

## **Rhotacization and the “Beijing Smooth Operator”: The social meaning of a linguistic variable**

*Qing Zhang (2008)*

This paper is exploring a prominent feature in Beijing Mandarin – rhotacization and investigates the social meanings and sociocultural associations linked to it. Stereotypical character of Beijing speech - Er yin zong – “heavy r-sounding” Rhotacization is a process where a retroflex is added to a final syllable rhyme. It is observed mostly in casual speech, with nouns, verbs, demonstratives and classifiers.

### **Data:**

1. Standard written Chinese – Beijing-flavor literature + literary criticisms
2. Spoken data – sociolinguistic interviews of business professionals (metalinguistic commentaries)

**Analysis** goes first to literary works (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and demonstrates that rhotacization is applied to cultural realities, cultural terms and speech that are strongly associated with the Beijing flavor. The author concludes that this feature becomes representative for the local dialect and it is a stylistic tool to “evoke localness”. The second part of the analysis is focused on writings of literary scholars and the interviews that contain metalinguistic comments. Rhotacization is associated with smoothness – not harshness and roughness. It is pointed out though that this doesn’t reflect any phonetic property of the actual sound but just a perception.

Beijing smooth operator local character type – rhotacization is part of this image. If rhotacization is described and perceived as smooth, so it is described the character of the Smooth operator. In other words, the “smooth” quality of rhotacization works toward a construction of a social persona and identity. The feature is linked to the character. Further support of this is added by the metalinguistic evaluations and comments from the interviews.

### **Conclusions:**

1. the frequency of the rhotacization and its use when talking about key cultural terms in Beijing-flavor literature makes it an indicator of local distinctiveness.
2. Rhotacization it is associated with local character type, that of the “Smooth operator” which can be described as “a set of male urban Beijing social personae”. It represents cluster of attributes as diverse as manners and interactional styles.
3. The actual meaning is not “smoothness” but social meanings that are linked to ideological interpretations of Beijing and its people, specifically the Beijing Smooth Operator.

## **REFERENCES**

Zhang, Q. (2008). Rhotacization and the “Beijing Smooth Operator”: The social meaning of a linguistic variable. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12, p. 201-22.

### **What was discussed:**

The question of recontextualization  
Semiotics; Where is the meaning actually?