep certain features of typically British (that is, Received Pronunciation) speech, such as non-rhoticity (“Hah-vahd Yahd”). Therefore, we hypothesize that one of the reasons the Transatlantic accent was able to catch on as quickly and as widely as it did was that it took advantage of posh features already present in a prestigious accent based mainly in New England.

4. Collection of the data. We selected 18 individuals characterized as having a Transatlantic accent by the Wikipedia article (*Mid-Atlantic Accent* n.d.). Seven of these people were born in New England; the rest were from elsewhere. We excluded non-native speakers of English (e.g., Ingrid Bergman, whose first languages were Swedish and German) or speakers of English born in countries other than the United States (e.g., Cary Grant, who born in Bristol, England, even though he later moved to America). For each person, we consulted at least one archived audio from a YouTube video. For actors, we obtained a video from a movie they starred in (e.g., a clip from *Now, Voyager* for Bette Davis). For non-actors, we aimed to obtain a video from a setting the person was most known for. For example, we selected a clip from a political debate for political commentator William F. Buckley, Jr. and a clip from the TV show *The French Chef* for chef and television personality Julia Child.

For each audio, we performed an impressionistic analysis, recording on an operationalized scale of 1 to 5 the approximate extent to which the speaker followed each of the four rules. For ease of summarizing the data, we considered speakers who were rated 1-2 on a rule to “not follow” that rule; speakers who were rated 4-5 on a rule “followed” the rule.

5. Summary of the data.

5.1. NON-RHOTICITY. In our data set, 74% of those not from New England tend to display non-rhoticity; in comparison, a greater proportion (83%) of those who did originate from New England used non-rhoticity in their speech (Figure 1).

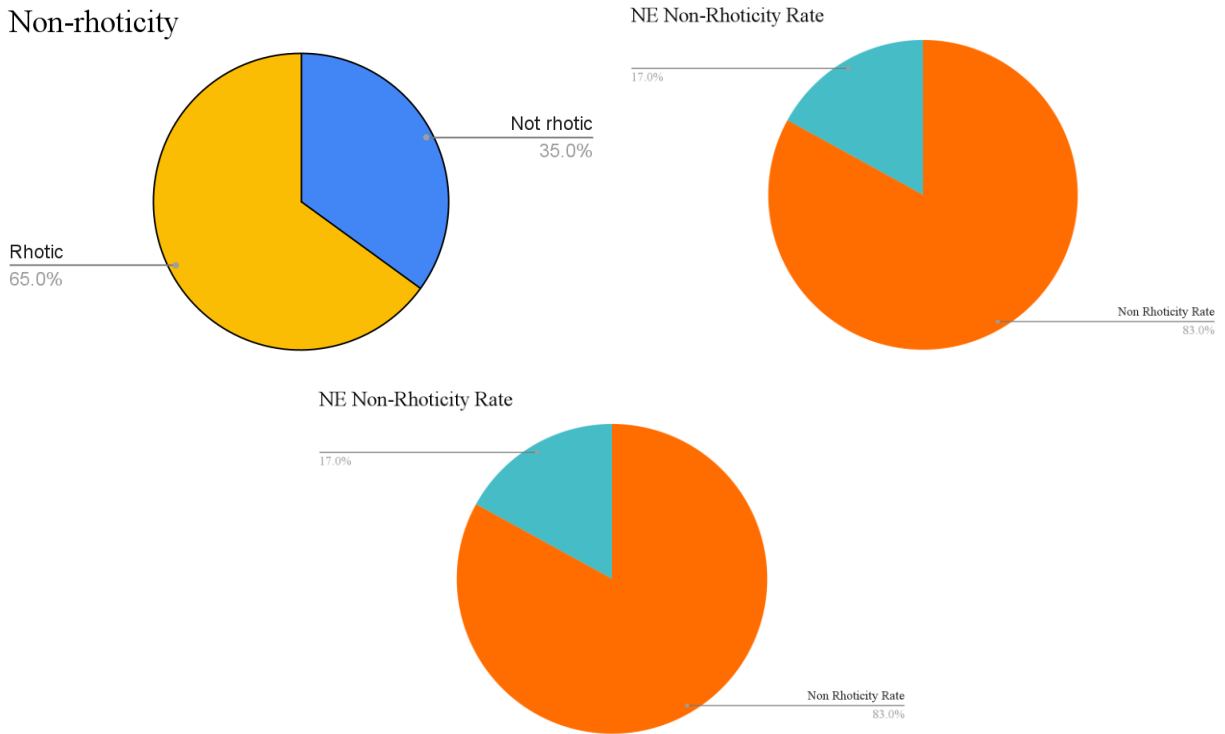
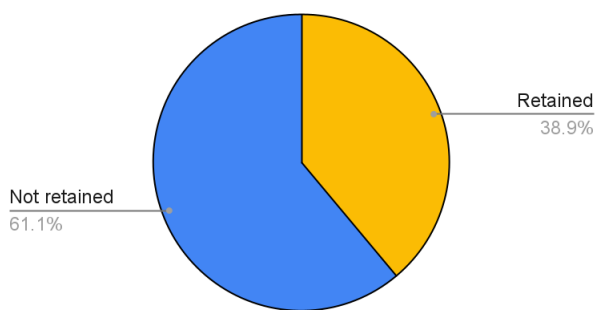


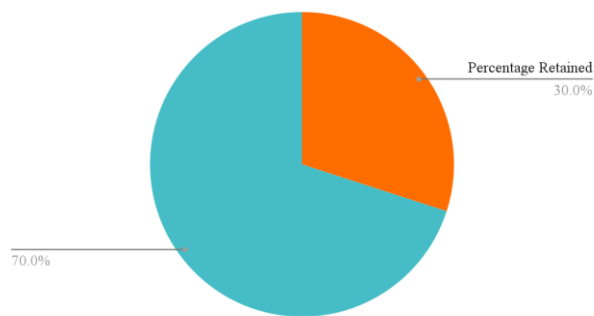
Figure 1. Percent of speakers whose speech was non-rhotic: overall (blue/yellow), from New England (NE, orange/green), and not from New England (NNE, orange/green).

5.2. YOD-RETENTION. This feature was absent in most speakers from our data set, regardless of where they originated from. This rule of the Transatlantic accent seems to be commonly broken, which is not surprising, given that it was considered optional in many words in *Speak With Distinction* (Figure 2).

Yod-retention



NE Yod Retention Rate



NNE Yod Retention Rate

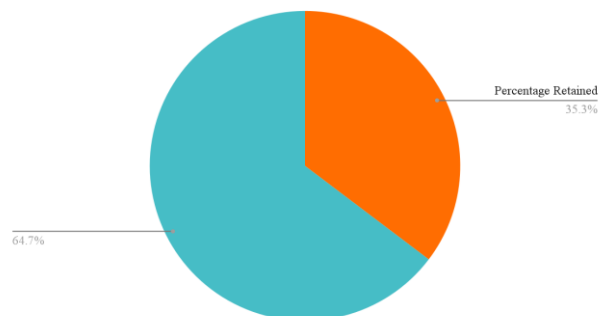
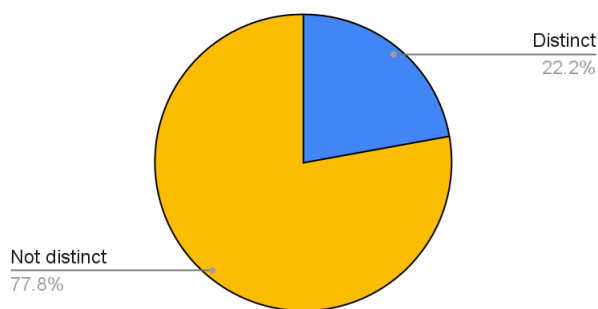


Figure 2. Percent of speakers who retained the yod.

5.3. WINE-WHINE DISTINCTION. The WINE-WHINE distinction does not seem to be prevalent within the speakers in the data set; rather, those who follow this “rule” seem to be outliers rather than representatives of speakers with the Transatlantic accent. So, while the rule was indeed prescribed, the actual distinction seems sparse in practice. The prescriptivism surrounding the WINE-WHINE distinction seems to be low compared to other rules of the Transatlantic accent (Figure 3).

Wine-whine distinction



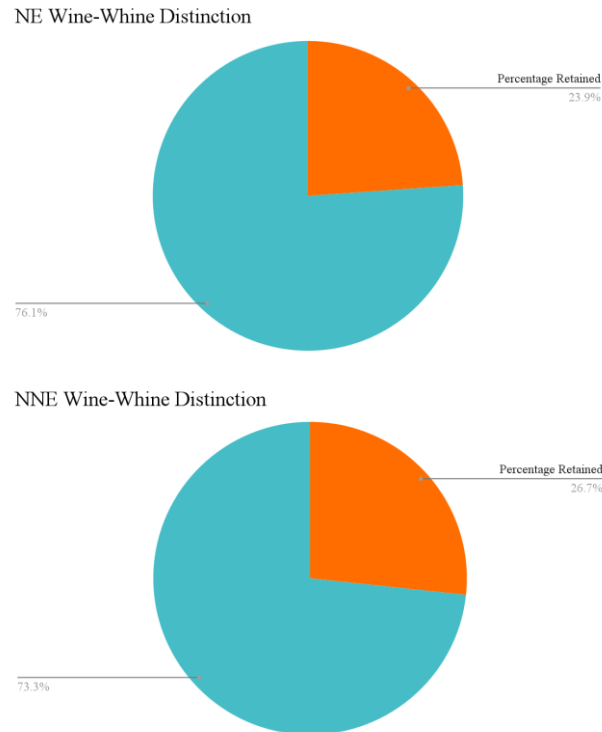
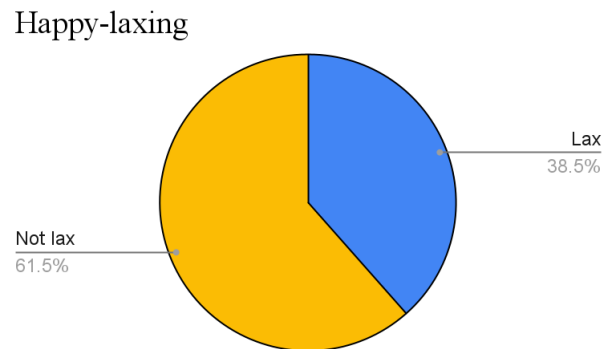


Figure 3. Percent of speakers who retain the WINE-WHINE distinction.

5.4. HAPPY-LAXING. The results coming from the data set on this point seem to be rather mixed. The speakers within each region are split roughly 40% laxing versus 60% tensing, and there is no significant difference in these proportions across regions. It seems as though very few speakers HAPPY-lax all of their words; rather, they select certain words to HAPPY-lax. This can lead to scenarios where the same word is both laxed and tensed in the same sentence, making the analysis more difficult due to its impressionistic nature.



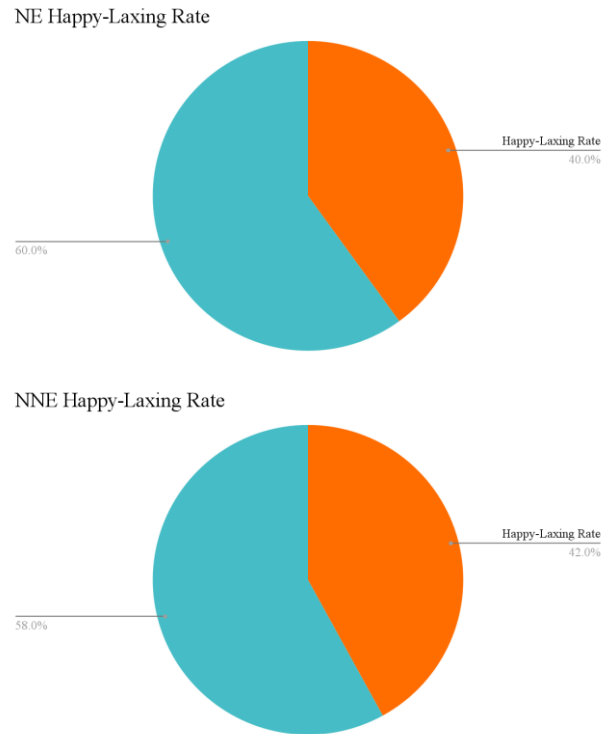


Figure 4. Percent of speakers who display HAPPY-laxing.

6. Individual profiles. In this section, we profile three individuals whom we believe to collectively represent much of the variation of prescription-following and breaking seen in our dataset. Notably, we see that not one of them consistently follows, or fails to follow, all four prescriptions chosen for this study.

6.1. WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR. Political commentator William F. Buckley, Jr. was born and raised in New York City, and he is fairly representative of Transatlantic speakers from that region. In a debate with fellow Transatlanticist Gore Vidal (Thomas G. 2012), he is consistently non-rhotic (as one would expect most New Yorkers to be) and received a score of 5 for this feature. However, he is much less consistent with HAPPY-laxing, laxing the final syllable *dearly* (at the 0:53 mark in the YouTube video) and then tensing that of *immediately* a mere six seconds later. This flip-flopping earned him a score of 3 for HAPPY-laxing. Yet, like most of the speakers from New England, he does not distinguish between WINE and WHINE or retain the yod.

6.2. JULIA CHILD. In contrast, it is harder to find representatives of non-New-Englanders because they vary so much more in which features they do and don't display. Two examples will have to suffice, the first of which is chef and TV star Julia Child, from Pasadena, California. In an episode of the cooking show *The French Chef* (Julia Child on PBS 2022), she displays neither non-rhoticity nor yod-retention nor the WINE-WHINE distinction. However, she still fairly regularly HAPPY-laxes (for example, in *quickly* at the 4:05 mark) and so earned a 4 for that feature.

One interesting feature of Child's speech is her "hard" /t/ sound in words like *butter* (for example, at 0:18) where most Americans would flap it or perhaps reduce to a glottal stop. But this was not one of the features we analyzed for this study.

6.3. **MARIANNE WILLIAMSON.** It may seem somewhat anachronistic to include author and presidential candidate Marianne Williamson, who was born in 1952 in Houston, Texas, in this data set. Nevertheless, she has been said to have “a mid-Atlantic accent that makes her sound as if she has walked straight off the set of a Cary Grant movie” (Mahdawi 2019), so she is included here. While she is consistently non-rhotic and retains the yod, she neither distinguishes between WINE and WHINE nor HAPPY-laxes. She therefore earned a 5 on the first two features and a 1 on the last two. It’s interesting to note that someone who only displayed two out of four Transatlantic features was still called Transatlantic by the media. Does “Transatlantic” today merely mean non-rhotic and non-New-England?

7. Analysis. Yod-retention and the WINE-WHINE distinction seem to be unpopular among speakers, no matter where they come from. The speakers are more divided when it comes to non-rhoticity and HAPPY-laxing. However, the speakers’ birthplaces—and therefore the accent the speakers were surrounded by—can help explain these divisions. New Englanders, who acquired an already non-rhotic accent, were more likely to use it in Transatlantic speech, and this may have influenced their tendency to use HAPPY-tensing, too.

However, a more important observation to take away here is that many prescriptions, in particular yod-retention and the WINE-WHINE distinction (and, to a lesser extent, HAPPY-laxing), were in fact broken by both New Englanders and non-New-Englanders. This casts doubt on the popular conception of the Transatlantic accent as a highly prescribed accent. Yes, the rules were indeed “set in stone” (for example, in *Speak With Distinction*) and subsequently taught to perhaps millions of actors and orator and others, but the rules evidently did not take root in the speakers’ minds, or at least not enough to dominate their Hollywood movies, their talk-show interviews, or their political speeches.

This fact, then, answers a question some linguists, such as Salmons (personal communication), have raised: How was the Transatlantic accent able to dominate some parts of the upper-class speech for the better part of the twentieth century? It makes sense that Received Pronunciation, though artificial, should have reigned over the British upper class; after all, it received vigorous government support and was heard on BBC radio across the country. But none of this is true for the Transatlantic accent, so how did it survive? The answer emerging here is that it did not; that is, its supposed speakers did not consistently use its defining features. Unlike Received Pronunciation, which survived the twentieth century with many of its features intact, the Transatlantic accent, as it was actually spoken in movies, TV, and radio, survived in a radically altered form, with the only rule that we analyzed taking hold among the majority of speakers being non-rhoticity (which just so happened to be a rule shared by an already influential New England accent).

8. Future research. How could future research on the Transatlantic accent proceed? The most obvious way to go is to analyze more speakers and more features (for example, the “hard” /t/ as noted with Julia Child). These additional speakers could be broken up into more specific categories than “born in New England” versus “not born in New England”; for example, the location of the universities they attended. This would be important data to keep track of because the Transatlantic accent is thought to have persisted mainly in schools.

Also interesting to study would be modern perceptions of the Transatlantic accent. For example, as previously noted, Marianne Williamson has been said to have a Transatlantic accent, yet under our analysis, she displayed few of the accent’s characteristics. Furthermore, several fictional characters have features of the Transatlantic accent, and this accent seems to have been

chosen specifically to match their character, such as the devilish Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons* or the snobbish Major Winchester from *M*A*S*H* (Mid-Atlantic Accent n.d.). Analysis could be done on these characters to determine how many traditionally Transatlantic features they retain.

9. Conclusion. The Transatlantic accent has traditionally been conceived as “a consciously learned accent of English ... which blended together features regarded as the most prestigious from both American and British English” (Mid-Atlantic Accent n.d.). If the Transatlantic accent was in fact a purely learned accent, it may come as surprising that it managed to persist for so long, given the vast amount of resources required for such widespread linguistic prescriptivism as well as the complete lack of government support for the accent. However, when we take into account the fact that not all of the Transatlantic rules were consistently followed by all speakers considered Transatlantic, and that features such as non-rhoticity were already commonplace among speakers from New England, the Transatlantic phenomenon may appear a bit more explicable.

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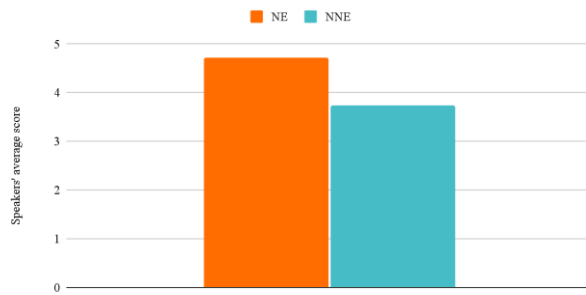
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Appendix: Average scores (1 to 5) by feature and region

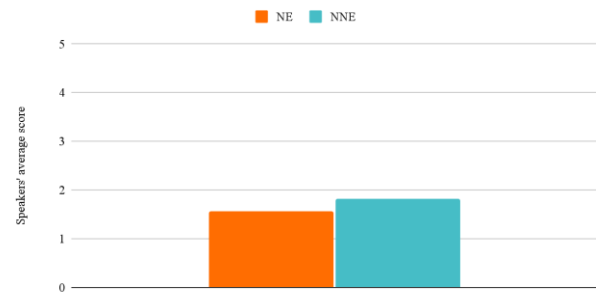
Non-rhoticity

1 = least rhotic, 5 = more rhotic



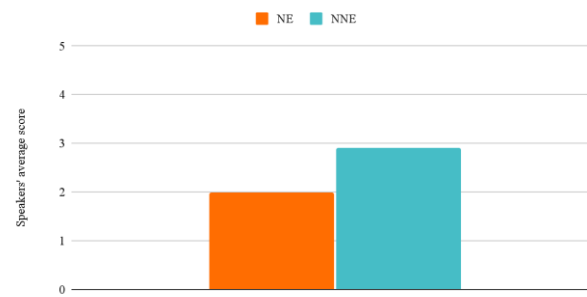
Wine-white distinction

1 = least distinct, 5 = most distinct



Happy-laxing

1 = never lax, 5 = always lax



Yod retention

1 = never retained, 5 = always retained

