

LET'S ROLL: RHOTACISMS IN BEIJING MANDARIN¹BY NELINE FLOOR²**ABSTRACT**

*Rhotacism is a well-known feature of Beijing Mandarin. However, it is scarcely accounted for in written language. If mentioned at all, dictionaries and textbooks assume that it has a strong connotation of literal smallness. In my thesis, I investigate how, and in what situations, rhotacism occurs, by analysing cases of rhotacism in a recent recording of Beijing Mandarin. The data shows that the semantics of rhotacism are much richer than often suggested, and reveal an unexpected similarity between the *r* suffix in Mandarin and the Dutch diminutive suffix -tje.*

While in Beijing as an exchange student, I lived on campus in a building called *Shaoyuan*. One day, I met a Chinese student on campus who asked me, ‘*Nǐ zhù zài nǎr?*’ (‘Where do you live?’) I answered, ‘*Wǒ zhù zài Shǎoyuán yī hào lóu.*’ (‘I live in Shaoyuan Building One’). Yet bizarrely enough, the student, who lived on the same campus, had no clue what I was talking about, so I explained to him I was referring to the building for international students. It was not until then that he understood what I was talking about. Of course he knew *Shǎoyuán!*

In the same way, I learned to refer to the gates of the campus as *mér* rather than *mén* because taxi drivers would not recognise *mén* as ‘gate’.

1 This is an abridged version of my MA thesis. A digital version of the complete article is available online (ED NOTE: the full thesis including audio-visual material will soon be published on the *Shilin* website). I am very grateful to my supervisor dr. Jeroen Wiedenhof, who spent a lot of time guiding me through the landscape of Chinese linguistics. Many thanks go to Katharine Feng and Alexander Thomson, who were willing to answer my questions when I needed the advice of a native speaker of Mandarin or English.

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However, I once found myself in a taxi with a driver who was not very fond of the *r* suffix and who complained that so many people from Beijing recklessly used it whenever they pleased. According to him, adding an *r* would imply that the thing referred to was small. He claimed that the use of *r* in *Tiānānmér* was entirely inappropriate, as Tiananmen Square is actually very big. However, there are still many who call the square *Tiānānmér*.

The use of the *r* suffix in Mandarin Chinese is called rhotacism. Rhotacism is prevalent in Beijing speech. Sometimes, the *r* suffix is represented in the character script by either 兒 (in traditional script) or 儿 (its simplified form). However, in most cases, rhotacisms occurring in spoken language are not accounted for in written Chinese, nor mentioned in dictionaries and textbooks.

This has to do with the history of Modern Standard Chinese, which was implemented in the 1950s. This language was not based on spoken language in the first place, but on an artificially constructed written norm. Hence typical colloquial phenomena such as rhotacism are often ignored in official language use.

To investigate the subject of rhotacism, I have therefore transcribed a part of a documentary which provides natural conversations in Beijing Mandarin and thus supplies a wealth of examples of rhotacism (full transcripts and audio files are available online). The part of the documentary which I have transcribed comprises three scenes, showing four different linguistic styles. In Scene One the main character Yú Bō, who is a taxi driver from Beijing, is introduced by a voice-over. Scene Two depicts a semi-natural monologue in which Yú Bō tells about the trials and tribulations of being a taxi driver. In Scene Three a natural conversation between the taxi driver and one of his passengers is recorded, as well as a part of a song. I have investigated how, and in what situations, rhotacisms may occur, by analysing all individual cases of rhotacism in my data.

The *r* suffix is often assumed to have a strong connotation of literal smallness. However, as revealed by the examples of *Sháoyuár* and *Tiānānmér* already, rhotacised nouns often refer to physical objects which are not small at all. My data provides much more examples which show that the semantics of the *r* suffix are richer than often suggested.

Based on my data, I reach the conclusion that there are two phenomena involving the use of *r*, which both may be referred to as rhotacism. My transcription shows that speakers from Beijing often pronounce voiceless retroflexes such as *sh*, *zh*, and *ch* as a voiced retroflex *r*. For example, *bú zhīdào*

‘not know’ is repeatedly realised as *búrdào*. This phonological process I call ‘*r* smoothing’. It has nothing to do with ‘*r* suffixation’, a process in which a whole new morpheme is added to a base form.

In most literature, if mentioned at all, *r* smoothing and *r* suffixation are not clearly distinguished. Consequently, the view on the semantics of the *r* suffix is further clouded. This article considers cases of *r* smoothing and *r* suffixation separately, and thus sheds fresh light on the semantics of rhotacism in general and the *r* suffix in particular.

THE SEMANTICS OF *R* SMOOTHING

Although scarcely documented and rarely written, cases of *r* smoothing are rather common in colloquial speech. In this section, I will briefly treat the semantics of *r* smoothing. As smoothing is mainly a phonological process, my focus will be on the distribution of cases of *r* smoothing in my data.

LITERATURE

In the literature, not much has been said on this type of rhotacism. Only Chao Yuen Ren and Jerry Norman mention *r* smoothing in their sections on weak stress or neutral tone. According to Chao (1968: 37, 38), weak stress may affect the syllable in various ways. Unaspirated stops such as *b*, *d* and *g* may become voiced; vowels are easily centered; and in rapid speech, some initials tend to become glides, retroflex *ch*, *zh*, *sh* all becoming *r*, and palatal *j*, *q* and *x* becoming *y*. As an example Chao mentions *Wáng xiānshēng* ‘Mr Wang’, which may be realised as *Wáng yānrēng*.

Norman (1988: 149) also speaks about *r* smoothing in weakly stressed syllables. What he sets out is very comparable to the content of Chao’s section on weak stress. Norman likewise identifies rapid speech as a situation in which *r* and *y* smoothing occur.

As I have said before, most researchers do not distinguish *r* smoothing from *r* suffixation. When *r* suffixation is discussed, sometimes examples of *r* smoothing are given, as we see in Wiedenhof (2004: 260).

Whereas *r* suffixation is scarcely accounted for in written Chinese, *r* smoothing is practically ignored altogether in dictionaries and textbooks. Moreover, if it is written in the character script at all, there is no other way to write it than by using the character which is used for the *r* suffix, viz. 儿 *ér*.

STATISTICS

Although scarcely documented, *r* smoothing is quite common in spoken Beijing Mandarin. The part of the documentary which I have transcribed contains 13 cases of *r* smoothing (see Table 1). In most of these cases, whole syllables have disappeared along the way.

In Scene One, which comprises 18 seconds of speaking time, there is no case of *r* smoothing to be heard. By contrast, Scene Two and Scene Three produce six and seven smoothed forms respectively. In these two scenes, which reflect more spontaneous, colloquial language, *r* smoothing occurs every 14.5 seconds on average.

The transcription of The Song played in Scene Three is reminiscent of Scene One, as it does not display any signs of *r* smoothing. This could be accidental, as the amount of sung data in my corpus is limited to 12 seconds. However, as this is a song, it is not surprising that the language is more carefully articulated and thus *r* smoothing does not occur.

R smoothing is a phonological process which reflects some degree of incautious articulation. It does not take place when words are carefully articulated, although, notwithstanding Norman's and Chao's assertions, it does occur in stressed syllables, as in *yòu rém* (from *yòu shéme* 'have what') and in *búrdào* (from *bú zhīdào* 'not know'). Even speech at normal speed may be affected, as Yú Bō hesitates while saying *yòu rém*, and *fǎngrri* (from *fǎnzhèng* 'anyway') is also pronounced without any haste.

Scene One 00:20-00:38 (18 seconds), 0 cases

Scene Two 01:26-02:34 (68 seconds), 6 cases

Time	Form	Unsmoothed form	Meaning
01:29	<i>shíhuàrshíshuō</i>	<i>shíhuàshíshuō</i>	'to tell the truth'
02:08	<i>duōr</i>	<i>duōshao</i>	'how much'
02:08	<i>duōr</i>	<i>duōshao</i>	'how much'
02:22	<i>búrdào</i>	<i>bú zhīdào</i>	'not know'
02:24	<i>búrdào</i>	<i>bú zhīdào</i>	'not know'
02:27	<i>búrdào</i>	<i>bú zhīdào</i>	'not know'

Scene Three 02:35-03:02, 03:15-04:51 (123 seconds), 7 cases

Time	Form	Unsmoothed form	Meaning
02:40	<i>dàongr</i>	<i>dàoshang</i>	‘on the road’
02:54	<i>yòu rém</i>	<i>yòu shéme</i>	‘have what’
02:54	<i>yòu rém</i>	<i>yòu shéme</i>	‘have what’
03:27	<i>búrdào</i>	<i>bú zhīdào</i>	‘not know’
03:56	<i>zhè ri</i>	<i>zhè shì</i>	‘this is’
04:33	<i>fāngrri</i>	<i>fānzhèng</i>	‘anyway’
04:36	<i>dàongr</i>	<i>dàoshang</i>	‘on the road’

Song 03:03-03:15 (12 seconds), 0 cases

Table 1: Cases of *r* smoothing in the documentary. Cases of *r* smoothing and their meanings are presented by scene. In the third column the unsmoothed form is given.

As *r* smoothing is a phonological process, its semantic connotations only concern matters of stylistics. Because of its inherent sloppiness, *r* smoothing is associated with informality. It is therefore no surprise that cases of *r* smoothing only occur in Scene Two and Scene Three.

THE SEMANTICS OF R SUFFIXATION

In contrast to *r* smoothing, *r* suffixation is a morphological process. Therefore, adding the *r* suffix may have semantic consequences on a lexical level. However, as in *r* smoothing, many cases of *r* suffixation are typically used in informal situations. In the following section, we will review what the literature says about the semantics of *r* suffixation and to what extent those assertions are corroborated by the cases of *r* suffixation which my data provides.

LITERATURE

R suffixation is often mentioned in descriptive grammars of Mandarin. In a section on noun suffixes, Norman discusses the historical background of the suffixes *zǐ* and *ér*, which both mean ‘child’ or ‘son’. According to Norman (1988: 113), *zǐ* and *ér* have been used as diminutives since the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). In some Southern dialects, the use of a morpheme meaning

'child' as a diminutive marker is likewise very common. For example, in the Guangzhou dialect, *tsai3* 'son, child' is used to express smallness, as *to1* means 'knife' and *to1-tsai3* means 'small knife'.

Charles Li and Sandra Thompson (1981: 39) also state that the suffix *ér* was etymologically a diminutive suffix for nouns. However, according to them, it has lost its semantic content in modern Mandarin, since its distribution as a purely phonological phenomenon has extended to other parts of speech, such as place words, time words and verbs.

None of the other sources go this far. Speaking about the modern use of the *r* suffix, Norman (1988: 155) states that it conveys 'a sense that the object it is attached to is something everyday and familiar; in some cases it may carry either a diminutive or a slightly pejorative overtone'. Robert Ramsey (1987: 63) states that the *r* suffix attaches to a variety of morphemes to form nouns and in certain cases other kind of words, bringing about 'a familiar and diminutive – or sometimes even a pejorative – flavor'. According to Wiedenhof (2004: 260) many expressions with *-r* refer to small objects. He adds that the *r* suffix may also be used to form nouns, to make a lexical contrast, or to convey informality or a pejorative tone, which he presents as a figurative application of smallness.

In a summary of the functions of the *r* suffix, the leading Chinese dictionary *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn* 'Modern Chinese Dictionary' (1977: 257) states that it is used as a noun suffix and in a few cases as a verb suffix. As a noun suffix, *-r* has the following functions: 1. to express smallness; 2. to modify the part of speech; 3. to make concrete things abstract; and 4. to distinguish different concepts.

Apart from Li and Thompson, who assert that the suffix *ér* has lost its semantic content entirely, all other sources mention a range of different possible connotations of the *r* suffix. The diminutive meaning is the only connotation which all have in common. In *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn* and Wiedenhof, this function is presented as the primary one, while Ramsey and Norman mention it as of equal standing with the familiar and the pejorative connotation.

STATISTICS

Let us now look at the cases of *r* suffixation from my data and see which semantics may be confirmed in my recording of Beijing Mandarin. As can be

seen from Table 2 (p. 28), *r* suffixation occurs 30 times in my data. The table shows clearly that *r* suffixation is not equally distributed across the scenes. Also, this type of rhotacism is only found in Scene Two and Scene Three. In the 68 seconds of Scene Two, we hear nine cases of *r* suffixation; the 123 seconds of Scene Three provide another 21 cases. So, in Scene Two, the *r* suffix is heard every 7.5 seconds, and in Scene Three, *r* suffixation even occurs every six seconds on average.

The language which is used in Scene Three appears to be more informal than the monologue in Scene Two. As Scene Three portrays a natural conversation, it is peppered with all kinds of interjections. In Scene Three, the word *biérér* ‘other people’ is clearly a rhotacism (02:54), while we encounter a non-rhotacised *biérén* in Scene Two (01:32). See also the expression *dàhuǒr*, which Yú Bō in Scene Three uses for ‘everybody’ (02:50). The Tuttle Concise Dictionary (Li 2008: 47) remarks that ‘大伙儿 *dàhuǒr* is a very colloquial word. For general use, 大家 *dàjiā* is preferred’.

As with *r* smoothing, The Song does not display any signs of *r* suffixation. Again, this could be accidental, as my transcription only captures 12 seconds of singing. However, note that this fragment contains the expression *yi dian*, which in normal spoken language is more likely to be pronounced with an *r* suffix, as *yi diar*.

SEMANTICS ON A LEXICAL LEVEL

The *r* which is produced in *r* smoothing does not carry a specific meaning from one instance to the next, but its use does achieve a general sense of informality. In contrast, the *r* suffix carries various semantic values, so when it is added to a base form, this may have consequences on a lexical level. We will therefore consider the individual cases of *r* suffixation, and see what meaning the *r* suffix adds in these specific cases.

INFORMALITY

If we consider the semantics of the *r* suffix, we find striking similarities with the Dutch diminutive *-tje*. Like the Mandarin *r* suffix, the Dutch diminutive suffix has several functions. Diminutives often refer to small physical objects, whereas their base forms refer to something bigger (cf. *schotel**tje* ‘saucer’ versus *schotel* ‘plate, dish’). Sometimes, however, the diminutive suffix does not convey any information on size. See, for example, the diminutive *kilootje* ‘kilo’ in the

expression *een kilootje bananen* ‘a kilo of bananas’. The base form of *kilootje* is *kilo* ‘kilo’. The diminutive suffix is frequently used on the Dutch market and in grocery stores. However, when a customer asks for a *kilootje bananen*, he does not want a ‘lesser kilo’ of bananas than the customer who has asked for a *kilo* ‘kilo’. In this case, the use of the diminutive suffix is merely part of the informal language style which is congruent with the market setting. It has nothing to do with measurable dimensions, but does convey information about figurative size. The deployment of this morpheme has to do with fitting into a certain social situation, in this case a market, where informal language is a given. It is worth noting that informal conversations are sometimes called *small talk*.

A similar connotation can be observed in the use of the *r* suffix in Mandarin. As we have seen above, *r* suffixation is said to have a diminutive connotation, and thus words with an *r* suffix are supposed to refer to something small. This surmised smallness is often not literally conveyed, although written sources often suggest that it is. See, for example, *rér*, which according to Wiedenhof (2004: 260) means ‘little man’ or ‘doll’, as opposed to *rén* ‘man, people’.

Both *rér* and *rén* occur in my data. *Rén* is used five times. In the majority of these, it is part of a compound: *biérén* ‘other people’ in 01:32, *gōngrén* ‘worker’ in 01:59, and *xínggrén* ‘pedestrian’ in 02:22. All these examples are from Scene Two and uttered by Yú Bō. In Scene One, the voiceover has *rén* ‘people’ (00:26), and in Scene Three, Yú Bō himself uses *rén* ‘people’ as well (04:25).

Rér is used only once. It occurs in Scene Three, and is used by Yú Bō as a part of *biérér* ‘other people’. *Rér* here is clearly a case of *r* suffixation. But are the people referred to in this case really physically smaller than the *biérén* ‘other people’ in Scene Two? The context does not provide any reasons for this assumption.

Surveying the broader context, we glean that *biérén* is taken from Scene Two, which gives a monologue, while *biérér* is used in the more dialogic Scene Three. It would appear that *biérén* is only rhotacised because this suits the informal language style of the conversation, just as a kilo of bananas on the Dutch market is often referred to by a diminutive.

Scene One 00:20-00:38 (18 seconds), 0 cases of rhotacism

Scene Two 01:26-02:34 (68 seconds), 9 rhotacisms

Time	Rhotacism	Meaning	Base form	Meaning
01:32	<i>shíhour</i>	'time'	<i>shíhou</i>	'time'
01:32	<i>kǒur</i>	'mouth'	<i>kǒu</i>	'mouth'
01:32	<i>mér</i>	'door'	<i>mén</i>	'door'
01:40	<i>zhèngr</i>	'this kind'	<i>zhèiyang</i>	'this kind'
01:59	<i>huór</i>	'work'	<i>huó</i>	'to live'
02:22	<i>shíhour</i>	'time'	<i>shíhou</i>	'time'
02:24	<i>shíhour</i>	'time'	<i>shíhou</i>	'time'
02:24	<i>zìxíngchē'r</i>	'bike'	<i>zìxíngchē</i>	'bicycle'
02:27	<i>shíhour</i>	'time'	<i>shíhou</i>	'time'

Scene Three 02:35-03:02, 03:15-04:51 (123 seconds), 21 rhotacisms

Time	Rhotacism	Meaning	Base form	Meaning
02:35	<i>nār</i>	'where'	<i>nǎ</i>	'which'
02:40	<i>nèi biar</i>	'there'	<i>nèi bian</i>	'that side'
02:43	<i>píngshé'r</i>	'usually'	<i>píngshí</i>	'usually'
02:50	<i>dàhuór</i>	'everybody'	n.a.	n.a.
02:54	<i>gē'r</i>	'song'	<i>gē</i>	'song'
02:54	<i>biérér</i>	'other people'	<i>biérén</i>	'other people'
03:15	<i>gē'r</i>	'song'	<i>gē</i>	'song'
03:42	<i>shèr</i>	'to be'	<i>shì</i>	'to be'
03:48	<i>shèr</i>	'to be'	<i>shì</i>	'to be'
03:51	<i>gē'r</i>	'song'	<i>gē</i>	'song'
03:53	<i>gē'r</i>	'song'	<i>gē</i>	'song'
04:08	<i>zhèngr</i>	'straight'	<i>zhèngr</i>	'straight'
04:08	<i>liǎr</i>	'face'	<i>liǎn</i>	'face'
04:15	<i>zhērdao</i>	'to know'	<i>zhīdao</i>	'to know'
04:15	<i>nār</i>	'where'	<i>nǎ</i>	'which'
04:18	<i>gē'r</i>	'song'	<i>gē</i>	'song'
04:36	<i>huór</i>	'work'	<i>huó</i>	'to live'
04:36	<i>gē'r</i>	'song'	<i>gē</i>	'song'
04:41	<i>gē'r</i>	'song'	<i>gē</i>	'song'
04:46	<i>gē'r</i>	'song'	<i>gē</i>	'song'
04:49	<i>huér</i>	'moment'	<i>huì</i>	'to meet, to happen'

Song 03:03-03:15 (12 seconds), 0 cases of rhotacism

Table 2: Cases of *r* suffixation in the documentary. Cases of *r* suffixation and their meanings are presented by scene. In the last two columns, a base form with its corresponding meaning is printed to provide a grasp of the semantic differences which the use of *-r* may convey. In addition, rhotacisms have in most cases a more informal connotation than their non-rhotacised counterparts.

Most rhotacisms that I have encountered in my data are of the same kind. The base form and the corresponding rhotacism can both be used for the same objects or concepts. The only consideration which is affected is the register, as the *r* suffix adds a somewhat informal flavour to the language. In a sense, the resulting concept is indeed smaller, but only figuratively. All such cases from my data are listed below.

Rhotacism	Base form	Meaning	Time
<i>shíhour</i>	<i>shíhou</i>	'time'	01:32, 02:22, 02:24, 02:27
<i>kóur</i>	<i>kóu</i>	'mouth'	01:32
<i>mér</i>	<i>mén</i>	'door'	01:32
<i>zhèngr</i>	<i>zhènyang</i>	'this kind'	01:40
<i>zìxíngchē'r</i>	<i>zìxíngchē</i>	'bicycle'	02:24
<i>píngshèr</i>	<i>píngshí</i>	'usually'	02:43
<i>gē'r</i>	<i>gē</i>	'song'	02:54, 03:15, 03:51, 03:53, 04:18, 04:36, 04:41, 04:46
<i>biérér</i>	<i>biérén</i>	'other people'	02:54
<i>shèr</i>	<i>shì</i>	'to be'	03:42, 03:48
<i>zhèngr</i>	<i>zhèng</i>	'straight'	04:08
<i>liǎr</i>	<i>liǎn</i>	'face'	04:08
<i>zhèrdao</i>	<i>zhīdao</i>	'to know'	04:15

NOMINALISATION

Although informality turns out to be statistically the most important semantic connotation of *r* suffixation, the *r* suffix also has the function of forming nouns. Again, there is a striking similarity with the use of diminutive suffix *-tje* in Dutch. Apart from conveying a sense of smallness and informality, the Dutch diminutive suffix is also used to form nouns or to make uncountable mass nouns countable. See, for example, *ijs*, the general word for 'ice' as found on frozen lakes or in a box of ice-cream. When the diminutive suffix is added, the word *ijsje* 'ice lolly' results (note that the *t* of *tje* is omitted after *s* due to phonotactic rules). *Ijsje* will in most cases not refer to a mass of ice, nor even

to a small box of ice cream. An *ijsje* can only be a consumable portion of ice presented on a stick or in a cone, which a human being can appropriate, leading him to regard it as a less massive concept. Adding the diminutive suffix does not mean that the ice-cream referred to is small; it means that it can be handled and counted.

Likewise, the *r* suffix can function as a noun-forming suffix and make abstract things countable. In my data there are two cases in which the rhotacism is a noun, while the base form is a verb. The noun *huór* ‘work’ is derived from the verb *huó* ‘to live’. *Huór* is a way in which it is made financially possible to live. The semantic connection between working and living is also made in English. In a question like ‘What do you do for a living?’ the word ‘living’ refers to one’s income or job and ‘to make a living’ is a colloquial expression universally taken to mean working at something successfully enough to be able to live moderately well.

The second example from my data is *huer* ‘moment, opportunity’. This noun is derived from the verb *hui* ‘to meet, to happen’. So *huer* is, as it were, a case of coming together or happening.

Rhotacism	Meaning	Base form	Meaning	Time
<i>huór</i>	‘work’	<i>huó</i>	‘to live’	01:59, 04:36
<i>huer</i>	‘moment’	<i>hui</i>	‘to meet, to happen’	04:49

ORPHAN WORDS

To ascertain the semantics of the *r* suffix, we have compared cases of suffixation with their corresponding base forms. However, in some cases this is impossible, because we do not know the base form. This can also be seen in Dutch, as some words ending in *-tje* seem to have no corresponding form without a diminutive suffix. For example, *sprookje* ‘fairy tale’ has no base form in present-day Dutch. A present-day speaker of Dutch needs an etymological dictionary to trace that the historical base form was *sproke* ‘story’ (Philippa 2009). *Sprookje* ‘fairy tale’ is still used, both in informal and in more formal contexts, while the historical *sproke* ‘story’ is forgotten and not relevant to the contemporary speaker any more. Cases like this I call ‘orphan words’, as there are historical base forms which gave birth to them but these ancestral forms

themselves are no longer there and cannot always be fully fathomed.

The same is true of some rhotacisms in Chinese. In my data, *dàhuǒr* ‘everybody’ is such a case, as Beijing Mandarin has no attestation of *dàhuò*. *Huǒ* ‘group of people’ does occur in Mandarin, but always in compounds such as *huǒjìmen* ‘guys’ and *huǒbàn* ‘companion’. As *dà* means ‘big’, *dàhuǒr* refers to a big group of people, or simply to ‘everybody’ (cf. the less informal alternative *dàjiā* ‘everybody’, which combines *dà* ‘big’ and *jiā* ‘house, family’). In contrast to the Dutch sprookje ‘fairy tale’, *dàhuǒr* ‘everybody’ is typically used in strongly colloquial language.

Rhotacism	Meaning	Base form	Meaning	Time
<i>dàhuǒr</i>	‘everybody’	n.a.	n.a.	02:50

Note that we may never know whether *dàhuǒ* ever existed. Was *huǒ* ‘group of people’ rhotacised to *huǒr* and later combined with *dà* ‘big’ to form *dàhuǒr* ‘everybody’? Or was *huò* combined with *dà* first and was this *dàhuò* rhotacised later on, yielding *dàhuǒr* ‘everybody’? We cannot know. The fact that rhotacisms are scarcely accounted for in documents makes it difficult to trace the historical roots of orphan words.

PLACE EXPRESSIONS

There is one other category which still deserves attention, that of place expressions, which in Mandarin are often rhotacised. See, for example, *nǎr* ‘where’. In this case, the *r* suffix is different from the suffix that we have been encountering thus far. In most cases of *r* suffixation, the *r* suffix is derived from *ér* ‘child, son’, but the *r* suffix we see here seems to be derived from the suffix *lǐ* ‘in’. Wiedenhof (2004: 260) seems to have been vindicated in his assertion that the *r* suffix has more than one etymological source.

Phonetically speaking, a shift from Mandarin *l* to *r* and vice versa is not uncommon, as these consonants are very similar or even interchangeable in some dialects of China. When I studied in Beijing, I once was puzzled when a language teacher from Harbin seemed to be talking about *ruójí*. I did not recognise the word until I realised she was simply talking about *luójí* ‘logic’. The fact that *l* and *r* are regarded as being very similar in the language is further illustrated by loanwords, in which an *r* is often transcribed as an *l* in Pīnyīn, and vice versa. See for example *Bālǐ* ‘Paris’ and *yímèr* ‘email’.

Semantically, it is also very reasonable to deduce that the *r* suffix in place words is derived from the suffix *lǐ* ‘in’. As the base form *nǎ* means ‘which’, adding *lǐ* ‘in’ or an *r* suffix derived from *lǐ* to *nǎ* ‘which’, results in ‘in which’, or indeed ‘in where’. The same might hold true for another place expression which is used in my data: *nèi biar* ‘there’, as adding the *r* suffix to *nèi bian* ‘that side’ results in ‘in that side’ or ‘there’. One could argue that the *r* suffix in this case cannot be derived from *lǐ* ‘in’, as the expression *nèi biar* ‘there’ is sometimes used together with *shang* ‘up’, in which case *shang* ‘up’ is being used as a preposition. If the *r* suffix in *nèi biar* ‘there’ were to have been derived from *lǐ* ‘in’, *nèi biar shang* would be an attestation of an unlikely sequence of two prepositions, *r* (from *lǐ* ‘in’) and *shang* ‘up’. However, a quick search on the internet is sufficient to reveal that the term 那边里 *nèi bian lǐ* is indeed used for ‘there’ in written Chinese. Probably, then, *nèi biar* ‘there’ is derived from *nèi bian lǐ* after all, and thus the occurrence of *nèi biar* ‘there’ in my data brings the number of *r* suffixes derived from *lǐ* ‘in’ to three.

Rhotacism	Meaning	Base form	Meaning	Time
<i>nǎr</i>	‘where’	<i>nǎ</i>	‘which’	02:35, 4:15
<i>nèi biar</i>	‘there’	<i>nèi bian</i>	‘that side’	02:40

One could also argue that rhotacised place words are actually cases of smoothing. Is, for example, the base form of *nǎr* ‘where’ not *nǎlǐ* ‘where’? Indeed, *nǎlǐ* is also used for ‘where’ in Mandarin. However, note that in this case, *nǎ* has a second tone instead of a third tone. This has to do with tone sandhi, an assimilation process which changes a second tone into a third tone when the syllable is followed by another third tone-bearing syllable, in this case *lǐ* ‘in’. Were *nǎ* to be a smoothed form of *nǎlǐ*, it would be strange that following the process of smoothing *nǎ* should have regained its original third tone that it had shed at an earlier historical stage. Therefore, I argue that the historical suffix *lǐ* ‘in’ has contracted into an *r* suffix, and in that form has been added to expressions like *nǎ* ‘which’ (forming *nǎr* ‘where’) and probably to *nèi bian* ‘that side’ as well, resulting in *nèi biar* ‘there’.

Note that there is no relation between the semantics of the *r* suffixation and this *r* suffix in place expressions. It seems that both suffixes share the same form by coincidence.

It is remarkable that not a single one of the cases in my data literally conveys a sense of smallness, although this is the only function of *r* suffixation which is mentioned by every one of the linguists cited above. A glance at the statistics makes it clear that *r* suffixation occurs most frequently in informal situations.

By being rhotacised, an expression apparently conveys a sense of informality, and thus fits better into small talk. This function of *r* suffixation is ignored by *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn* but accounted for by Ramsey, Norman and Wiedenhof. Closely related to the sense of informality is the pejorative flavour which Ramsey, Norman and Wiedenhof mention as well. In contrast with the sense of informality, which turns out to have accounted for most cases of *r* suffixation in my data, I have not found any examples of this pejorative implication.

Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn reports two other functions of *r* suffixation, of which I found no traces in my data, viz. to make concrete things abstract and to distinguish separate concepts. The latter function is also accounted for by Wiedenhof, who gives several examples from cases in which the *r* suffix serves to make a lexical contrast.

Both the dictionary and Wiedenhof mention that the *r* suffix may also be used to form nouns from other parts of speech. This function is confirmed by two cases in my data.

In considering nominal entity and informality, we have found striking similarities between the functions of the Dutch diminutive suffix and *r* suffixation in Mandarin. Apparently, there is a connection between literal small size and these more figurative readings of smallness. As Wiedenhof suggests, informality and a pejorative overtone are figurative applications of smallness. On the basis of my data, I argue that the noun forming use of the *r* suffix relates to smallness as well. Once rhotacised, a referent may cease to be an uncountable mass and become manageable, just as things of a small size are easier to handle.

CONCLUSIONS

For my research, the documentary *Beijing yinxiang* 北京印象 ('Beijing Impression') proved to be an excellent source, as within five minutes, four different language styles coexist. This documentary could be helpful for studies on other linguistic phenomena as well, not only because it is easy to

compare different styles within it, but also because the conversations sound very natural and authentic.

Although rhotacism is often ignored in dictionaries and in official language, it turns out to be an integral part of Beijing Mandarin. In less than four and a half minutes, rhotacism occurs 43 times. All of these cases occur in Scene Two and Scene Three, which together capture 191 seconds of speech. That means that in the informal situations depicted in these scenes, a rhotacism is produced every 4.5 seconds.

These rhotacisms fall into two groups which deserve to be studied separately. *R* smoothing refers to a range of phonological processes which result in the presence of *r*, while *r* suffixation refers to a morphological process, which may bring about lexical differences.

In all cases of *r* smoothing, the *r* is the result of assimilation, and most cases of it show elision as well. *R* smoothing is in fact a result of some degree of sloppiness in speech, and it does not occur in carefully articulated language. Hence it conveys a sense of informality. *R* suffixation may likewise add an informal touch, but as it is a morphological process, the semantics of the *r* suffix are richer and far more complex than the semantics of the *r* which occur in *r* smoothing.

In my data, I have found two different etymological sources for the *r* suffix. In place expressions such as *nǎr* ‘where’ (from *nǎ* ‘which’), the *r* suffix has seemed to be derived from the suffix *lǐ* ‘in’, while the *r* suffix in all other cases finds its origin in *ér* ‘child, son’.

The fact that this *r* suffix has developed from *ér* ‘child, son’ suggests a semantic connotation of smallness, as often assumed in the literature. However, I have not found much evidence for a literal diminutive meaning of the *r* suffix. The taxi driver’s anecdote in my introduction shows that this connotation is taken as a norm for spoken language, as he says that it would be inappropriate to say *Tiānānmér* for a square as big as Tiananmen Square.

However, a look at the data reveals that the context in which something is said has more influence on the presence or absence of rhotacism than does the size of the object referred to. Why, for example, does the voiceover say *shíhòu*, while Yú Bō consequently says *shíhour*? Not because the voiceover is talking about a longer stretch of time than Yú Bō, but because he is talking seriously or, indeed, ‘talking big’. He is supposed to be sounding official and professional, while Yú Bō is supposed to be coming across as ‘one of us’, and – probably even more importantly in a promotional series on Beijing – authentically Beijingsese.

The *r* suffix thus makes the language that incorporates it more fit for small talk. Literal smallness may well have been the historical semantic background of the *r* suffix, but this connotation turns out to be not very relevant in spoken Beijing Mandarin today. The figurative smallness which *r* suffixation conveys is reflected not only in its informal connotation but also in its noun-forming function. When the *r* suffix is added, a referent may in some cases cease to be an uncountable mass and become manageable, just as literally smaller things are easier to handle.

It is remarkable that the diminutive suffix in Dutch, which belongs to an entirely different language family than Chinese, is also used for nominalisation and informalisation. The similarities are too striking to be accidental. We may conclude that the semantic relation between informality, nominal entity and smallness is easily made in languages.

The taxi driver who thought Tiananmen Square was too big for *r* suffixation actually thought of rhotacism in terms that were too small. As we have seen from the language of Yú Bō the Singing Cabbie, *r* smoothing can be used anywhere, and the semantics of *r* suffixation are so rich that the *r* suffix may apply to both small and big things, as long as it is a case of figurative smallness in one way or another.

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