

## Tactics of [r]-Colored Vowels, Part 1

The problem is to identify [r]-colored vowels that can be treated as a special subset of instances or holdouts to the VCV/VCC tactical contrast. And again what we are interested in are contrasts that have pedagogical value. The CommonWords analysis recognizes the following ten stressed [r]-colored vowels. The list of exemplars excludes digraph vowel spellings:

[a1r] as in *tariff, carriage*

[a3r] as in *scarce, rare, where*

[e1r] as in *dictionary, sheriff, strawberry, bury*

[e3r] as in *era, here, conspiracy*

[i2r] as in *desirable, fire*

[o4r] as in *reward, warrant, scorn, score, torrent*

[o5r] as in *hard, sergeant*

[u1r] as in *word, worry, fur, burrow*

[u3r] as in *during, insure*

[yu3r] as in *curiosity, obscure*

**[a1r].** The vowel [a1r] poses an interesting problem: On one hand, it could be said that in words like *tariff* the vowel after <r> fills out a VCV pattern and has a diacritic function: Compare, for instance, the pronunciation of <tar> in *tariff* and *tar*. We could posit a subset of VCV for [r]-colored vowels, in which the head vowel though not long, is an [r]-colored version of a long vowel, a subset of which [a1r] would be a member. This subset would include the 41 instances of [a1r] spelled <arV> in CommonWords. However, words like *carriage*, with [a1r] spelled <arr> (twenty instances in CommonWords) would, are cases of VCC. So we have a subset in which the VCV/VCC contrast carries no contrast at all – though there would be contrast with the <ar> spelling of [o5r]. Probably a non-profitable case.

**[a3r].** The <ar> spelling of [a3r] is regularly followed by a vowel, often a silent final <e>, as in *care* and *fare*. In CommonWords the only instance of <ar> followed by a consonant and spelling [a3r] is *scarce* and its two derivatives *scarcely* and *scarcity*. There are apparently no <arr> spellings of [a3r], most words with stressed <arr> spellings having [a1r], as in *arrow, carry, embarrass, marry, sparrow*, etc. All in all, the <ar> spellings of [a3r] would appear to be a legitimate member of the subset of VCV/VCC contrast described in the previous paragraph. **See the redlined note at**

### [o5r].

The <er> spelling of [a3r] occurs only in *ere*, *there*, and *where* and their several derivatives (22 instances). There are no <err> spellings of [a3r], so the <er> spelling of [a3r], always followed by <e> can also be treated as an instance of VCV in members of our subset of [r]-colored long vowels, perhaps contrasting with the <err> spelling of [e1r], as in *berry* and *merry*.

**[e1r].** The same is not true for the <er> and <err> spellings of [e1r]. Though the <er> spelling is the more common (41 instances), there are several instances with <err> (17) – much like the <ar> and <arr> spellings of [a1r]. And there are also non-contrastive VCV/VCC pairs such as *cherish/cherry*, *herald/herring*, *merit/merry*. The <ar> spelling of [e1r] is fairly common (39 instances in CommonWords), and it always occurs in the ending <ary>. There are apparently no <arr> spellings of [e1r], and the <ur> spelling of [e1r] occurs only in *bury* and its derivatives. The <urr> never spells [e1r]. Thus, the <ar> and <ur> spellings can be treated as a case of VCV in our subset.

**[e3r].** The only non-digraph spellings of [e3r] are <er>, <ere>, and <ir>, of which there are 51 instances. The <ir> spelling occurs only in *conspiracy*. The <er> spelling is always followed by a vowel, very often a silent final <e>: *bacteria*, *here*, *sphere*, *interior*, *severe*, etc. So we can treat the <er> spelling as an instance of VCV with the silent final <e> in *here*, *sphere*, etc. as a diacritic. **Contrast with <er> spelling of [u1r]? But the [u1r] is pretty much drained of vowel color.** A better contrast is with the <err> spelling of [e1r], as in *herring* and *merry*.

**[i2r].** The two non-digraph spellings of [i2r] are <ir> and <ire>. In the very irregular *choir* the <ir> is in word-final position (the <o> apparently has to be treated as spelling [w]). In the other 33 instances it is followed by a vowel, often a silent final <e>. The situation here is just like that with the <er> spelling of [e3r], and we can treat the <ir> spelling as an instance of VCV with the silent final <e> in *spire*, *squire*, etc. as a diacritic. **Contrast with <ir> spelling of [u1r]?**

**[o4r].** The <ar> spelling of [o4r] (35 instances) is always followed by a consonant, including a second <r>: *quart*, *ward*, *swarm*, etc., or in the sole case of *war*, it is word final. Thus, it occurs always in strings that would



(i) <arV> = [a3r] as in *care*  
<arr> = [a1r] as in *carry*

(ii) <erV> = [e3r] as in *here*  
<err> = [e1r] as in *herring*

(iii) <irV> = [i2r] as *mire*  
<irr> = [i1r] as in *mirror*

(iv) <orV> = [o4r] as in *bore*  
<orr> = [o1r] as in *borrow*

(v) <urV> = [u3r] as in *sure* or [yu3r] as in *cure*  
<urr> = [u1r] as in *surrender* and *current*

(vi) The pattern does not apply to <yrV>, as in *lyric, pyramid* with <yrV> and a short head vowel [i1r], or to <yrr>, as in the rare and technical *pyrrole* with [e3r].

Notice that among the short vowels the Vrr pattern usually involves very little, if any, [r]-coloring. Among the long vowels, [i2r] also involves very little or no [r]-coloring, [o4r] involves more, [a3r] and [e3r] even more yet.

There are also patterns among more general VrC strings in which the second consonant is not a second <r>: In stressed <erC>, <irC>, and <urC> strings the vowel color is completely lost before the [r], producing a convergence symbolized as [u1r]. (For more on this convergence, see AES, 321-26.)

(vii) Stressed <erC> = [u1r] as in *alert, certain, desert, eternal, fern, germ, herd, iceberg, jerk, mercy, observe, person, reverse, servant, term, verb*. The only holdouts to this pattern in CommonWords are the recent Italian adoption *concerto* and *sergeant*, with the British [o5r] pronunciation of <er>.

(viii) Stressed <irC> = [u1r] as in *affirm, bird, circle, dirt, first, girl, mirth, shirt, thirst, virtue, whirl*. There are no holdouts in CommonWords.

(ix) Stressed <urC> = [u1r] as in *absurd, burn, curly, disturb, furniture, hurl, lurk, murder, nurse, purple, return, sturdy, turtle*. Again, there are no

holdouts in CommonWords. Notice that the pronunciation is the same in <urr> and in the more general <urC>.

(x) In word-final position <er>, <ir>, and <ur> also spell [u1r]: *her, sir, occur*. And not surprisingly, in unstressed <erC>, <irC>, and <urC> strings the <er> reduces to [u4r].

(xi) The longish vowel [o4] occurs regularly in <orV> as shown in (iv) above. But it also occurs in <orC> in stressed strings when the C is not <r>, as in *absorb, corn, export, form, horse, lord*, etc. The only holdouts in CommonWords are *attorney*, which experienced an apparent convergence of earlier spellings with <o> with pronunciations spelled <u>, and words in which <w> precedes the <o>: *word, work, world, worm, worse, worship, worth*. (But see *worn* with [o4], apparently via analogy with *wore*.)

(xii) The tense vowel [o5] occurs regularly in <arC>, as in *art, barn, carpet, darling, embargo, farmer, garden, harmony, jargon, large, marvel, narcissus, oligarchy, pardon, remark, smart, tar, yard*. Words in which [w] precedes the <a> regularly have [o4r]: *award, dwarf, swarm, warn, warrior* (with <arr>). A clear holdout is *scarce* with [a3r].

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