A department store study for the 21st century: Post-vocalic /r/ on TLC’s Say Yes to the Dress
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In 1966, Labov’s groundbreaking study of post-vocalic /r/ in New York City department stores demonstrated how social class and attention to speech are correlated with sociolinguistic variables (Labov, 1966). In addition, Labov demonstrated that the deletion of /r/ in post-vocalic position was on the decline in the city. Replications of the department store study in later decades (Fowler, 1986; Maher, 2011) found quite similar results to Labov’s initial study, and also confirmed that /r/ was on the decline in NYC speech, though the change has been a slow one (Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006). At the same time, the variable remains socially meaningful; Becker (2009) shows, for example, that /r/-lessness indexes local identity for some New Yorkers and can be used meaningfully in this way, in the construction of place identity.

The current study is a take on Labov’s classic department store investigation. I examine post-vocalic /r/ on the reality television program “Say Yes to the Dress,” which has been airing since 2007. On the show, women enter the New York City bridal boutique Kleinfeld’s to find their ideal wedding dress. Dresses in the store range in price from $1,500 to upwards of $50,000. The drama of the show centers on the consultants’ ability to find the perfect dress for the bride-to-be—one that she loves and one that falls within the amount she is willing to spend (budgets range from $1,500 to “unlimited”). I examine post-vocalic /r/ in the speech of five of the bridal consultants who work at the store, with the primary aim being to determine whether /r/ rates vary with the budget that the bride gives her consultant.

Preliminary results indicate that among the five consultants, there are significant differences in the use of /r/ depending on the budget of the client. This indicates that the consultants are sensitive to the social class indices of the variable, consonant with Labov’s department store study and subsequent replications. What is more, the five consultants show significant differences from one another in their individual rates of post-vocalic /r/. However, the consultants’ differing rates of /r/ underscore the fact that speakers’ use of sociolinguistic variables is not merely reactive, to the budget of the client, for example, but also has an active component, in which speakers create social personae through linguistic means. As numerous works have demonstrated, speakers draw on sociolinguistic variables as part of the creation of their overall personal style (e.g., Eckert, 2000; Podesva, 2007). Such identity constructions are explored in this paper as a means of understanding how this linguistic variable, while on the decline as a whole, maintains and is used for the social meaning it is imbued with. Additionally, I explore other variables, such as whether the bride or her family are rhotic or not, as well as the stance (see Englebretson, 2007; Kiesling, 2009) that the consultants take as they engage in these transactions with their clients.