

Feedback 33 Report

Thanks to those of you who sent in participated in Feedback 33 on Linking /r/. We received a total of 102 responses to the questionnaire, both online and in hard copy, with 38 responses in Age group 4 (65+), 39 in Age group 3 (45-64), 11 in Age group 2 (25-44), and 14 in Age group 1 (10-24). In the results presented below, Age groups 1 and 2 have been put together, so as to create a reasonable base for comparison. Special thanks go to Irene Warfe, University of Ballarat, and Hans Colla, U3A Nuts & Bolts & Washers of English class, Geelong, for sending in multiple feedbacks.

Feedback 33 was designed to test to what extent respondents felt they used an 'r' sound to bridge the gap between words when one ends in a vowel sound and the next one begins with a vowel sound. The questionnaire was created and analysed with the assistance of Dr Felicity Cox, a phonetician at Macquarie University who specialises in Australian English speech.

The survey was structured to compare phrases where matching vowel sounds were followed by stressed or unstressed vowels. For example *far out* (stressed) and *far above* (unstressed). Overall, there appeared to be no gender difference, with males and females reporting approximately the same degree of 'r' liaison (males 66%, females 68%). This finding corresponded with the study by Buckley and Cox¹, which also found no gender effect.

There was, however, an age effect with the youngest group (10-44 year olds) reporting greatest incidence of 'r' at 76% compared with the middle groups 62% and the eldest group 65%. The percentage of occurrence of linking 'r' was approximately 75% in the Buckley and Cox data on read speech, which indicates either that older Feedback respondents use linking 'r' less, or are less aware of when they do use it.

There also appears to be a relationship between whether the following vowel is stressed or unstressed. When a strong vowel follows this seems to have an inhibiting effect for some items.

Table 1 displays the word combinations that displayed the highest and lowest overall returns for the presence of linking 'r':

Table 1

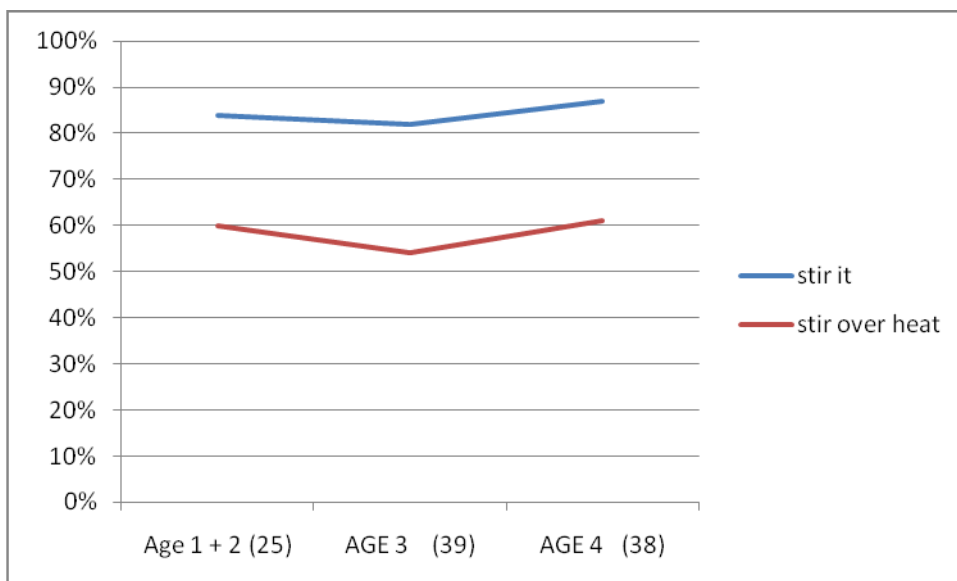
	Total	Age 1+ 2	Age 3	Age 4
<i>for ever</i>	84%	92%	82%	79%
<i>stir it</i>	84%	84%	82%	87%
<i>fair enough</i>	82%	84%	79%	84%
<i>upper atmosphere</i>	46%	56%	36%	47%
<i>Mr Allan</i>	50%	60%	41%	50%
<i>thaw out</i>	50%	60%	49%	42%

The fact that *for ever* comes at the top of the scale is probably influenced by the fact that it can be presented orthographically as a single word, *forever*, so a phonetic linkage between them seems natural (especially for the younger age group here). The influence of *forever* could account for the fact that this is the only one of the three showing linking 'r' most strongly that follows the 'r' sound with a stressed vowel.

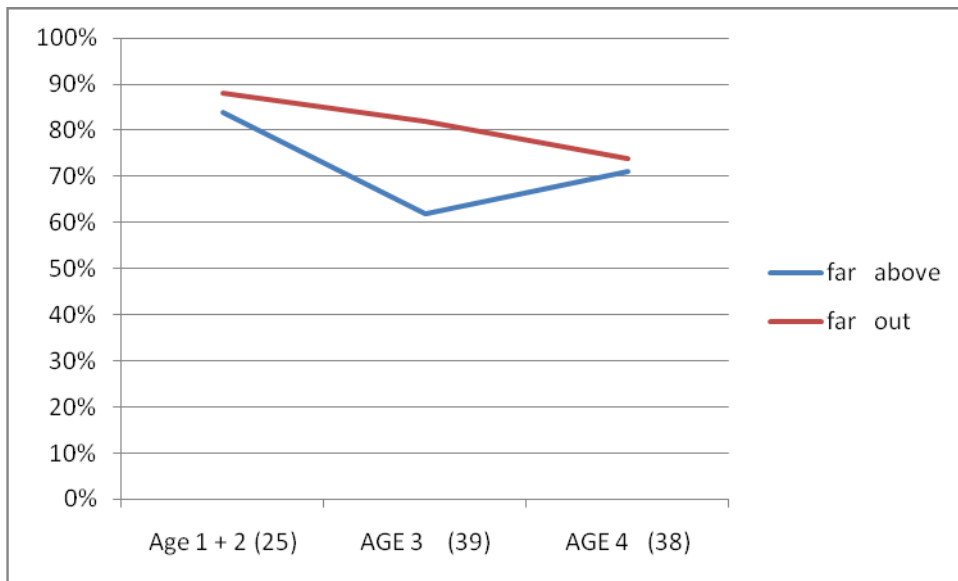
Conversely, each of the examples where linking 'r' is least prevalent follow the 'r' sound with a stressed vowel. There appear to be other factors at work here too. *Upper atmosphere* and *Mr Allan* are the only two examples out of the eighteen presented in the questionnaire where the first element consists of two syllables rather than one. In each case the stress falls on the first syllable of the first word and also on the first syllable of the second word. Inserting an 'r' would blur the boundary between the words. This type of boundary is an important one for rhythmic reasons and tends to be preserved in English.

There could well be an orthographic explanation for the lack of support for linking 'r' in *thaw out* – sometimes labelled an “intrusive r” because there is no 'r' in the written form of the word. Older respondents in particular are unwilling to convert the 'w' in *thaw* to a spoken 'r'. The age distinction appears even more pronounced in the other example containing a 'w' before the vowel, *law and order* (Age 1+2 - 76%, Age 3 - 51%, Age 4 - 42%). In this case, the frequency of the word combination might have an influence. Google searches showed *law and order* to be the 3rd most common collocation out of the eighteen instances in the survey, and it is likely to be particularly familiar to younger respondents through the popular US crime show of that name. The familiarity of the collocation is thus reinforced by the phonetic bridging of the gap between words.

Frequency might also have an influence on the choice over whether to include a linking 'r' in other cases. As mentioned above, there is more likely to be a linking 'r' before an unstressed syllable, and this expectation is born out when we look at pairs where the initial vowel sound matches, for example *stir it* and *stir over heat*:



The linking 'r' is clearly preferred across all age groups before the unstressed vowel in 'it', whereas it is less accepted before the stressed initial vowel of 'over'. The same pattern is true for the pairs *here or there/near other people*, *fair enough/their answer* and *law and order/thaw out*. For some other pairs, the tendency is not so clear cut, and this could be influenced by the comparative frequency of the word combination. For instance, *far out* (stressed) appears to be more common than *far above* (unstressed), and also shows a preference for the linking 'r' across age groups:



It would be wrong to place too much weight on a written study of speech practices, where respondents have to assess their own use of the linking or intrusive 'r', but it does appear that both phenomena are firmly entrenched in Australian English, and that the strong support shown by the youngest age group in this survey may indicate a growth in use.

For further information on phonetic characteristics of Australian English, go to <http://clas.mq.edu.au/voices/further-study>

¹ Buckley, L. and Cox, F. (2009) "Hiatus resolution and linking 'r' in Australian English". Paper presented at the Australian Language and Speech Conference, December 3-4, Sydney.