A Department Store Study for the 21st Century: /r/ vocalization on TLC's Say Yes to the Dress

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Abstract

This paper focuses on /r/ vocalization on the reality television show *Say Yes to the Dress*, which features an upscale bridal salon in New York City. The study examines five bridal consultants working at Kleinfeld Bridal in Manhattan. Using the brides' budgets as a proxy for social status, we investigate whether variation in consultants' use of /r/ correlates with the amount of money brides state they are willing to spend on their dress, which ranges from $1,000 to unlimited. A mixed-effects model in Rbrul shows significant differences across three budget categories. We argue that although there are important methodological differences, our findings parallel Labov's original department store study as well as later replications. Additionally, qualitative examination of show excerpts suggests that variation in /r/ may be recruited in performing particular interactional roles, as consultants use clusters of [r-1] or [r-0], depending on the positioning taken in a given interaction.

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Maeve Eberhardt and Corinne Downs

1 Introduction

When William Labov published his groundbreaking study of sociolinguistic variation in New York City, he demonstrated that stratification of social class is correlated with speakers' use of linguistic variables (Labov, 1966). One such variable in New York City is /r/ vocalization in the syllable coda, in words such as *car, four,* and *writer*. The vocalization of /r/ in such contexts was at one time prestigious in New York, as it was in London, Boston, and other areas in England and New England, though the variant is now a stigmatized one throughout the U.S. (Labov, 1972; Preston and Niedzielski 2003). There is ample evidence that New Yorkers are, over time, moving towards /r/-fulness (see Becker, 2009 and comparisons to Labov, 1966 therein), but at the same time, rhoticity is still variable in the city, and may be used to index prestige and local identity (Becker, 2009).

As part of his comprehensive study of New York City English, Labov conducted a rapid and anonymous survey in three department stores: Saks, Macy's, and Kleins, which contrasted in their level of social status, Saks having the highest prestige and Kleins the lowest. Having identified that /r/ vocalization was "extraordinarily sensitive to any measure of social or stylistic stratification," Labov set out to test the hypothesis that the rates of /r/ among the salespeople in these stores would correlate with the social class status of the clientele their store served. His rapid and anonymous survey elicited four tokens of syllable coda /r/: a casual production of *fourth floor*, and a more careful repetition. Indeed, this study showed that salespeople working in Saks produced the highest rates of constricted [r], followed by those working in Macy's, and finally, the lowest rates of the higher prestige variant produced by salespeople working at Kleins. This foundational study has been replicated at least two times (Fowler, 1986; Mather, 2012). In each case, results parallel the original investigation of /r/, confirming the close connection that remains between /r/ vocalization and social status in New York City. Figure 1 below shows the rates of all [r-1] (constricted [r]) across the three department store studies.
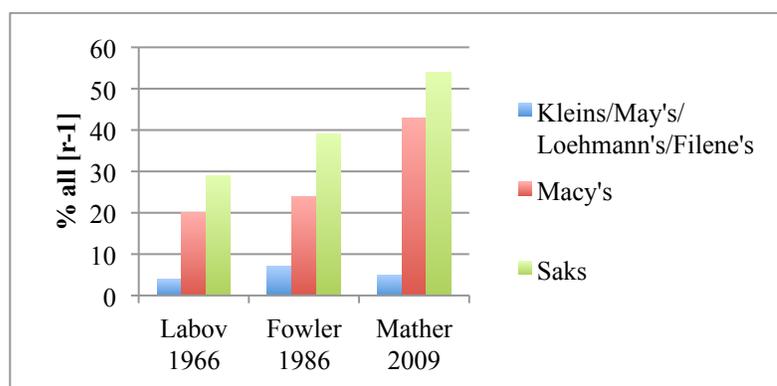

Figure 1:All [r-1] in the three department store studies.

In the current paper, we offer a different look at /r/ vocalization in a New York City department store, using data from the reality television show *Say Yes to the Dress*. The show revolves around future brides' search for their wedding dress. Using the bride's budget as a proxy for social class, we test the hypothesis that the bridal consultants working at the bridal salon Kleinfeld will show variation in /r/ based on the perceived social status of their clients. Our study, then, differs in important ways from the department store research. Our analysis includes many tokens from just a few speakers, whereas the department store studies collected just 4 tokens from many

speakers. In addition, the "ideal client" for which speech was designed in the rapid and anonymous surveys of the previous department store studies, is replaced with actual customers shopping for a big-ticket item at a high end store. Our results indicate that the consultants' use of /r/ is indeed influenced by the amount of money their client says she will spend on her dress. We present results from a logistic regression with a mixed-effects model that selects budget as one significant factor constraining the consultants' use of this iconic New York City variable.

2 *Say Yes to the Dress*

The data source for this paper is the reality television "docusoap" *Say Yes to the Dress*, which began airing on TLC in 2007. The show is set in the New York City bridal salon Kleinfeld, located between 6th and 7th Avenues in Manhattan, and centers on the quest of brides in search of their ideal wedding gown. Each episode typically features 3-4 brides, who come into the salon to choose their dress or to have a fitting in the alterations department. To select their dress, the brides often bring with them a number of close friends and family members (most often all female), to assist in the process. Each customer has a bridal consultant assigned to her, whose job it is to find her "perfect dress" among the thousands of gowns that the store sells.

Once the bride and the consultant have introduced themselves, the consultant attempts to get to know the bride, gathering information which presumably will assist her in selecting the kind of dresses that the bride would be interested in. The bride tells the consultant about her fiancé, how the two met, what kind of wedding they are planning, what kind of dress she is looking for, and finally, how much money she is willing to spend on the dress.

The budget is a key focus of the show and each bride's story. Kleinfeld specializes in designer dresses, and wedding gowns range from about $1,500 to upwards of $40,000, making it an upscale retail store. The importance of determining the budget of the bride is emphasized on several occasions on the show, by both the managers and by the consultants themselves. Not finding out how much a bride is willing to spend on their wedding dress means that the consultant may be showing dresses to the bride that she will not end up purchasing because of cost. Although this is a highlight of the show, it serves primarily as dramatic effect; the consultants most likely know what the bride's budget is before taping in most cases, as it is on the application to appear on the show. Although the focus of the show is the bride, the consultant has a pivotal role to play: she guides the bride during the appointment, asking questions, offering advice, and helping the bride make the best decision.

3 Data and Methods

At the time of data analysis, 5 seasons of this show were available, from 2007-2010, for a total of 78 episodes, roughly 20 minutes in length each. The analysis presented here focuses on five consultants featured on this show: Audrey, Camille, and Debbie, Dianne, and Keasha. There are several other consultants who appear on the show as well, but these five women are the only consultants who are variably r-less. The consultants had been working at Kleinfeld for between 8 and 15 years during the taping of the show, and appear to be between 35-50 years old. The analysis includes interactions with a total of 126 brides. Keasha worked with the most brides (41), followed by Audrey (28), Dianne (24), Camille (19) and Debbie (14).

An important feature of reality television is the use of the post-show interview to provide commentary about events being shown to the audience (Bignell, 2005). On *Say Yes to the Dress*, this includes commentary from the bride, members of her family or friends, the bridal consultant, and other employees from the salon who might have been involved in the sales interaction. These tokens were coded as instances of 'referee' designed speech (as distinct from 'audience' design). In presenting his framework for audience-design, Bell (1992, p. 328) defines referees as "third persons not physically present at an interaction but possessing such salience for the speaker that they influence language choice even in their absence." Subsequent research has also found referees to have significant effects on variation (see Hay, Jannedy, and Mendoza-Denton, 1999).

A total of 2,491 tokens were perceptually coded as rhotic/constricted [r-1] or non-rhotic/vocalized [r-0]. The internal constraints included in the model were preceding vowel

(START, NORTH, SQUARE, NEAR, CURE, LETTER (unstressed) and FUR (stressed)), following environment (vowel, consonant, or pause), whether the word was lexical or functional, and whether the syllable in which /r/ occurred was stressed or unstressed. Tokens in which /r/ was in syllable onset position, as in *military* or *flattering*, were excluded, as /r/ is invariably constricted in this position. Cases of 'linking /r/, in which /r/ crosses a word boundary, as in *butter up*, were included, as some recent studies have found variation in this context (Becker, 2009; Nagy & Irwin, 2010). Tokens in the CURE category were very rare (n=4) and thus were excluded from analysis. As Rbrul allows for mixed-effects analyses, the word in which /r/ appeared was included as a random effect. This takes into account that there may be some words that favor or disfavor one variant "over and above (or 'under' and 'below')" what the factors in the model would predict (Johnson, 2009, p. 365). For this reason, speaker is often also included as a random effect, but since we were interested in the behavior of the individual consultants here, it is a fixed effect in our model.

Additionally, the speech design of the tokens were coded as Audience or Referee, where Audience-designed tokens included those for which the consultant was talking to the bride or a member of her party, or interactions in which any of those people were ratified participants. Tokens coded as Referee were those in which the consultant was talking to the camera about the bridal appointment, in a post-show interview, or when the consultant was talking about the bridal appointment, but when none of the bridal party members were present. Additionally, we devised a factor group to control for possible effects of non-rhoticity in the audience. In other words, if anyone—the bride, her family, or friends shown in the episode—exhibited /r/-lessness, the token was coded as there being [r-0] present in the audience. There were 27 brides for which this was the case.

4 Results

The overall rate of [r-1] in the sample was 49% (1,214/2,491). This falls just under the 54% all [r-1] production that Mather (2012) found in Saks (the high prestige store) in the most recent replication of the department store study.

4.1 Internal Constraints

As with other studies of /r/ vocalization, the internal factors are strong. Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis. As shown there, the factors selected as significant predictors of [r-1] were preceding vowel, following environment, and word type.

Preceding Vowel	N	%	Factor Weight
FUR	521/698	75	.942
START	78/195	40	.422
LETTER	245/589	41	.393
SQUARE	102/252	41	.377
NORTH	200/586	34	.321
NEAR	66/171	38	.313

Word Type	N	%	Factor Weight
Lexical	767/1550	49	.601
Functional	254/941	27	.399

Following Environment	N	%	Factor Weight
Vowel	249/352	71	.747
Pause	226/386	56	.486
Consonant	739/1,753	42	.263

Table 1: Effect of internal factors.

As other studies have shown, words in the FUR category have a very strong probability of being rhotic. Nagy & Irwin (2010) note that this is a universal finding for /r/. Following an unstressed schwa (LETTER), /r/ is much more likely to be vocalized. In the FUR and LETTER categories, it should be noted that there are a large number of tokens from the word *her* and *herself*, given the topic of the show, in which a single female (the bride) is the focus of much of the show. Many more instances of these word appear in the current data set than likely would in a sociolinguistic interview, for example. The other vowels show favoring of [r-1] in the following order, from most favoring to least favoring: START > SQUARE > NORTH > NEAR. In a review of studies on /r/ vocalization, Nagy & Irwin (2010) report that the ordering of these vowels differ from one study to the next in terms of probability for [r-1], so that there is not a general tendency for /r/ among these lexical sets. Also in line with previous work on /r/, words that are functional have a lesser likelihood of having a rhotic pronunciation than those that are lexical. The following environment exerts a strong effect, with a vowel highly favoring rhoticity, and a following consonant strongly disfavoring rhoticity. Beyond the internal factors, there were several external factors selected as significant, which we discuss below.

4.2 External Constraints

The fixed external factors selected as predictors of [r-1] were: Speaker, Budget, Speech Design, and Non-Rhoticity in Bridal Party. In addition, Word was selected as significant, indicating that there is an element of random behavior within the data set that is necessary to control for. We present the results of the model below and discuss each of the factors in turn.

Our central question at the outset of the study was whether the budget of the bride, acting as a proxy for social status, would affect the consultants' /r/ vocalization. As Table 2 below shows, the budget of the bride was indeed selected as significant.

Budget	N	%	Factor Weight
High	204/357	57	.54
Medium	556/1092	51	.51
Low	452/1042	43	.45

Table 2: Effect of Budget.

Table 2 shows that when consultants are working with a bride in the High budget category (over $8,000), constricted [r] is the favored variant. Slightly less favoring [r-1] is the Medium category ($3,500 - $7,500), followed by the Low category (under $3,000). Such a result indicates that the consultants do respond to the budget of their bridal customers in a similar manner to the way in which employees in the New York City department stores design their speech according to the imagined social status of their ideal customers. That is, just as employees at Saks were more likely to produce constricted [r] in the phrase *fourth floor*, employees at Kleinfeld are more likely to use the higher prestige variant when their customers state their willingness to spend larger amounts of money. Kleinfeld consultants appear to be working from the assumption that a bride's declaration that she will spend a certain amount of money gives some indication of her social standing. This parallels not only the finding that Saks employees assumed that by entering that high prestige store, a customer would have the money to spend there, but also that the rates of [r-1] increased in departments where the most expensive items were sold (Labov, 1966). In both cases, it is certainly possible that the customer does not have the money required to shop at the store or to buy the desired dress. Nevertheless, the employees design their speech with the level of prestige presented on the surface in mind. Because of the nature of the rapid and anonymous survey, the employees do not have much time to make a judgment about the potential client; they provide only the "fourth floor" response to the researcher's question without additional interaction. A major difference, then, between these studies and the one based on *Say Yes to the Dress*, is that the consultants have much more opportunity to make a judgment about the client's social class, as

they spend a substantial amount of time with the bride and her family and friends. It may more often be the case that the actual social class of the bride is incongruous with her budget; she or her family may have saved up money for this one special item, even if their overall lifestyle does not match that level of spending. This may explain in part why the results for the budget are not stronger, with more differentiation between the three categories. Even with that possibility in mind, the findings still show that budget does have an effect on variation in /r/ vocalization for these speakers.

We previously explained that the speaker was included in the model as a fixed effect, which allows us to see how the individual consultants behave with respect to this variable. The results of this factor are shown in Table 3.

Speaker	N	%	Factor Weight
Keasha	416/747	56	.631
Dianne	305/582	52	.569
Debbie	144/301	48	.483
Camille	138/351	39	.412
Audrey	209/510	41	.403

Table 3: Effect of Speaker.

Table 3 shows the probability for the individual consultants to use the constricted /r/ variant, with Audrey showing the lowest factor weight for [r-1] and Keasha showing the highest. Keasha is the only African American consultant featured on the show, and although ethnicity is not a focus of the current paper, a few comments can be made about the results for the individual speaker differences. /r/ vocalization is a well-documented feature of African American speech in New York and elsewhere (e.g., Myhill, 1988; Labov, 1966; Hinton & Pollock, 2000; Nagy & Irwin, 2010); however, this particular result is not inconsistent with other New York City department store studies. As we have already emphasized, it is important to keep in mind that the bridal salon Kleinfeld is an upscale retail store, more comparable to Saks in previous department store studies—it is a high-end store, where the *lowest*-priced dresses are approximately $1,500. In Mather's recent replication of Labov's original study, he found that in Saks, 55% of responses from African American employees were all [r-1] (Mather, 2012). Blake and Shousterman (2010) have also demonstrated that "Black ethnics" (which includes African Americans as well as second generation Caribbean/West Indians) view the /r/-ful pronunciation as indexical of higher social class and prestige. Thus, it is not a particularly surprising result that Keasha shows a high probability for [r-1]. Moreover, not only did Keasha work with the most brides of all the consultants, she also worked with the most brides who fell into the High budget category—almost twice as many in that category as any other consultant. Figure 2 below shows the number of brides each consultant worked with in the three budget categories.
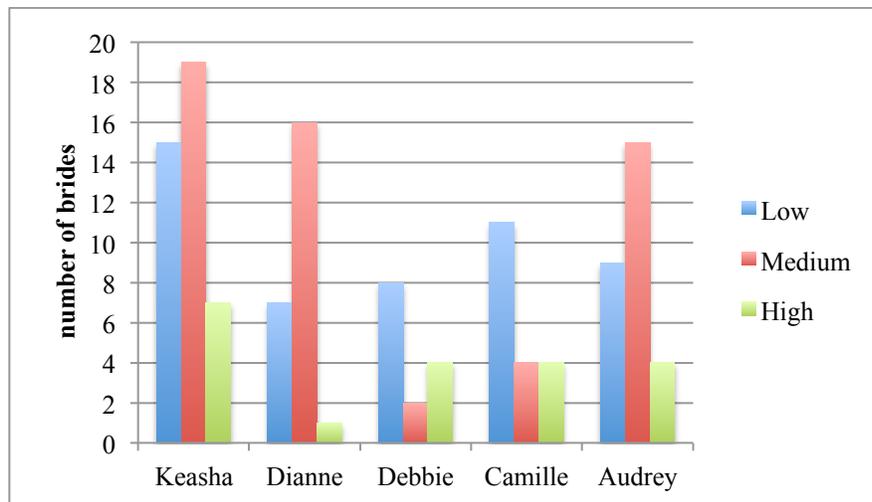
Figure 2:Number of brides in each budget category by consultant.

The managers of Kleinfeld make the decisions about what consultant to pair with what bride, as Elise, one of the managers, explains in the very first episode of the show. The viewing audience is not privy to how this pairing is made, or why, for example, Keasha has so many High budget brides, and Dianne has so few. Brides may request to work with a particular consultant, but beyond that, these pairings may be based on sales records, personality, or some other factor (including producer preferences) that may help to further explain the individual differences among the consultants, but which is not currently known.

Another significant factor was whether the consultant was talking *to* the bride (or family/friends), or whether she was talking *about* the bride, either to another employee or to the camera. Tokens in this first category are labeled Audience, and those in the second are called Referee. Table 4 shows that when the consultants spoke directly to the bride or a member of her party, there was a lower probability for [r-1] than when the consultant spoke either to the camera after the show, or to another employee of the store, with neither the client or any of her party present. Referee tokens were overwhelmingly produced in the post-show interviews (1151/1207).

Speech Design	N	%	Factor Weight
Audience	547/1284	43	.461
Referee	665/1207	55	.539

Table 4: Effect of Speech Design.

The finding that referee-designed speech in the context of this show has a higher probability for [r-1] suggests that there is a heightened awareness on the part of the consultants that they are being filmed when they are speaking to the camera about previously-taped events. In other words, in cases of referee-designed speech in the context of the current study, we are observing their speech when the speakers may be most aware that they are being observed—precisely the situation Labov worked to circumvent in his development of the rapid and anonymous survey in the original department store study. More sociolinguistic work on reality television, in particular investigating variation that arises between speech during the "action" of the show and that which occurs afterwards in the interviews, might shed additional light on this particular result.

As discussed above, a factor group was included to control for the effect of non-rhoticity in the audience. Several studies have demonstrated that the speech of the audience can exert significant effects on variants, such that there may be an accommodation effect occurring, with more /r/-lessness appearing in the consultants' speech when the bride she is working with (or more often, an older family member of the bride) also exhibits /r/-lessness.

[r-0] in Bridal Party	N	%	Factor Weight
yes	346/644	54	.537
no	866/1846	47	.469

Table 5: Effect of Non-Rhoticity in the Audience.

The results of the model show that the presence of a variably non-rhotic speaker in the bridal party does indeed have an effect on [r-1] in the consultants' speech, but in the opposite direction to what we would expect. There is a slightly higher probability for [r-1] to be used by the consultants when there *is* someone in the bridal party who also has /r/-lessness as a feature in their speech. We venture that the consultants become more aware of their own use of this stigmatized variant when they are speaking with someone who is variably /r/-lessness, a phenomenon which may be heightened by the fact that they are being taped for a nationally-broadcasted television show, an explanation also applied to the results for speech design. Again, this is purely speculation, and cannot be confirmed with the data presented here.

4.3 Interactions

Two interactions were run: Speaker x Budget, and Speaker x Non-Rhoticity in the audience. Of these, only the second was selected as significant, and is graphed in Figure 3 below.
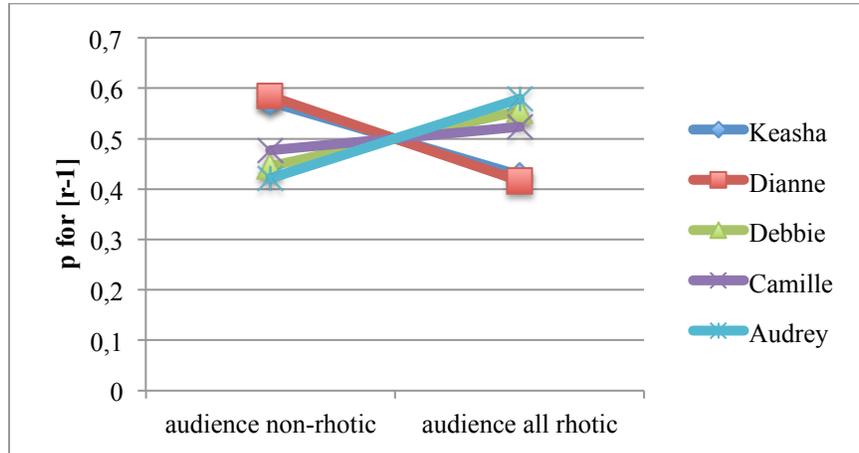

Figure 3: Interaction between speaker and non-rhoticity in audience.

As Figure 3 shows, the consultants behave quite differently when there is someone in the audience (the bride or her family and friends) who also are variably non-rhotic. Audrey, Debbie, and Camille all show a lower probability for [r-0] when the audience also exhibits r-lessness. Based on a theory of speech accommodation (Bell, 1984), this is precisely what we would predict. On the other hand, Keasha and Dianne both show a *higher* tendency for [r-1] when the audience is non-rhotic, a somewhat unexpected result. In other words, Keasha and Dianne seem to exhibit disaccommodation, in using higher rates of [r-1] when their interlocutors exhibit [r-0]. It may be that Dianne and Keasha are more sensitive to the social meanings of /r/, in particular the prestige element, or it may be that they are more aware of their outward appearance on the nationally-broadcast reality television show. Both of these possibilities also are supported by the finding that Keasha and Dianne have the highest rates of [r-1] overall in the data set. And in particular, for Keasha, as an African American woman, there may be a heightened sense of having to use more of the prestige variant, in a similar manner to the hypercorrectness of the lower middle class (Labov, 2001). Unfortunately, as these conjectures cannot be tested with the data presented here, such speculation remains just that.

5 Discussion

The work presented here shows that even in the context of reality television, the constraints on /r/ in terms of social status are still present. There are important similarities and differences between this study and the department store study, as discussed above. However, we have found in a manner parallel to the department store studies, that the consultants in this high-end salon are sensitive to social prestige, and use the brides' budget as a way to gauge that status. We found that beyond the internal factors that constrain /r/ vocalization, the budget of the bride was selected as a significant predictor of the rhotic variant, with a greater tendency for [r-1] when the budget is high. Furthermore, the individual consultants showed different preferences for the constricted variant as well, which may give indication of varying levels of sensitivity to the prestige indices of the variable, and/or awareness of their speech being nationally broadcast.

However, we wonder if the picture of variation is more complex than a reaction to the bride's budget and perceived social status. A great deal of work has been done showing that sociolinguistic variation can be linked to active speaker constructions of identity and presentations of self (e.g., Podesva, 2007; Schilling-Estes, 1998). Although it is beyond the limits of our analysis to test such speaker motivations, we can consider the interactional roles that the speakers frequently take up on

the show, and how meanings of the variants of /r/ may be connected to such speaker positions.

All of the bridal consultants have the same goal: to sell a dress, and to sell the highest priced dress they can. Thus, they are all driven by the same concrete motivations during the interactions on the show. In working towards their goal of making a sale, all of the consultants consistently engage in two particular interactional roles with their brides: Expert and Friend. In order to make the sale, the consultant must assure her bride that she is knowledgeable, but also be available to provide support during the bridal gown selection, which is presented throughout the show as an emotionally-charged event. Kleinfeld has the largest selection of designer wedding gowns, and each consultant must be an expert in all things bridal; she must be up-to-date with the latest bridal fashions, familiar with the over two-thousand dresses available in the store, and understand the anatomy of both dresses and women's bodies in order to make the perfect match/selection. At the same time, the brides are potentially going to spend a lot of money, and have come to the salon for the "Kleinfeld experience", and expect to be treated like a "princess". Consultants thus must act as friends to the bride, as they guide them through the emotional experience of selecting this all-important dress. This may include helping the bride make her opinion heard over that of her friends and family, or overcome insecurities about her body and help her feel beautiful in her dress. Below we provide two short excerpts from the show during which one consultant, Debbie, is acting as Expert (in (1) below) and Friend (in example (2). Each token of /r/ is marked with [r-1] or [r-0] next to it, to indicate the variant used in the interaction on the show. Both brides that Debbie is working with in the examples are completely r-ful and are in the Low budget category. Ellipsis marks enclosed in brackets indicate that the interaction was interleaved with other scenes on the show.

In the first example, Debbie is working with a client who is planning a vow renewal ceremony with her husband.

(1) Debbie as Expert.
Debbie:	So I think we should try this one. It doesn't have the color **[r-1]** but you know what you have all this dimensional flower **[r-1]** […]
Debbie:	Very different
Julie-Ann:	It is very different
Debbie:	You could actually see your **[r-1]** figure **[r-1]** through the tulle.

Debbie is pointing out specific features of the dress that she thinks will be appealing to Julie-Ann. She draws the bride's attention to specific details on the dress—the color, the decorative flower, and the material it is made of. In highlighting these various features of the dress, she is positioning herself as an expert, as someone who has the authority to speak about bridal wear. In doing so, she produces a string of tokens with the constricted variant. We suggest that Debbie is drawing on the social meanings of prestige attached to [r-1], which aid in her construction of expertise in this interaction (cf. Benor, 2001).

In the next example, a very different pattern of /r/ emerges, when Debbie talks with a bride who has recently suffered a personal tragedy.

(2) Debbie as Friend.
Debbie:	So that's why you have these feelings about this dress. You want her **[r-0]** spirit in this dress
Beth:	I do
Debbie:	Okay. I understand **[r-0]** that […]
Beth:	My- y'- I'm counting my bridesmaids and it doesn't, nothing feels right
Debbie:	She's there **[r-0]** though. Re-
Beth:	So
Debbie:	Just always remember **[r-0]** that. She is there **[r-0]** and she sees everything.

    Example 2 is highly representative of moments on the show when the consultant must provide emotional support for the bride. In this excerpt, Debbie and Beth are alone in the dressing room, and Beth has just revealed that her youngest sister recently passed away. Beth has tried on a wedding dress, but has explained that this tragedy is making it difficult for her to choose a gown. As Debbie offers comforting words to the bride, she consistently uses the non-rhotic variant, in sharp contrast to the previous example. Paired with her soothing tone of voice and concerned expression, Debbie moves the interaction with her bride beyond a standard business relationship between a consultant and client. Her use of [r-0] in these moments may be seen as helping to create make this shift in footing with the bride. At the same time that she consoles Beth, Debbie is working to move forward with the appointment. She smooths and straightens the gown, and adjusts the bustle in the back, all preparing Beth to go out of the dressing room to show her family and friends. This highlights the importance of balancing these two roles—Expert and Friend—in order to successfully close the sale with the bride.

6 Future Directions

While we have answered the question we posed at the start of this paper, that is, whether the brides' budget on the reality television show *Say Yes to the Dress* affects the bridal consultants' use of /r/ vocalization, there are further lines of research that would be fruitful to pursue. In particular, it would be interesting to examine in detail the discourse functions of /r/ on the show. As discussed above, the social meanings attached to /r/ may allow the consultants to construct their roles as Expert or Friend during interactions on the show. Beyond the short excerpts provided above, to what extent is this observation an actual trend that can be measured?

    Another question that this work raises is the nature of reality television as a source for sociolinguistic research. Since its inception, sociolinguistic scholarship has privileged speech that is spontaneously and unselfconsciously produced. The data source here, a reality television show, contains a great deal of speech that is likely neither spontaneous nor unselfconscious. While the show may not be scripted, it most probably contains segments that are rehearsed or re-taped for the viewing experience. Along these lines, the findings presented here surrounding the audience's use of the non-rhotic variant and its effect on the consultants is one that needs to be further explored, particularly in light of the different ways that the consultants behave in this regard—by either accommodating or disaccommodating to their audience. Although to date there is not a huge amount of sociolinguistic work on reality television at this point, there has been some research exploring this medium in the field (Bakht, 2010; Thornborrow & Morris, 2004). The possibilities and limitations of reality TV for sociolinguistic data analysis is something that needs to be tackled in going forward with work in this area.

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