

R is for Rural: phonologically constructing the rural other in Southern England

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In 2011, Michael Woods argued that “rurality is ... a social construct ... an imagined entity that is brought into being by particular discourses of rurality that are produced, reproduced and contested by academics, the media, policy-makers, rural lobby groups and ordinary individuals. The rural is therefore a ‘category of thought’” (2011:9). In this paper, I show how, through a circuit of the emergence, circulation and reproduction of ideological discourses (Phillips, Fish and Agg 2001), Southern English rurality is constructed and reproduced through the strategic deployment in TV, in film, in song and in other media of **rhoticity**, the realisation of non-prevocalic /r/ in words such as ‘farm’ and ‘car’.

Rhoticity is a rather rapidly obsolescing phonological characteristic of the English rural South-West (and, appears today to be more robustly preserved in the area’s larger urban areas, such as Bristol). In other areas of the rural South of England, such as East Anglia, it died out well over a century ago (Ellis 1889). Despite the waning use of rhoticity in the South-West, however, comedians, film-makers, and dramatists still routinely recruit rhoticity to phonologically construct the peripheral ‘South-West’. Characters that we are urged to read as from this area, especially old ones in pastoral occupations, especially those without a long formal education, are routinely portrayed with rhotic accents. These deployments are, furthermore, also deeply classed – the rhotic are blue-collared, not white.

The ideological circuit has led to the association of rhoticity as being *iconically* rural. Rhoticity has, therefore, been deployed to construct *any* such older, less educated rural character, wherever they come from in the south of England and whether or not their character comes from a part of England where rhoticity can still be found. Examples from TV drama, comedy, film, and the internet will be used to demonstrate how a recessive consonant is put to work to construct and disseminate ideologies of the countryside, ideologies which erase rural linguistic diversity. Such constructions of rurality as these, broadcast regularly into people’s living rooms, strongly shape how people ‘see’, and, ‘hear’, the countryside, despite contestations from academics and from those in the rural South itself.

Ellis, A. (1889). *On Early English Pronunciation: Part V*. London: Truebner and Co.

Phillips, M., Fish, R. and Agg, J. (2001). Putting together ruralities: towards a symbolic analysis of rurality in the British mass media. *Journal of Rural Studies* 17: 1-27.

Woods, M. (2011). *Rural*. London: Routledge.