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 <ur> 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]?
- **[04r].** The <ar> spelling of [04r] (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

normally mark a short vowel, VCC and VC. On the other hand, the <or>
spelling of [o4r] occurs in VCV strings (98 instances) and in VCC strings (198 instances), and occasionally in CVC# strings (6 instances, plus *or* and *ore*). Thus, in neither the <ar>
nor the <or>
spellings of [o4r] is the VCV/VCC contrast of use.

[o5r]. There are 233 instances of the <ar> spelling of [o5r] in CommonWords. There are 213 instances in which it occurs in a VCC string, with sixteen instances of CVC# – both strings that regularly mark short vowels. The only native words in which <ar> spells [o5r] in a VCV string are *are* and its derivatives. The unintegrated adoptions *aria* and *impresario* both have <ar> in VCV strings. Thus the VCV/VCC contrast does not apply to <ar> spellings of [or5]. Can we posit a VCC/VCV contrast for <ar> in which <ar> in VCV strings spells [a3r]?

[u1r]. In CommonWords there are 160 instances of <er> spelling [u1r], nearly always in VCC and CVC#. Contrast with <er> spelling of [e3r]? Or with [i2r]? There are only 21 instances of the <or> spelling of [u1r]. Just two, thorough and thoroughly, are in VCV strings, while the other nineteen are all in VCC strings. The <ur> spelling of [u1r] occurs in 92 words in CommonWords – never in a VCV string; four times in CVC#, and in 89 VCC strings.

[u3r] and [yu3r]. Of the sixteen instances of <ur> spelling [u3r], all are in VCV strings. Contrast with [u1r]? The 24 instances of <ur> spelling [yu3r] are also always in VCV strings.

In American English Spelling I attempted a description of [r]-colored vowels in terms of certain large fields made up of different spellings and pronunciations (AES, 307-26). What follows attempts to provide more detail and a new perspective, by looking at the relationship between [r]-colored vowels and the normal VCV/VCC contrast between long and short vowels, as in *later* and *latter*. The normal VCV/VCC contrast holds when the consonants involved are <r>
 feect of the [r] on the preceding vowel and must sometimes choose from among accepted variant pronunciations:

- (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) $\langle orV \rangle = [o4r]$ as in bore $\langle orr \rangle = [o1r]$ 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 spelliings 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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