

# PHONOLOGICAL VARIANT OF /r/ AS A MARKER OF GROUP IDENTITY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE RESIDENTS OF WALLED AREA OF LAHORE CITY

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**ABSTRACT:** *The phenomenon of replacing the standard alveolar glide /r/ with retroflex flap /ɽ/ is commonly observed among native Punjabi speakers residing in the walled area of Lahore City. Since this phenomenon is not observable in any other part of the Urdu-Punjabi speaking world, the present study aims to establish that this replacement of /r/ sound with /ɽ/ serves as a marker of group identity of the residents of the old walled area of Lahore to distinguish themselves from the residents of the other parts of the city. Two groups of 40 respondents each with equal distribution of genders were randomly selected from the old walled-city and other parts of Lahore. Following Labovian tradition, the respondents were engaged in an informal conversation during which they were asked three questions whose answers required them to speak words having /r/ sound at the word-initial, word-medial and word-final position. Ten respondents were also interviewed to elicit their opinion about using /ɽ/ sound instead of /r/. The data showed a strong tendency of replacement of /r/ with /ɽ/ among the residents of walled-city of Lahore. It was also found that the use of /ɽ/ correlated more strongly with Punjabi language than with Urdu. Males appeared to use /ɽ/ more frequently as compared to females. Overall, a strong correlation between the choice of /ɽ/ and the walled area identity was observed.*

**Key words:** Linguistic Identity, Group Identity, Micro-sociolinguistics

## INTRODUCTION

Linguistic choices produce and reproduce social identities [1]. Each linguistic choice ranging from the choice of a particular language at a particular point in time to the choice of a particular phoneme/morpheme signals something important about the identity of the person who makes that choice. As humans have been observed to league themselves in a number of different ways to form different groups, language offers one of the ways of signaling and maintaining distinct identities of the groups intuitively formed by human beings. If *language* is to be defined as the universal asset of humans making them distinct from the rest of the species [2], every language variety must contain elements which may distinguish one person from another and one group from another.

The linguistic choices speakers make are assumed to be systematic, marking the identity of the groups they belong to. Since there are numerous ways in which humans may group themselves, there must be certain choices available to the speakers of two sub-groups of a larger group to mark and maintain their distinct sub-group identities. Thus, unlike the researcher's [2] 'homogenous' speech community showing no variation whatsoever, a sociolinguistic perspective on language focuses on the diversity of human language that goes well beyond grammar and lexicon [3]. It focuses on the ability of the human beings to form groups on the basis of these linguistic variables. Thus, for a generativist, the choice of a particular variant of a variable by an individual may be meaningless, but it carries important information regarding the identity of the individual for a sociolinguist. Linguistic choices made by different individuals ranging from the choice of a particular variety of language to the choice of a particular variant of a phonological, morphological, syntactic or lexical variable crucially signal the multiple identities of those who make these choices.

Humans may divide themselves into larger groups and smaller sub-groups within a group because of their shared sociological tendency of forming different groups. Existence

of a group critically depends on how different it is from the rest of neighboring and distant groups of humans and how much particular about their distinct identity are the members of the group. Thus, to mark different identities human groups have assumed different sociocultural markers to mark the identities of larger groups formed on the basis of different geo-political, socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-cultural factors.

In the same way, since larger groups are usually further subdivided into smaller groups because of the tendency of humans to group themselves in numerous ways, one variety of language marking the identity of a larger group must offer such choices as may be exploited by different sub-groups to signal and maintain their distinct identities within a larger group. For example, even though both American and British English are considered Englishes, yet native American and British English speakers tend to make certain choices which mark their distinct identity as either American or British speaker. Thus, at a global level, the omission or presence of post-vocalic /r/ may serve as the marker which distinguishes Standard American English from Standard British English. However, the omission or presence of post-vocalic /r/ within American or British English may be associated to different social and socioeconomic background of the speakers in the concerned speech community [4]. The omission of post-vocalic /r/ in British English is associated with speakers of higher classes but its omission in American English serves the other way round and serves as an identity marker of lower socio-economic classes.

Since linguistic variables serve as important markers of social identity, this research tries to find the association of a linguistic marker with the sociolinguistic identity of the residents of the walled area of Lahore city. The replacement of standard /r/ sound with a retroflex flap /ɽ/ is a common phenomenon among the residents of Lahore. This study tries to find out if the replacement of /r/ with /ɽ/ serves as a marker of group identity of those living inside the old walled-city area of Lahore, distinguishing them from those living outside

the walled city. It also intends to see if other variables like gender and choice of language affect the choice of the variable under consideration.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims

- To find out whether the residents of the walled city area of Lahore substitute /r/ with /ɾ/ to mark their group identity
- To see if there is a difference in the use of /ɾ/ between males and females
- To see at what position in a word the replacement takes place most often.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher [5] defines identity as complex, multiple, non-unitary and dynamic. Most of us have a complex web of multiple identities. The researcher [6] famously said that we have as many selves as the people we interact with. The researcher [7] concurs that the complexity of this network of identities makes it a difficult phenomenon to study. From national to personal level, we represent different identities while communicating with different people. Identity at the macro level refers to such identities as religious, national and political identities; whereas, those at the micro-level refer to our group identities based on our geographical settings, our dresses, orientations etc.

The role of language as a marker of identity is undisputed; however, it is the micro level of interactions that helps us in claiming, asserting and reconstructing our identities. According to the researcher [8], identity is constructed through micro level interactions of the individuals. So, the micro level interactions serve as subtle markers of individual and group identity and as means of convergence to or divergence from a certain group. According to the researchers [9], identities are constructed relationally with respect to similarities and differences; genuineness and artificiality and authority and delegitimacy. They believe that linguistic identities may work at intentional, habitual or less than conscious level and they are constructed out of “interactional negotiation”. (p. 585)

According to the researcher [10], micro level language use and construction and propagation of identity are studied under the approach called interactional sociolinguistics (IS), a branch of sociolinguistics based on the researcher’s [11] work who believes that since our social worlds are shaped through interaction, it is necessary to study about the ways localized interactive processes take place. According to the researcher [12], culture functions as the software of the society by adapting and evolving with members having multiple identities and having membership to multiple subgroups in the society.

The field of language and identity has received a lot of scholarly attention. Most notable are the works of researcher [4] on language stratification, the researcher’s [1] work on language and social identity, the researcher’s [11] on interactional sociolinguistics, the researchers [12] and [14] on language and identity. The researcher’s [4] seminal work in the social stratification of English language in New York City has been a cornerstone in the research on language and

identity. A number of studies have been modeled on his work (cf [15,16,17,18]). The present study is also a methodological assimilation of the same study; however, it links the choice of a variable with a certain sociolinguistic identity.

Little work has been done on language and identity in Pakistan and hardly any on group identity. Some macro level studies on language attitudes and identity have been conducted (cf. [19,20,21,22]); however, no micro level studies have been carried out. The present study, therefore, tries to establish a connection between linguistic choices and micro-level group identity of the residents of the walled area in Lahore city.

### METHODOLOGY

The present study, taking cues from the researcher’s [4] famous department store study, tried to elicit data from the residents of both walled-city area and other areas of Lahore in natural settings. For collecting quantitative data 40 males and females from walled area of Lahore and 40 from other parts of Lahore were engaged in an informal discussion and during that discussion were asked questions which required giving answers using /r/ sound at the word-initial, word-medial and word-final position. The following questions were asked:

1. What are useless papers called? Expected answer was “raddi” (spoken as /rɑḏi/ meaning waste paper) with a /r/ sound at the word-initial position.
2. Which sport Misbah-ul-Haq plays? Expected answer was “cricket” (pronounced as /kirkɾt/ or /krikɾt/) with a /r/ sound at the word-medial position.
3. Who is Mamnoon Hussain? Expected answer was “sadar” (pronounced as /sɑḏar/meaning president) with a /r/ sound at the word-final position.

Out of the 80 respondents, half were asked questions in Urdu and half in Punjabi in order to find out in which language the /r/ sound was replaced with /ɾ/ most often. Like the researcher [4], the questions were asked repeatedly feigning poor hearing in order to obtain a second utterance with an emphatic stress. The researcher made a note of the sound the respondent used in each word. An asterisk was added with poor articulations or with those which could not be correctly heard due to external noise or other factors. Thus, 160 elicitations were obtained for each of the three words in both Punjabi and Urdu which were coded into SPSS for further analysis.

For getting a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, ten respondents, five males and five females from walled-city area were engaged in a fairly structured interview. They were asked a straightforward question as to why they used /ɾ/ sound instead of /r/. They were given three choices namely, “*changa lagda ay*” (It feels good), “*asi Lahori hone aan*” (Because we are Lahorites) and “*awen hi*” (For no reason). This helped in triangulating the data (Creswell, 2003).

### DATA ANALYSIS

The data obtained in the raw form were filtered manually. Poor articulations were discarded and only the data with clear articulation of /r/ or /ɾ/ were used for the analysis. After cleaning, the following number of articulations were available for analysis.

**Table 1: Clearly identifiable articulations of /r/ and /ɾ/**

Sr. No.	Words	Male	Female	Total
1	<i>raddi</i>	76	76	152
2	<i>cricket</i>	79	78	157
3	<i>sadar</i>	78	77	155

The clean data were then coded through SPSS and cross-tabulation tables were created. In order to find out whether the residents of the walled city area differed in their use of /r/

and /ɾ/ from the residents of other parts of the city the following cross-tabulations were obtained

**Table 2: The difference in use of /r/ and /ɾ/ between walled and non-walled residents**

Words	Walled residents				Non-walled residents			
	/r/	%	/ɾ/	%	/r/	%	/ɾ/	%
<i>raddi</i>	48	64.8	26	35.1	74	94.9	4	5.1
<i>cricket</i>	30	38.5	48	61.5	66	83.6	13	16.4
<i>sadar</i>	19	24.6	58	75.4	58	74.4	20	25.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>42.4</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>57.6</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>84.3</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>15.7</b>

The above table proved that the majority of the residents of the walled area used /ɾ/ more than the standard /r/; whereas, those living outside the walled city also replaced /r/ with /ɾ/ but the percentage of such instances was much lower than those living inside the walled area of Lahore. This proved our

core hypothesis that the residents of walled-city area did indeed replace /r/ sound with /ɾ/ sound.

Another cross-tabulation was generated to see if there was any difference in the way males and females substituted /r/ sound with /ɾ/. The following table shows the results.

**Table 3: Gender-wise substitution of /r/ with /ɾ/**

Words	Males				Females			
	/r/	%	/ɾ/	%	/r/	%	/ɾ/	%
<i>raddi</i>	54	71.1	22	28.9	68	89.5	8	10.5
<i>cricket</i>	43	54.4	36	45.6	53	67.9	25	32.1
<i>sadar</i>	35	44.9	43	55.1	42	54.6	35	45.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>56.7</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>43.3</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>70.6</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>29.4</b>

The results showed that females tended to use the standard /r/ sound more often as compared to men, whose tendency of replacing /r/ with /ɾ/ outnumbered that of the females. This confirmed that the females tend to use more standard forms as compared to males.

In order to find out whether the respondents replaced /r/ with /ɾ/ sound differently while using Urdu and Punjabi, another cross-tabulation test was applied and the following table was generated

**Table 4: Language-wise substitution of /r/ with /ɾ/**

Words	Questioned in Punjabi				Questioned in Urdu			
	/r/	%	/ɾ/	%	/r/	%	/ɾ/	%
<i>raddi</i>	49	65.3	26	34.7	73	94.8	4	5.2
<i>cricket</i>	32	41	46	59	64	81	15	19
<i>sadar</i>	26	33.8	51	66.2	51	65.4	27	34.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>46.5</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>53.5</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>80.3</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>19.7</b>

The above table shows that the respondents replaced /r/ with /ɾ/ more often while speaking Punjabi as compared to when speaking Urdu. The choice of /ɾ/ while speaking Punjabi suggested that Punjabi language is strongly associated with walled-city area identity of the people and their process of asserting their identity.

In order to find out at which phonemic position the speakers made most substitutions of the sounds, and to know whether the second utterance was different than the first, a table was generated to see which of the three words received most replacements of /r/ with /ɾ/ and in which utterance. Table 5 represents the data

**Table 5: Which word received most replacements of /r/ sound with /ɾ/?**

Word	First utterance				Second utterance			
	/r/	%	/ɾ/	%	/r/	%	/ɾ/	%
<i>raddi</i>	59	78.7	16	21.3	63	81.9	14	18.1
<i>cricket</i>	41	51.9	38	48.1	55	70.5	23	29.5
<i>sadar</i>	28	35.9	50	64.1	49	63.7	28	36.3
Total	128	<b>55.2</b>	104	<b>44.8</b>	167	<b>72.0</b>	65	<b>28.0</b>

The above table showed that the /r/ sound at the word final position (in the word “*sadar*”) was substituted most often; whereas, it was substituted least at the word initial position (in the word “*raddi*”). It suggests that starting a word with a retroflex sound seems to carry a phonological constraint in Urdu and Punjabi languages. The above table also shows that the speakers tended to use the standard versions of the words while articulating them a second time. This conformed to the researcher’s [4] findings that since the second articulation is more careful, the speakers tend to use more standard forms while articulating a word second time.

The qualitative data were obtained through structured interviews. Five male and five female respondents from the walled area were asked why they used /ɾ/ instead of /r/. They were provided with some options as a means of guiding them as to what may be the possible reasons for using a certain sound instead of a standard sound. The results of the interviews were inconclusive. The participants were given three options “It feels good”, “Because we are Lahorites” and “For no reason”. All the three options were selected by the participants equally. Some believed that it was due to both reasons

## CONCLUSION

The data show that the /r/ sound is substituted with /ɾ/ by the Lahorites in general but mostly by the residents of the walled-city areas of ancient Lahore. This proves that those living inside the walled-city areas of Lahore have their own unique group identity which they consciously or subconsciously assert by replacing the /r/ sound with /ɾ/. Secondly, it was observed that the males substituted the sounds more frequently than females. This proves the general understanding that the females prefer more standard forms of language than males (cf. [22] and [23]). Thirdly, the substitution of sounds occurred in Punjabi language more often than in Urdu language, and fourthly, the /r/ sound at the word-terminal position was substituted most often; whereas, that at the word initial position was substituted least often. It was also observed that the respondents would usually correct themselves while articulating the word a second time.

The interview results, though inconclusive, proved that despite not being consciously aware of the using a variant of a sound, the residents of the walled-city areas of Lahore did indeed use the retroflex /ɾ/ instead of alveolar /r/ sound. This showed that the variant /ɾ/ enjoys covert prestige among the residents of the walled areas of Lahore.

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