

Towards a description of the rhotic sounds of Northern Tosk Albanian

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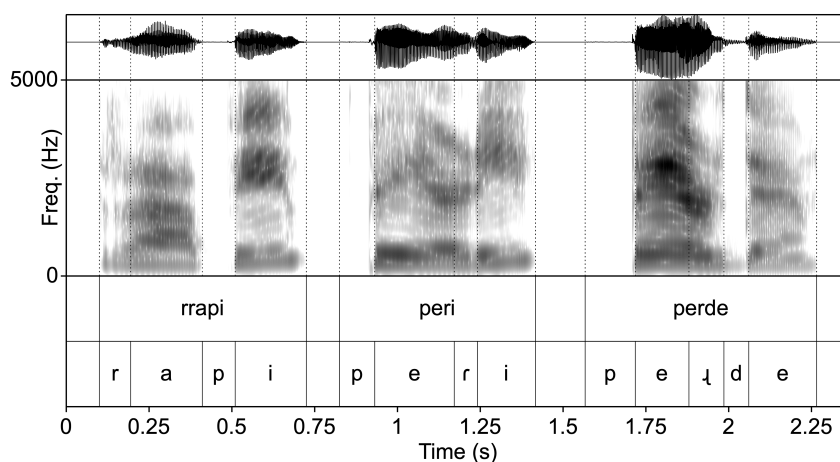
This paper aims to provide a preliminary sketch of the production and distribution of the rhotic sounds found in Northern Tosk Albanian (Gjinari 1988) as emerged during a laboratory study of its sound system. Albanian is an isolate branch of the Indo-European family comprising various (sub)varieties, including Northern Tosk. With the exception of the Korça Qarku area, its inventory has traditionally been described as including two rhotics (Gjinari et al. 2007), represented in writing as <r> and <rr>, henceforth /ɾ/ and /r/. These are considered to be contrastive as they distinguish words such as *rasa* ‘the case’, *rrasa* ‘the stone tile’ and *ara* ‘the arable land’, *arra* ‘the walnut’. Previous work offers contradicting accounts regarding the phonetic realisation of these sounds. For example, according to Simpson (1996) and Dodi (2004), the prescriptive norm claims that /ɾ/ is an alveolar tap [ɾ] and /r/ a trill [r], whereas Belluscio (1994), Jubani (2005) and Belluscio (2014) argue that speakers of Tosk varieties realise both as a retroflex flap [ɽ] or an alveolar approximant [ɹ]. Belluscio (2014) further indicates that /ɾ/ tends to be realised as [ɾ] when preceded by a consonant and as [ɹ] in the other contexts.

As part of a broader descriptive study of Northern Tosk, we recorded 5 native speakers (3F, 2M; aged 25–33) who read a word list, sentence list and translation of *The North Wind and the Sun*. Words containing rhotics were coded by three analysts as containing a flap/tap, approximant or trill based on the audio signal, waveform and spectrogram.

The figure below shows example realisations of /r/ in *rrapi* ‘oak’ and /ɾ/ in *peri* ‘thread’ and *perde* ‘curtains’. While our speakers always realised /r/ as a trill [r], /ɾ/ was characterised by a great deal of allophonic variation. Among the range of realisations for /ɾ/, we found retroflex flaps [ɽ] and retroflex approximants [ɹ]. These show a trend towards complementary distribution, with [ɽ] found mostly in the onset and [ɹ] tending to appear in coda position. A further tendency observed was for an alveolar tap [ɾ] to occur before [i] (cf. a similar observation by Myers 2015 regarding the liquid in Luganda) and directly preceding [d]. However, in a small number of repetitions, word-medial onset and word-medial coda /ɾ/ were realised as [ɹ] and [ɽ] respectively.

Our findings regarding /ɾ/ are in line with impressionistic studies and some case-study analyses suggesting that /ɾ/ may be increasingly realised as [ɹ] in different varieties of Albanian (Jubani 2005, Belluscio 2014). However, though there have been reports that the opposition between /r/ and /ɾ/ is being neutralised among younger speakers (Hysenaj 2009, Jubani 2005, Jubani-Bengu 2012, Belluscio 2016), we do not see this in our data, where /r/ is invariably a trill [r]. We ascribe this, in part, to a task effect as /r/ is prescriptively both a trill and distinct from /ɾ/.

The relatively limited set of contexts—especially for /r/—in the words collected prevents us from making definitive generalisations about the distribution of these allophones and future work—including the collection of articulatory data—is warranted.



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