

Variable rhoticity in rock music performance across British and American singers: New evidence for Singing English?

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Sociolinguistics

- Trudgil (1983)
 - 1960s and the 1970s **British rock bands**, mainly the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, **adopted rhotic pronunciation** in order **to sound more American**
- Coupland (2011), Gibson (2011)
 - **musicians adopt** given **accentual features** in singing **to build their on-stage image**
- Simpson (1999)
 - **musicians subconsciously adopt rhoticity** and other pronunciation features commonly associated with General American **due to the American influences in popular culture**

Phonetics (Wells 2010)

- less vowel reduction
 - $\text{ə} > \text{ɑ:}$ | $\text{ə} > \text{eɪ}$ (“Hallelujah”)
- lax vowels become tense
 - KIT > FLEECE (“still got the blues”)
- stress shifting
 - (')halle'lujah > hal'lelu'jah
- change in /r/ quality
 - uvular > post-alveolar / retroflex

Research questions

- Are British and American vocalists really imitating one another or is there a more universal **Singing English** which has its own set of rules?
- To what extent are singing constraints more responsible for the loss/retention of rhoticity?
- How different are rhoticity rates of the same speakers in spoken and sung English?

Hypothesis

- **adopting rhoticity** when singing **is dependent** not only on socio-cultural constraints, but also **on specific phonetic properties** that are associated with singing:
 - CONTEXT: **word-final** vs **pre-consonantal**
 - STRUCTURE: **verse** vs **chorus**
 - TEMPO: **slow** (< 100 bpm) vs **moderate** (~ 120 bpm) vs **fast** (> 120 bpm)
 - VOCAL DELIVERY: **normal** vs **fast**

The bands

- late 1960s – early 1970s
 - Led Zeppelin (London)
 - The Doors (Los Angeles)
- late 1970s – early 1980s
 - Joy Division (Salford)
 - Talking Heads (New York City)
- late 1990s – early 2000s
 - Arctic Monkeys (Sheffield)
 - Foo Fighters (Seattle)



The vocalists – % rhoticity in interviews

late 1960s – early 1970s

Robert Plant
Led Zeppelin



~0%

Jim Morrison
The Doors



~100%

late 1970s – early 1980s

Ian Curtis
Joy Division



~0%

David Byrne
Talking Heads



~100%

late 1990s – early 2000s

Alex Turner
Arctic Monkeys



~0%

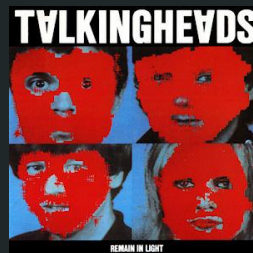
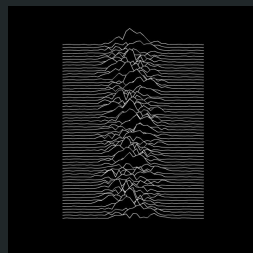
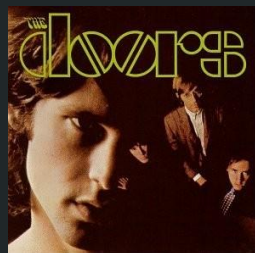
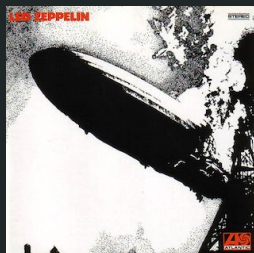
Dave Grohl
Foo Fighters



~100%

The songs

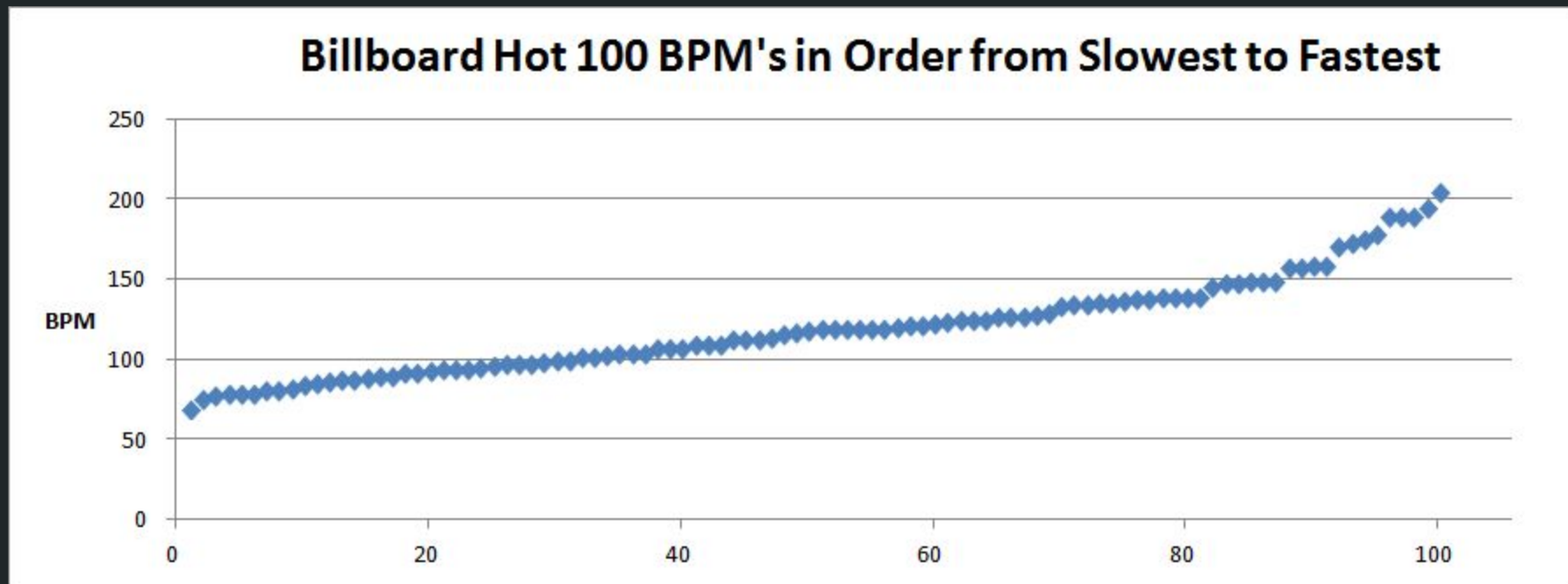
Led Zeppelin	The Doors	Joy Division	Talking Heads	Arctic Monkeys	Foo Fighters
<i>Communication Breakdown</i>	<i>Riders on the Storm</i>	<i>Love Will Tear Us Apart</i>	<i>Burning Down The House</i>	<i>I Bet You Look Good On The Dancefloor</i>	<i>Walk</i>
<i>Heartbreaker</i>	<i>Break On Through</i>	<i>She's Lost Control</i>	<i>Once in a Lifetime</i>	<i>R U Mine?</i>	<i>Rope</i>
<i>Immigrant Song</i>	<i>Light My Fire</i>	<i>Atmosphere</i>	<i>Mind</i>	<i>Do I Wanna Know?</i>	<i>Arlandria</i>
<i>Stairway to Heaven</i>	<i>Soul Kitchen</i>	<i>Disorder</i>	<i>Cities</i>	<i>Why'd You Only Call Me When You're High?</i>	<i>Dear Rosemary</i>



Data analysis – tempo (bpm)

	Tempo (BrE)	Tempo (AmE)
AVG	125.67	127.42
SD	38.46	20.80
MIN	85	103
MAX	206	183

Data analysis – tempo (bpm)



Source: <https://popmusictheory.com/song-tempo/>

Data analysis – % rhoticity

late 1960s – early 1970s

Robert Plant
Led Zeppelin



6.8%

Jim Morrison
The Doors



26.7%

late 1970s – early 1980s

Ian Curtis
Joy Division



62.2%

David Byrne
Talking Heads



63.2%

late 1990s – early 2000s

Alex Turner
Arctic Monkeys



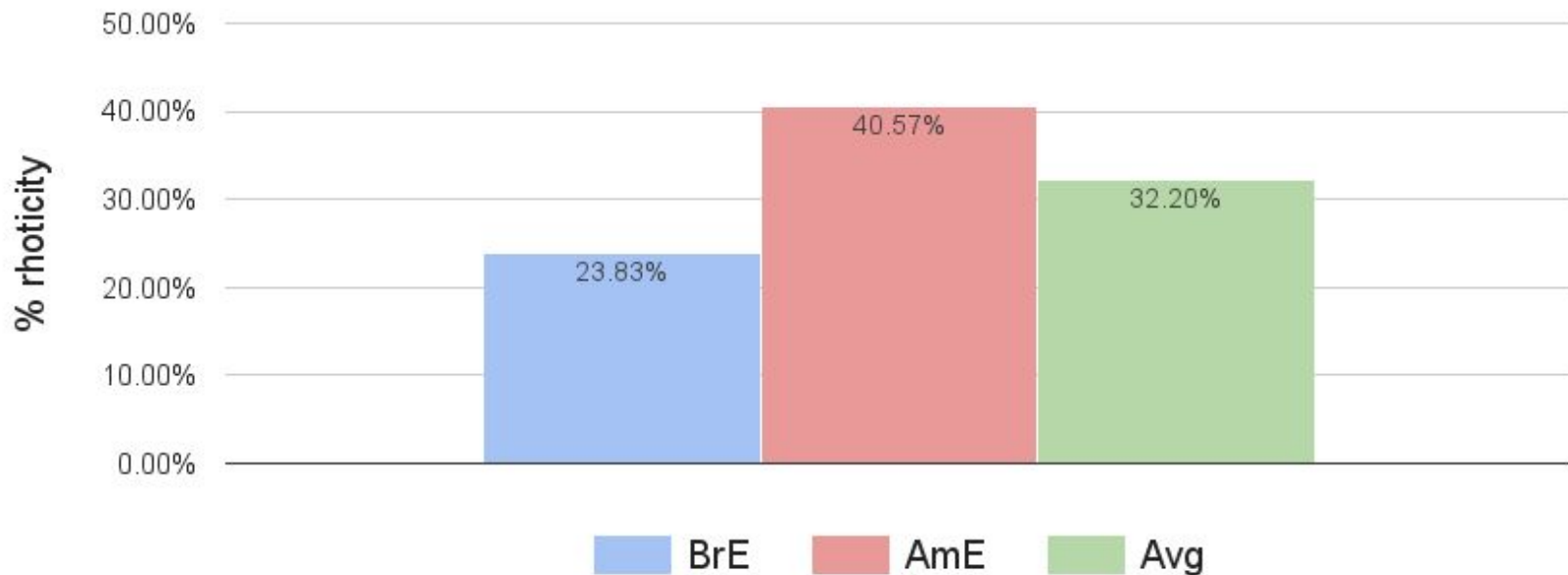
1.9%

Dave Grohl
Foo Fighters

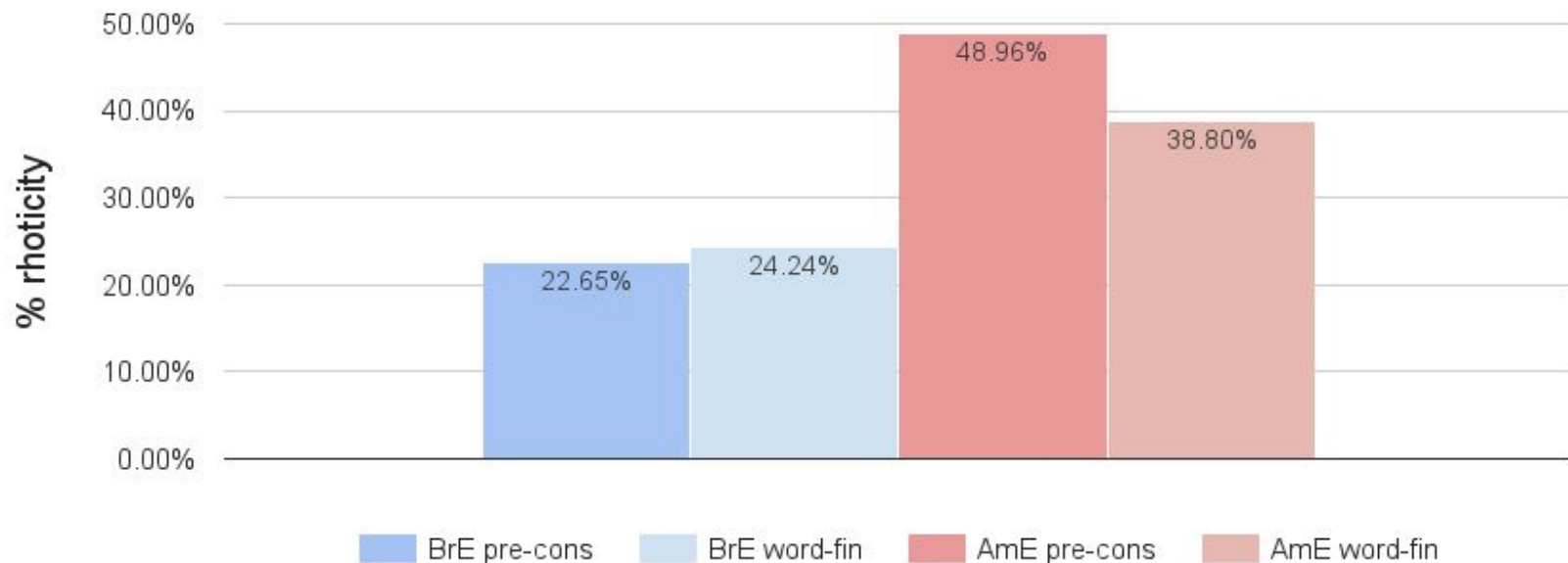


31.8%

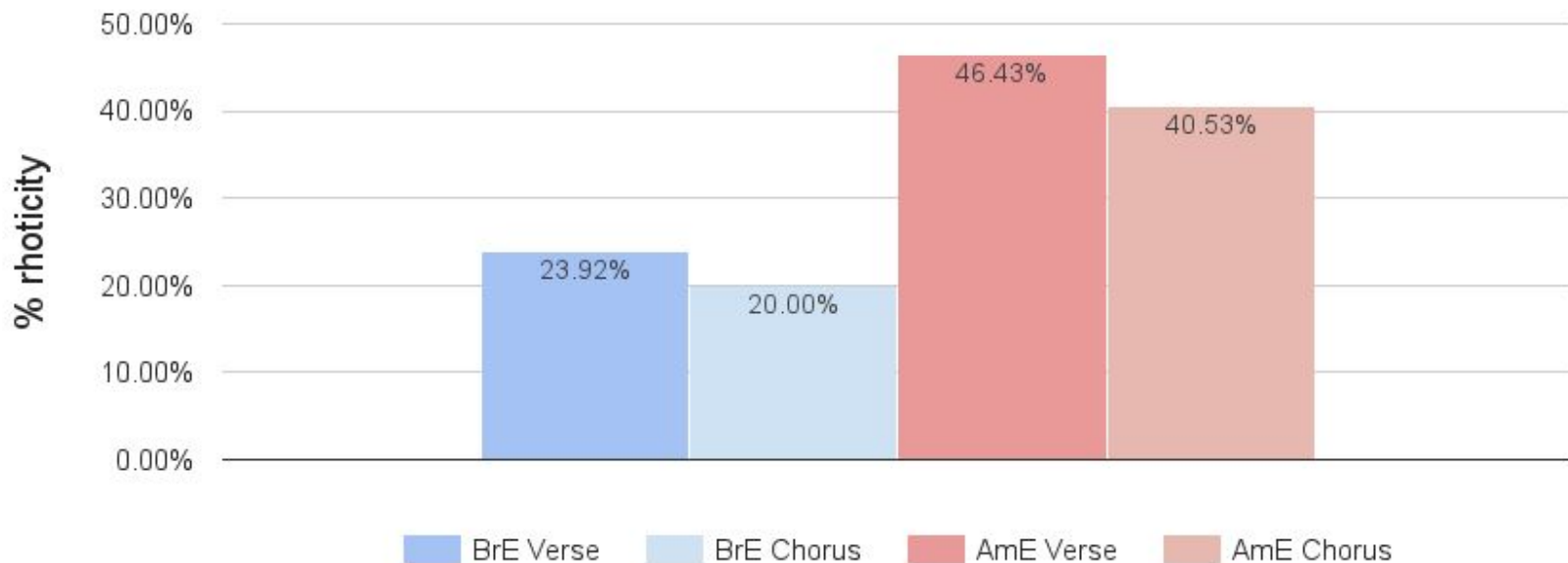
Data analysis – % rhoticity



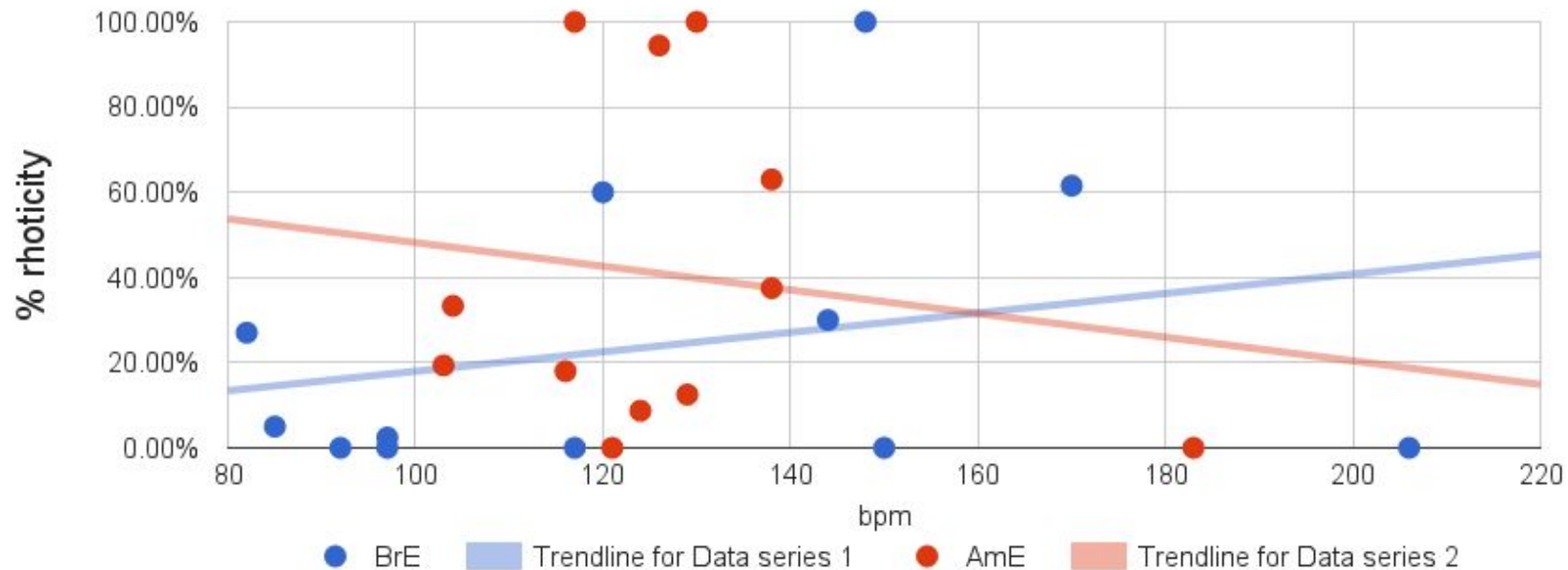
Data analysis – pre-consonantal vs word-final



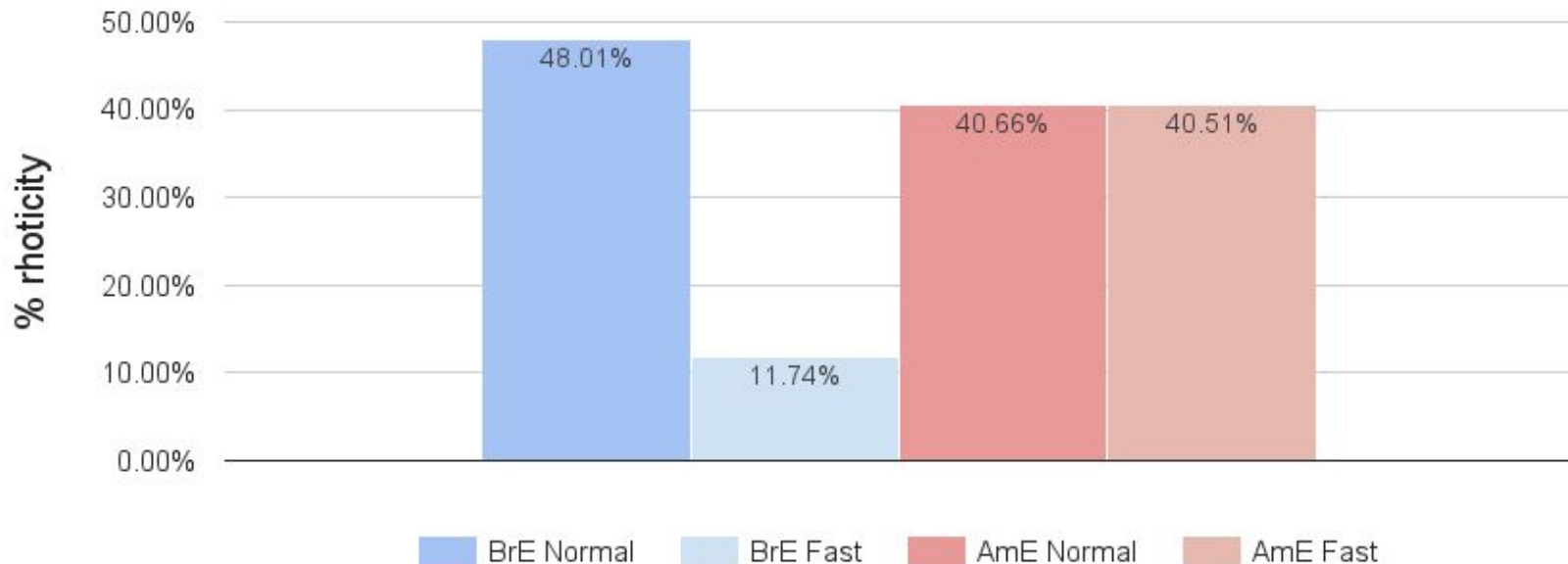
Data analysis – verse vs chorus



Data analysis – tempo (bpm) vs % rhoticity



Data analysis – tempo (vocal delivery) vs % rhoticity



Conclusions

- rhoticity rates of spoken English are drastically different from singing English
- rhoticity rates seem to be dependent on song tempos and vocal delivery
- British and American vocalists display different patterns for rhoticity
 - American vocalists seem to prefer non-rhotic variants in word-final positions
 - American vocalists have more non-rhotic variants in chorus parts than verse parts
 - British vocalists tend to have a more natural non-rhotic pronunciation when singing fast

Discussion

- artists tend to switch their accents during their career
- differences between studio recordings and live performance
- more data and statistical analysis needed

References

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