

‘Water’ and Jamaican Identity:

An Exploration into the usage of North American variants among Jamaican university students living in North America

by Emma Miles

Introduction

In Jamaica, the distinctive pronunciation of the word ‘water’ has garnered an iconic status. Jamaicans realise the intervocalic /t/ as a stop, thereby showing no instance of flapping. Moreover, the unstressed final /r/ is dropped. In fact, one of the leading brands of bottled water in Jamaica is ‘WATA’, highlighting the consciousness of this unique pronunciation. Intervocalic /t/ and the dropping of unstressed final /r/ transcend beyond the pronunciation of ‘water’, and are characteristic of Jamaican English.

In my six years of living in Canada, I’ve observed many Jamaicans alter the way they pronounce words like ‘water’, when communicating with North Americans. Such individuals may choose to articulate the final /r/, or do so in combination with flapping. Such observations have inspired my investigation into the presence of these two variables among several speech styles. The use of flapping and unstressed final /r/ will be examined among male and female Jamaican university students living in North America. The sex of the speaker, as well as the nationality of the interviewer, will also be examined in its effect on the presence of these two variables.

The Speech Community

The Jamaican language situation is one characterized by the presence of a speech continuum, where the versions of the acrolect and basilect differ from each other lexically, morphologically and syntactically. In Jamaica, language is used as a marker of social status. The basilect Jamaican creole (known as Patois) is likely to be used by uneducated or socio-economically disadvantaged speakers and is natively available to nearly all Jamaicans. On the other hand, the acrolect Jamaica Standard English is a variety spoken by a small minority: educated and affluent Jamaicans. It is the language of prestige, offered as a model in education, the workplace and the media.

Focusing my sample on Jamaican university students living in North America will allow for a relatively homogeneous group in terms of social class and age, as well as their speech. These individuals will fall on the higher end of the speech continuum and are speakers of Jamaican

Standard English. Moreover, when linguistic research is conducted in Jamaica, it is conventionally devoted to the study of Jamaican Patois. Thus, focusing on the speech of this minority population who speaks Jamaican Standard English is essential in providing a more holistic view of Jamaican English.

Flapping and Unstressed final /r/ in Jamaican English

In examining the presence of flapping, intervocalic /t/ is realised as a stop among all speakers of Jamaican English, no matter their position on the speech continuum. Thus, Jamaican English contains no evidence for flapping, with intervocalic /t/ never being realised as a flap. The variants concerning flapping will include the intervocalic /t/ being realised as a stop, i.e. “the Jamaican variant”, and the intervocalic /t/ being realised as a flap, i.e. “the North American variant”.

The presence of unstressed final /r/ is more complex in Jamaican English. Jamaican English is known as a semi-rhotic variety of English, where /r/ is always pronounced before vowels, in monosyllables or stressed syllables at the ends of the words (e.g. in ‘car’ or ‘dare’). However, /r/ is not pronounced at the end of unstressed syllables (e.g. in ‘water’) or before consonants (e.g. ‘interview’). This semi-rhoticity can be explained as a consequence of incomplete accommodation in a diverse contact scenario. It may therefore be the case that the accommodation of rhotic varieties brought to Jamaica in the 16th and 17th centuries was incomplete.,

The dropping of /r/ in unstressed syllables at the end of the word as a feature of Jamaican English is widely supported. Wells (1982) claims that “the usual unmonitored production for all social classes in Jamaica is non-rhotic” in respect to words with unstressed final /r/.³ Even in Jamaican patois, where /r/ is retained in morpheme final position, this retention does not take place with unstressed final /r/.⁴ However, Wells (1982) also contends that the presence of unstressed final /r/ is determined by speech style, citing differences in “careful” vs “unmonitored pronunciation”.⁵ Likewise, Akers (1981) describes the deletion of word-final /r/ as favoured in “unmonitored speech”, while the realisation of word-final /r/ is favoured in “monitored speech styles”.⁶ On the other hand, Rosenfelder (2009) argues for a pattern where the presence of /r/ decreases with increasing level of formality among Jamaican Standard English speakers., The greatest realisations of /r/ took place in “conversations”, the most casual speech style evaluated in her study, whereas the most formal speech styles “radio hosts” and “newscasters” had the lowest incidence of postvocalic /r/.⁸ The realisation of postvocalic /r/ constitutes the exception, rather than the norm, in educated Jamaican English, with 78% of Jamaican Standard English speakers having no realisation of postvocalic /r/.⁹ The variants

concerning unstressed final /r/ will be the articulation of this unstressed final /r/, i.e. “the North American variant”, and the dropping of this /r/, i.e. “the Jamaican variant”.

Hypotheses

My first hypothesis involves a comparison between the presence of the two variables. Since flapping does not take place whatsoever in Jamaican English, whereas /r/ is systematically articulated some of the time, I predicted that there will be more instances of unstressed final /r/ than flapping.

I also predicted that there will be greater usage of the North American variants among the female students than the male students. Labov (1990) argues that women lead in adopting norms external to a speech community; they lead in the acquisition of new prestige patterns and in eliminating stigmatized forms.¹⁰ Such behaviours are characteristic of a group with high linguistic insecurity.¹¹ Additionally, women being more socially aware of variation, react more to it than men.¹² Since women appear to be the more linguistically insecure sex, I predicted that the female students will perceive the North American variants to carry prestige and accordingly, incorporate them more in their speech than the male students.¹³ The female students' linguistic insecurity will result in more convergence towards the norms of North American speech.

I also predicted that students interviewed by the Canadian interviewer will show greater usage of the North American variants than those interviewed by the Jamaican interviewer. I base this hypothesis on the assumption that there will be excess self-monitoring of speech in the presence of the Canadian interviewer, as this addressee belongs to a different speech community, thus motivating accommodation. Those interviewed by the Canadian interviewer will attune their speech to the norms associated with that interviewer¹⁴, and thus, the North American variants.

Therefore, I predicted that female students interviewed by the Canadian interviewer, will show the highest percentage of the North American variants, while male students interviewed by the Jamaican interviewer, will show the lowest percentage of these North American variants. Being both the more linguistically insecure sex, as well as being motivated to self-monitor their speech even more due to their interviewer, will result in more convergence towards North American speech than their Jamaican-interviewed male counterparts.

In respect to stylistic variation, I anticipated the opposite pattern proposed by Labov. Labov (1972) asserts that individuals pay more attention to their speech in more formal speech styles, and that the more attention paid to speech, the more standard the individual's speech

becomes.¹⁵ Rather, I expected that participants would show the most instances of North American variants in their casual speech rather than their formal speech. This prediction stems from a theory of accommodation, specifically one of convergence, rather than a theory of attention. With speakers attuning to the norms associated with the addressee, they are more likely to converge when actually conversing with someone (a more casual speech style), rather than reading something out loud (a formal speech style).

Greater Significance

Assessing the use of North American variants among Jamaicans living in North America serves greater importance than just mere curiosity. Jamaican English is a critical constituent of Jamaican culture, serving as a means of self-expression and national identity. However, when living outside of Jamaica, Jamaicans immigrants may feel the need to implement changes in their speech due to a very real fear of discrimination or ridicule, based on the way they speak.

In the United States, the Civil Rights Act prevents discrimination based on race or origin, but does not specify language, leaving room for interpretation, especially among employers.¹⁶ Likewise, while the Canadian Charters of Rights and Freedoms does prohibit language as grounds for discrimination,¹⁷ this too is up for interpretation and individuals do not always classify regional varieties being applicable for blatant language discrimination. Three forms of accent discrimination have been raised in human rights cases in Canada: hiring decisions that inappropriately considered accents where accents did not impair communication, denial of access to jobs or rental accommodation, and harassment or ridicule of a speaker because of their accent.¹⁸ In a study conducted in Toronto, several accents were tested through telephone contact with potential employers. Henry (1999) observed differential screening took place, significantly favouring "local" dialect varieties over the Jamaican accent.¹⁹ Jamaican callers had to make 18 calls to attain 10 potential job interviews, while only 11 calls were needed among local accents to attain the same number of interviews.²⁰

The extent to which Jamaicans may find the need to change their speech patterns when living abroad, is clearly exemplified in interviews conducted with Jamaicans in Toronto.²¹ Basch (1994) found that 58% of the Jamaicans either had Canadian accents or alternated between their Jamaican and Canadian accent, while the remaining 42% consistently had their Jamaican accent. With such a close connection between speech and identity, Jamaican immigrants' identities essentially change as they acculturate their speech in North America.

Currently, over one million Jamaican immigrants live in the United States,²² along with over 250,000 in Canada.²³ Almost every Jamaican has at least one relative residing permanently in the

United States or Canada, with whom contact is maintained₂₄. Thus, the changing speech patterns among Jamaican immigrants living in North America may have the potential of influencing Jamaican speech and culture at home. This study will address the extent to which Jamaicans feel the need to alter their speech patterns when living in North America.

Method

The participants chosen were ten male and ten female Jamaican university students living in either the United States or Canada, who were known to have lived in Jamaica for the majority of their lives. Moreover, all participants were known to be speakers of Jamaican Standard English. Participants were contacted in person or by Facebook messenger to see if they would like to partake in the study.

Labovian-style sociolinguistic interviews were conducted, consisting of four structured parts to evaluate four different speech styles. Participants were asked to read out loud i) a list of minimal pairs, ii) a word list and iii) a short narrative. They were also iv) asked questions about themselves and their school and work experiences. Interviews were conducted in person and on FaceTime for participants not available in Montreal. It was crucial that in both settings, the participant and interviewer maintained facial interaction. Interviews were recorded using the voice recording feature on QuickTime Player.

In examining whether the presence of the Canadian interviewer had an effect on the speech of participants, half of the interviews were led by myself (a speaker of Jamaican Standard English), and the other half were led by a female Canadian university student. Minimal pairs, word lists and the reading passage all provided pre-determined potential occurrences of flapping and unstressed final /r/. To determine the tokens that would potentially contain flapping and unstressed final /r/ in casual speech, the casual section of each interview was transcribed.

All data was manipulated into an Excel spreadsheet. For each participant, under each speech style, the number of occurrences of the variable in question was expressed as a percentage of the potential number of realisations for that variable. This provided the participant's mean use of that variable for each speech style (Appendix 1). The mean of these speech style percentages was then calculated, assigning each participant a percentage indicating their overall mean usage of the variable in question (Appendix 1). This allowed for the participant to be grouped with other participants in order to derive certain conclusions.

To facilitate a comparison between the overall use of the two variables, the mean amount of flapping was compared to the mean amount of unstressed final /r/. Each variable's overall

mean was calculated by finding the mean of the 20 participants' percentages for that respective variable.

In evaluating the effect of speaker's sex on their use of the variable in question, the 20 participants were divided into two groups, 10 males and 10 females. Each group's overall use of the variable in question was calculated by finding the mean of the percentages of the 10 participants of that group.

The 20 participants were also divided into two groups according to their interviewer situation, with 10 Jamaican-interviewed participants and 10 Canadian-interviewed participants. This grouping is to assess the effect of the interviewer on the participants' use of the variables. Likewise, each group's overall use of the variable in question was calculated by finding the mean of the percentages of the 10 participants of that group.

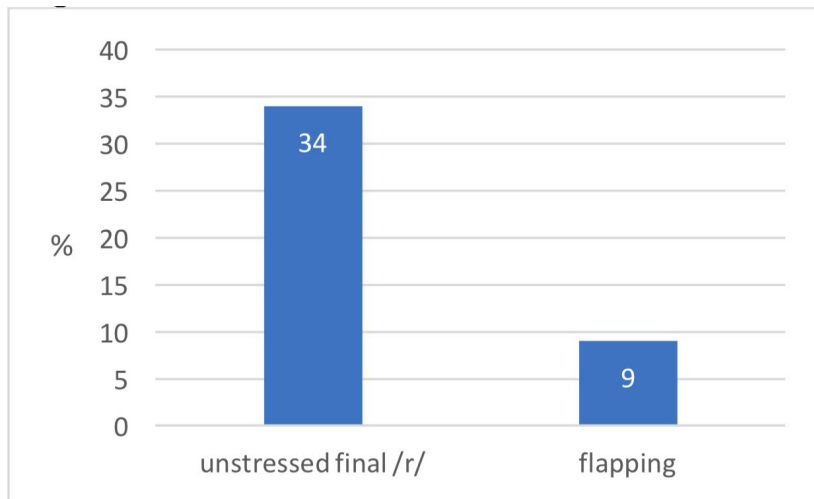
Lastly, the 20 participants were grouped both by their sex and their interviewer situation, forming 4 groups: Jamaican-interviewed males, Canadian-interviewed males, Jamaican-interviewed females and Canadian-interviewed females (Table 1). Each of these 4 groups consisted of 5 participants. This grouping allowed for an evaluation of both the effect of the speaker's sex and the effect of the interviewer on their use of the variables.

To evaluate stylistic variation, the mean for each speech style was calculated, for the variable in question. This was done by calculating the mean of the 20 participants' percentages for that speech style. In total, four means were calculated: the minimal pairs percentages, the word lists percentages, the reading passages percentages, and the casual speech percentages.

All statistical tests (t-tests) were performed in Excel. In calculating the significance of stylistic variation, the most formal speech style, minimal pairs, was compared to the most informal style, casual speech.

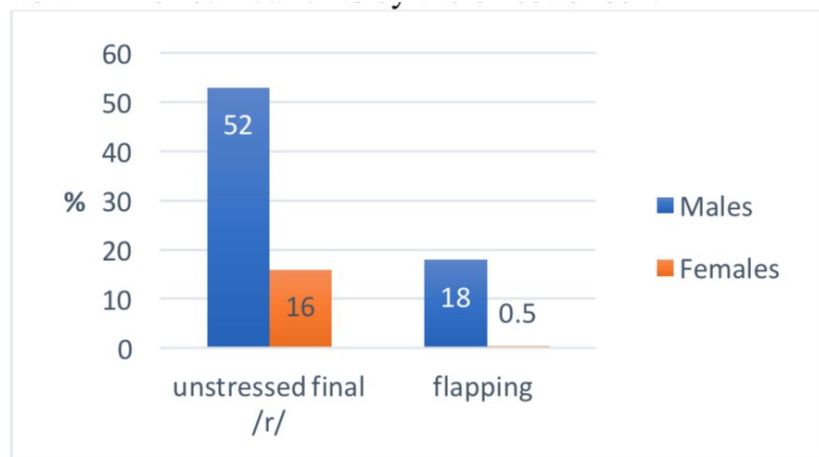
Results

Figure 1. The overall usage of the North American variants.



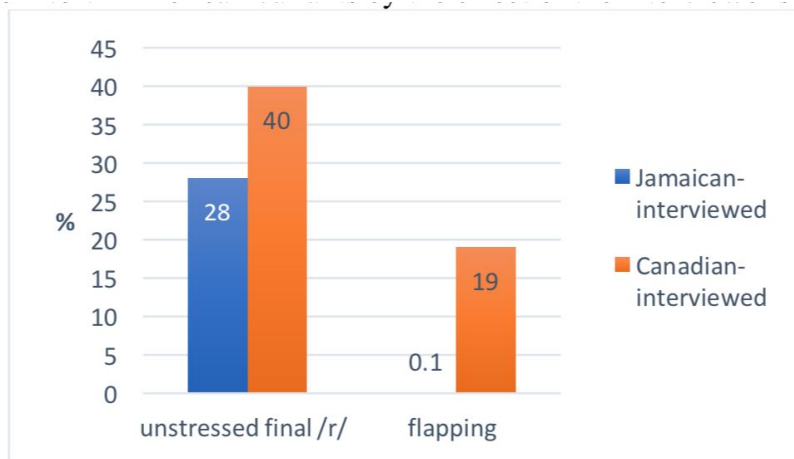
Shown is the overall usage of unstressed final /r/ and flapping among all 20 participants in all speech styles. The difference in the use of the two variables proved to be significant at $p = 0.019$.

Figure 2. Frequency of North American variants by the effect of sex.



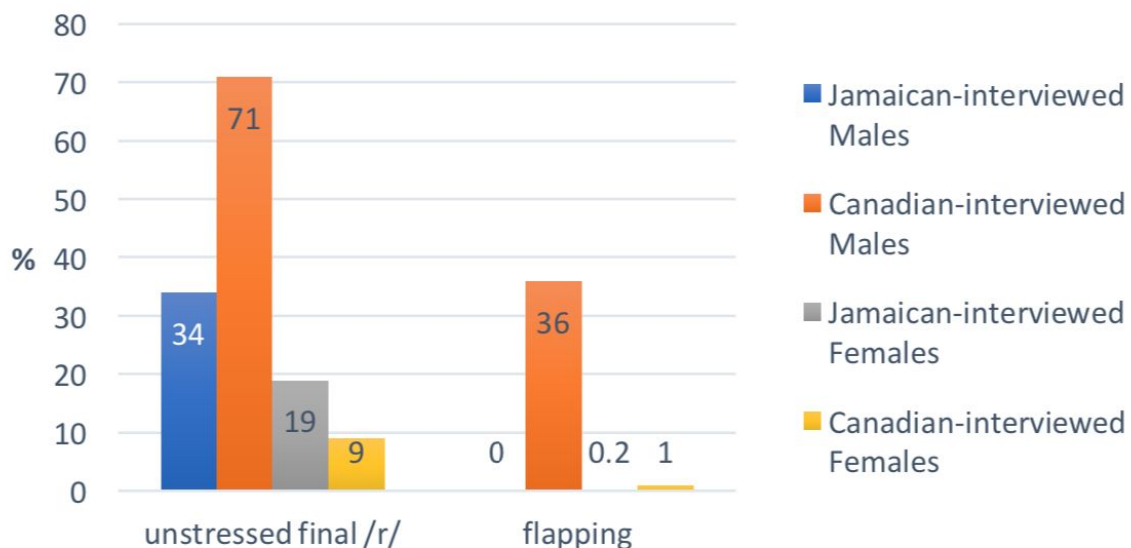
Shown is the mean percentage of unstressed final /r/ and flapping for male and female speakers across all speech styles. The difference between males and females in their use of unstressed final /r/ was found to be significant at $p = 0.025$. However, the difference between males and females in their use of flapping was found to be non-significant ($p > 0.05$).

Figure 3. Frequency of North American variants by the effect of the interviewer situation.



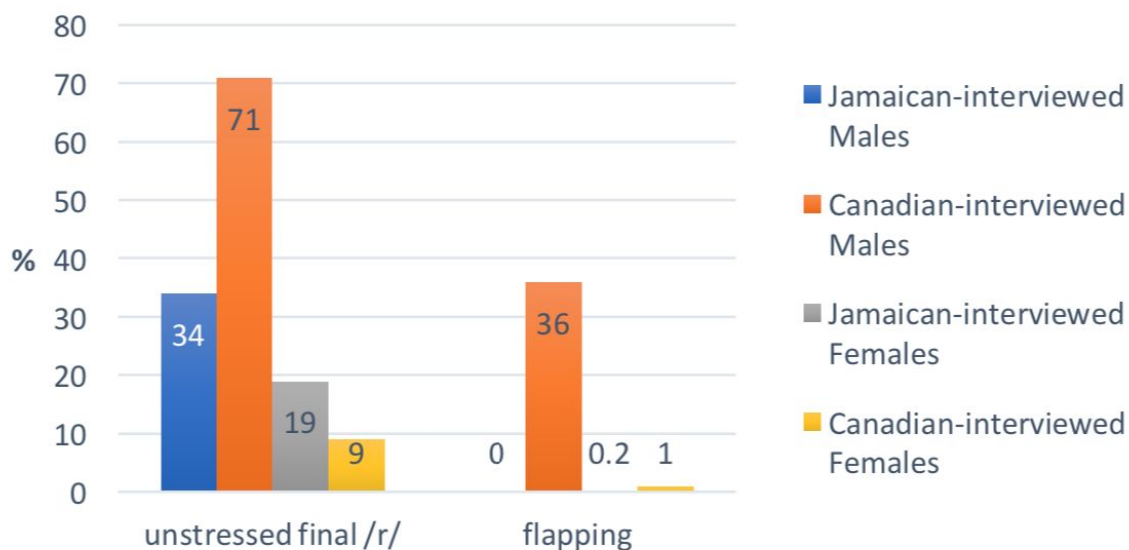
Shown is the mean percentage of the usage of unstressed final /r/ and flapping for Jamaican-interviewed and Canadian-interviewed participants across all speech styles. For both unstressed final /r/ and flapping, the differences between Jamaican-interviewed participants and Canadian-interviewed participants were found to be non-significant ($p > 0.05$).

Figure 4. Frequency of North American variants organised by sex and interviewer.



Shown is the mean percentage of unstressed final /r/ and flapping for Jamaican-interviewed males and females, and Canadian-interviewed males and females, across all speech styles. For unstressed final /r/, the difference between Canadian-interviewed males and Canadian-interviewed females was found to be significant at $p = 0.027$. However, the differences between all other group combinations, for both unstressed final /r/ and flapping, were found to be non-significant ($p > 0.05$).

Figure 5. Stylistic variation among all participants.



Shown is the mean percentage of unstressed final /r/ and flapping for all participants organised according to speech style. For unstressed final /r/, the difference between minimal pairs and casual speech, was found to be significant at $p = 0.34$. However, for flapping the difference between minimal pairs and casual speech, was found to be non-significant ($p > 0.05$).

Analysis

In their overall production of North American variants, participants were more likely to produce the unstressed final /r/ than to flap, with this difference being significant (Figure 1). Similar to the results found by Rosenfelder (2009), while more popular than flapping, the realisation of unstressed final /r/ is the exception rather than the norm among speakers of Jamaican Standard English²⁵, with the total usage of unstressed final /r/ amounting to 34%.

Unstressed final /r/ being the more popular North American variant of choice suggests that it is more acceptable for Jamaicans to alter their speech to include the unstressed final /r/ rather than flapping. Incorporating unstressed final /r/ may prove simpler than incorporating flapping as the realisation of /r/ does take place in other contexts in Jamaican English, whereas flapping can be identified as a North American form, foreign to Jamaican English.

Furthermore, Jamaicans may be more inclined to incorporate unstressed final /r/ in their speech, as the presence of this variable is more aligned with the spelling of the words that contain it. Therefore, the dropping of unstressed final /r/ among Jamaicans may cause difficulty in being understood by North Americans. However, for flapping, Jamaicans' realisation of intervocalic /t/ aligns more with the spelling of the words that contain flapping. This may

suggest less need among Jamaicans for incorporating flapping into their speech, as North Americans may still understand them despite differences in their dialects.

The graph in Figure 2 indicates that there are sex differences in the usage of the two variables. Unexpectedly, male participants produced more instances of unstressed final /r/ and flapped more than the female participants, whose flapping was almost non-existent. The sex differences in the use of unstressed final /r/ were so great, they proved significant. However, the sex differences of flapping were not significant.

Male students producing the higher percentage of the North American variants may suggest that they feel a stronger need to converge their speech towards North American than their female counterparts. It appears that female students do not perceive these North American variants as carrying prestige, and as a result, they do not feel the need to incorporate them as much in their speech. While women are typically the ones to hold less powerful positions in society₂₆, I would argue that being a female Jamaican immigrant in North America holds more status and carries less threatening stereotypes than being a male Jamaican immigrant in North America. The female students appear more linguistically secure in their speech. They feel less of a need to win over the approval of their addressees by making changes to their speech, thus being aware of the variation taking place and reacting in a way that does not adopt it.

As shown in Figure 3, participants interviewed by the Canadian interviewer had produced more instances of unstressed final /r/ and flapping than their Jamaican-interviewed counterparts. However, the difference between the Canadian-interviewed and Jamaican-interviewed participants was not significant for either of the variables.

In his audience design, Bell (1984) postulates that speakers are aware of the variation in linguistic behaviour of different social groups in the larger speech community₂₇. The addressee is therefore perceived and categorised as a representative of a social group₂₈. Therefore, depending on who the participants were interviewed by, the interviewer was perceived either as a representative of the Jamaican upper-middle class (belonging to the Jamaican Standard English speech community), or as a representative of the Canadian upper-middle class (belonging to a generalisable North American English speech community). Consequently, the speaker's understanding of the characteristic features of that group's speech is used as the basis for designing appropriate responses to the addressee₂₉. This suggests that the participants interviewed by the Canadian interviewer were more likely to use North American variants, in using the context of North American English as a basis for their responses.

Speakers attuning their norms to ones associated with the different addressees₃₀, may also assist in explaining why Jamaican-interviewed participants also had instances of unstressed final /r/ despite their interviewer being Jamaican. This may be attributed to the fact that the Jamaican

interviewer was known by the participants to currently be living in North America. Thus, the participants may have perceived the Jamaican interviewer to be accustomed to North American English and the use of these North American variants in everyday speech. Therefore, the Jamaican-interviewed participants may have continued using North American variants as they assumed the use of such variants would not be perceived as strange or incomprehensible by the Jamaican interviewer.

Figure 4 indicates that for both variables, Canadian-interviewed males surpass all other groups in their usage of the North American variants. As Jamaican males interviewed by a Canadian, this group's possession of the highest frequency of North American variants, may be attributed to their even greater need for convergence relative to the other groups. Furthermore, despite unstressed final /r/ clearly being the more popular North American variant, Canadian-interviewed males' use of flapping was disproportionately high compared to the other groups, especially as there was literal non-occurrence among Jamaican-interviewed males. This occurrence may be interpreted as a sort of hypercorrect behaviour, where Canadian-interviewed males feel the need to hypercorrect in their flapping, far beyond its low expected use. Flapping's virtual non-occurrence among the other two groups may be explained by its perception as a North American variant not so crucial in adopting.

After Canadian-interviewed males, the greatest use of unstressed final /r/ was followed by Jamaican-interviewed males, showing that their need for convergence based on their sex was still vital. Their usage surpassed both the Jamaican-interviewed and Canadian-interviewed females, with the Canadian-interviewed females being the lowest users of unstressed final /r/. Moreover, this group's performance in flapping was almost non-existent. This unexpected behaviour may be connected to the females' linguistic security. Even when interviewed by the Canadian interviewer, the female participants appear to be linguistically secure in their speech, barely feeling the need to accommodate their speech towards convergence.

The only statistically significant difference amongst all groups' use of the variables, was the use of unstressed final /r/ between the Canadian-interviewed males and Canadian-interviewed females. In respect to accommodation theory, this may suggest that Canadian-interviewed males feel the need to converge the most to their surroundings, while Canadian-interviewed females feel the least need for convergence.

In assessing stylistic variation, Figure 5 indicates the occurrence of two separate patterns for the two variables. The most instances of unstressed final /r/ can be found in minimal pairs, the most formal speech style. A gradual decrease in usage can be seen the more casual the speech becomes, with the least amount of unstressed final /r/ occurring in casual speech, the most informal style. This difference in the most formal and least formal speech styles proved significant. On the other hand, a more stagnant pattern can be observed for flapping, where

speakers flap the most in casual speech, and flap the least in minimal pairs and word lists. However, the occurrence of flapping in all the speech styles is so miniscule with almost non-noticeable differences amongst the styles, barely allowing for a gradual pattern, explaining the lack of significant difference.

The greatest usage of unstressed final /r/ in the most formal style may be attributed to accommodation taking place in way that was unexpected. Instead of using this North American variant the most in their casual speech, which provided a more direct inter-speaker interaction, speakers may be attuning their behaviour the most to the norms they've been socialised with for the formal styles. All formal styles in the interview included the task of reading aloud, a task in which speakers have been socialised in school or testing settings to use careful speech.

Therefore, the articulation of unstressed final /r/ may be perceived to be more appropriate the more formal the speech style. This greatly contradicts Rosenfelder (1990), but aligns with Akers (1981) whose research found that the deletion of word-final /r/ was favoured in "unmonitored speech", and the realisation of word-final /r/ was favoured in "monitored speech styles".³¹ Minimal pairs and word lists may be perceived as more monitored speech styles, where individuals pay more attention to their speech.³² In paying more attention to their speech, their speech becomes more "standard".³³ This would suggest the speakers of Jamaican Standard English interpret the articulation of unstressed final /r/ as a standard variant. Such a shift in perception of the standard was not predicted, as these speakers' use of the Jamaican variants within Jamaican contexts is viewed as the standard to be attained by all Jamaicans.

Conclusion

This study has addressed the extent to which speakers of Jamaican Standard English feel the need to alter their speech patterns when living in North America. An evident incorporation of North American variants (especially unstressed final /r/) in Jamaican speech, can be seen among Jamaican males, who have shown to be more linguistically insecure in their speech, and among those interviewed by a Canadian. Stylistic variation has also been observed.

In conducting the study, problems were encountered with the use of Facetime. Even though the technology facilitated facial interaction between the speaker and interviewer, barriers to communication still occurred. Therefore, I would suggest for all interviews to be carried out in person. Likewise, with a larger sample size and more time, I would suggest an alternative approach to the interview. I propose two interviews be designed for each participant, with each interview being conducted by a different interviewer. This would truly assess the extent to

which Jamaican Standard English speakers alter their speech around North Americans versus Jamaicans.

Some directions for future research would be anonymously observing the speech of Jamaicans when interacting with fellow Jamaicans, and observing these same individuals' speech when interacting with North Americans. Moreover, looking into the underlying processes as to why Jamaicans change their speech, such as need for clarity, fear of discrimination and ridicule, would make for a compelling study.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 - The list of minimal pairs, a word list and reading passage participants were asked to read out loud in their interview.

general	danger
water	supportive
writer	after
getting	fate
butter	rider
metal	wedding
wetter	cucumber
misconception	women
later	bother
bitter	table
vegetable	finger
better	difference
turtle	flower
motor	wanted
conservative	number
sweater	another
city	excellence
author	paper
Saturday	certificate
teacher	colour
answer	either
pretty	book
copper	Peter
chocolate	sister

On Saturday, Peter went to the theater to meet a writer to discuss an upcoming play he was interested in investing in. Instead of getting there by bus, Peter took a motor cycle. He wasn't the best rider and knew this would entail some danger. It was finally summer and he had never rode in the city before when it wasn't winter. The sidewalks were lined with pretty flowers. Suddenly, it started to rain and Peter became bitter as there was water all over him. He arrived at the theater with dirty sneakers and an even wetter sweater. There was a little cafe inside the theater, and Peter asked the waiter if he could order a glass of water and some toast with butter. He then met with Conner, the writer of the play. Conner shared the idea of using his mother, father and daughter as actors. The plot included a neighbour who was begging for a dollar, and a turtle that could walk a kilometer. Peter looked down at the paper on which the script was written. He pointed his finger in disbelief, the paper

was filled with many colours, as if a child had drawn on it. He could count the number of errors. This was a proper waste of his time and he wanted an answer as to why Conner asked him to come, but didn't want to cause a bother. Instead, he got another drink and said he'd see him later.

writer

rider

AD 20

80-20

Adam

atom

bidder

bitter

latter

ladder

metal

medal

wetting

wedding