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DECIPHERING THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF /R/ IN WORD-FINAL IN CHETTI LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: The evolution of languages over time can be traced through investigating language variation. Despite its significance, this aspect has been largely ignored in studies of minority languages like Chetti. Therefore, this study strives to address this gap by examining phonological variation, focusing on the variability of the sound “r” in word-final position in Chetti language. The research aims to explore how social factors such as age, gender, social class, and speech styles relate to the use of /r/ in word-final, and to identify distinct linguistic variations within the Chetti community.

Methodology: Data was collected through interviews with 37 Chetti speakers and analysed using the Labovian quantitative analysis approach. Non-parametric statistical tests, the Kruskal Wallis Test and the Mann-Whitney U Test, were used to determine significant differences in stylistic and social variations, given non-normally distributed data. Moreover, index score was used to examine the influence of social and stylistic variances on linguistic variables. It quantified the likelihood and extent of using specific linguistic variants by measuring pronunciation shifts between standard and non-standard forms.

Findings: Results show that [r] and [ø] variants are used interchangeably by the speakers. Although age and social class influence the use of /r/ in word-final position, no significant difference is found based on gender.

Contributions: This study sheds light on phonological variation in the Chetti community and emphasises the importance of employing quantitative analysis methods. It underscores the intricate relationship between language, society, and phonological variation, paving the way for further research.

Keywords: Phonological variation, Chetti language, minority language, quantitative sociolinguistics, urban dialectology.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The study of language variation, originating from Weinreich et al.'s (1968) influential work and further advanced by William Labov, is a pivotal area in linguistics. Sociolinguistics, as a distinct discipline, has predominantly focused on major languages such as English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French, leaving minority languages like Chetti relatively unexplored (Adli & Guy, 2022). While previous investigations into Chetti language attitudes have offered insights into language preferences and variations, they often prioritise emotional aspects over behavioural analysis, lacking in-depth linguistic exploration. Obiols (2002) argues that examining language attitudes is vital in predicting behaviours like language choice and loyalty, as well as determining language prestige within multilingual communities. Despite being labelled as sociolinguistics, many studies on Chetti language have emphasised affective components while neglecting the analysis of behaviour. For instance, studies by Rahilah Omar et al. (2016) and Noriah Mohamed and Meriam Abd. Karim (2005) explored language choices in familial and social contexts but leaned towards affective dimensions. While some research has highlighted distinctive linguistic features of Chetti language, such as Noriah Mohamed's (2009) identification of variations in /a/, deletion of /r/ and /h/, and monophthongisation, there remains a need for micro-sociolinguistic investigations to fully understand the correlation between linguistic and social variables. As a minority community facing linguistic dominance, it is imperative to evaluate the level of language endangerment. Macro-sociolinguistic methods,

as employed by Sa'adiah Ma'alip (2019), have been applied to Chetti language, utilizing approaches like Fishman's model and the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS).

However, there is also a necessity for micro-level exploration, encompassing phonological research. Therefore, this study specifically delves into phonological variables to examine Chetti language usage, aiming to determine if there has been significant alteration or loss in pronunciation and whether the younger generation is assimilating their pronunciation into Malay or actively maintaining linguistic characteristics to preserve their identity. Should the research indicate fading markers of Chetti identity, efforts must be undertaken to safeguard the language. The importance of linguistic variation in identity marking is underscored by studies such as Labov's (1963) research in Martha's Vineyard and Collins's study in Sekadau West Kalimantan. Labov's study on Martha's Vineyard demonstrated that the island's residents distinguish their identity from tourists through their pronunciation of the diphthongs [au] and [ai]. Similarly, Collins (2002) found that the Dayak Benawas and Malay Sekadau languages in Sekadau, West Kalimantan, are essentially two variants of the same language. However, Dayak and Malay identities are distinguished by their different pronunciations of /ʁ/ and /ɣ/. Specifically, the Dayak Benawas community uses the uvular consonant /ʁ/, while the Malay Sekadau community pronounces the same word with the glottal sound /ɣ/.

1.1 Chetti Community

The Chetti community, similar to Malaysia's Peranakan Chinese but less recognised, maintains a modest presence primarily in Melaka and a few areas in Singapore. Despite speculation linking some Chetti ancestors to Indian convicts, Samuel (2006) debunked this theory, asserting that their history predates the arrival of Indian convicts by approximately 400 years. Furthermore, the Chetti community's visibility is hindered by its dwindling population. Noriah Mohamed and Meriam Abd. Karim (2005) mentioned in their writing that there has been a noticeable decline in their numbers, with recent estimates suggesting around 150 inhabitants in Kampung Chetti, Melaka. In contrast, the Baba Nyonya community, another Peranakan Chinese group in Melaka, enjoys widespread recognition, with influence in business and politics across various regions. Prominent figures like Tun Tan Cheng Lok and Tun Tan Siew Sin have played significant roles in Malaysian politics (Beng, 1988). Despite the lack of societal acknowledgment, the Chetti community's Melaka culture is distinctly indigenous, resulting from intermarriages and cultural assimilation among Indian traders, Malays, Javanese, Batak, and Chinese. This unique Chetti identity is categorised as Peranakan Indians, emphasising their local roots and detachment from India (Ravichandran, 2009).

1.2 Studies on Chetti Community

Research on the Chetti community can be divided into two main areas. Scholars such as Raghavan (1977), Ravichandran (2009), Airil Haimi Mohd Adnan and Indrani Arunasalam (2020), and Ravindran and Lee (2024) are among those who have contributed to this area. Initially, scholars focused on the historical aspects, delving into the community's origins and development, as well as the historical events influencing their current situation. Additionally, this category included studies on Chetti culture, examining the beliefs, practices, and social norms defining their unique cultural identity. These researchers explored this aspect of the community by observing the Chetti way of life, food, attire, religion, and traditions. It is plausible that investigations into Chetti's history and culture have yielded valuable insights into this community. On the other hand, another aspect of Chetti's research focuses on a key element, which is its language. Many studies in this realm centre on the Chetti community's native language, referred to as either the Chetti language or Chetti creole. A noticeable trend in these research articles supposedly emphasises language usage and the underlying reasons behind it. The study of the Chetti language has garnered considerable attention from scholars such as Noriah Mohamed (2006, 2009), Noriah Mohamed and Meriam Abd. Karim (2005), Rahilah Omar et al. (2016), and Sa'adiah Ma'alip (2019), who have contributed significantly to this area of research. However, a closer scrutiny of these studies raises questions about the reliability and generalisability of their findings. It prompts an inquiry into whether the observed language preferences and usage patterns can be extrapolated to the broader Chetti community or if they are contingent upon specific circumstances or contexts. Such an examination necessitates a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics within the Chetti community and the factors that influence language behaviour. Additionally, exploring the diversity within the Chetti community, including variations across generations, gender, and social strata, can provide further insights into the intricacies of Chetti language usage. By delving deeper into these complexities, researchers can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic landscape within the Chetti community and contribute to a more robust body of knowledge in this field.

1.3 Variationist Sociolinguistics

Labov (1963) pioneered research into language variation and its relationship with sociological factors by examining the Martha's Vineyard community in Massachusetts. He investigated the pronunciation of diphthongs /aw/ and /ay/ across speakers of different ages and ethnicities. Labov noted that younger speakers, particularly those aged 31-45, adopted a more conservative

pronunciation influenced by older Vineyard speakers, notably Chilmark fishermen. These younger individuals aimed to assert their identity as Vineyarders and differentiate themselves from summer visitors, inadvertently establishing a perceived superiority. Consequently, this led to the emulation of their speech patterns, fostering community solidarity while excluding outsiders. In a subsequent study, Labov (1966) explored the social stratification of the /r/ sound in New York City department stores. He hypothesized that salespeople in higher-ranked stores would exhibit higher /r/ usage, a prediction confirmed through interactions with salespeople posing as customers. Trudgill (1971) conducted a similar study in Norwich, identifying social classes and speech styles influencing linguistic variables, particularly among women signalling status through speech. Meanwhile, Milroy (1980) examined casual speech in Belfast, focusing on the pronunciation of /æ/ among different socioeconomic groups, community areas, and genders. In the realm of urban dialect research in the Western context, scholars like Labov and Trudgill have long acknowledged the significance of social elements.

In Malaysia, however, there has been less emphasis on social dialectology compared to traditional dialectology. Nevertheless, notable studies in traditional dialectology include Asmah Haji Omar's (1977) investigation of synchronic Malay traditional dialects, as well as the works of Collins (1983, 1985a, 1985, 1988, 1992, 2002) and Chong (2002a, 2002b, 2003) on various Malay dialects. In addition, Wong (1987) and Idris Aman (1995) conducted exemplary studies in Kerinchi and Shah Alam, respectively, focusing on social dialectology. Wong (1987) analysed the correlation between linguistic variables and social factors in PKNS Flat, Kampung Kerinci, while Idris Aman (1995) explored phonological variables in the Malay language and their relationship with social variables and speech styles. Wan Robiah Meor Osman and Idris Aman (2006) examined phonological variations in the urban community of Kuching, Sarawak, revealing that middle-class groups exhibited more phonological shifts. Furthermore, Idris Aman and Rosniah Mustaffa (2009) concentrated on the social variation of Malay language accents in Kuching, uncovering a preference for the standard accent in formal contexts, but more non-standard accents in casual contexts, reflecting local identity.

2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to identify the variation of /r/ in word-final position in Chetti language. In this study, the researchers use parentheses to encompass the sound of the /r/ in word-final and categorise it as 'variable (r) word-final', rather than using the term 'phoneme /r/'. Thus, 'variable (r) word- final' refers to words such as *besar* meaning 'big' or *cicir* meaning 'drop out'. The pronunciation of the rolled alveolar phoneme /r/ in word-final position

present an intriguing area for linguistic study, particularly within the context of the Melaka Chetti Creole Language (MCCL). Historically, older Chetti speakers have been observed to retain the final /r/ in their speech, a phonetic feature that is gradually disappearing among younger speakers. The articulation or omission of final /r/ can serve as a sociolinguistic indicator, reflecting broader social and cultural dynamics within the Chetti community. Understanding these patterns not only enhances phonetic knowledge but also enriches the sociolinguistic profile of MCCL speakers, highlighting the interplay between language, identity, and community.

Therefore, the first objective of this research is to scrutinise the correlation between variable (r) word-final and social variables such as age, gender, and social class and speech styles. The second objective is to uncover distinctive phonological variations exhibited in Chetti language which may exist in individuals from different age group, gender, and social class. By delving into how phonology interacts with different social variables and speech styles within the Chetti community, the study aims to shed light on the nuanced and dynamic aspects of language use within this unique cultural and linguistic context.

2.1 Social Variables

This study considers social variables such as age, gender, and social class encompassing factors like education level, occupation types, and income. The respondents were divided into three age groups: 18-30 years, 31-59 years, and 60 years and above. For social class, after considering the three mentioned factors, the respondents were categorised into six social classes namely Upper Middle Class (UMC), Middle Middle Class (MMC), Lower Middle Class (LMC), Upper Lower Class (ULC), Middle Lower Class (MLC), and Lower Lower Class (LLC).

2.2 Speech Styles

The research employs four distinct speech styles; reading word list style (WLS) and reading passage style (RPS) are categorised under “text style”, involving the use of written material, while formal style (FS) and casual style (CS) fall into the “non-text style” category. These speech styles vary in formality, with WLS being the most formal and CS the least formal or most casual.

2.3 Phonological Variable

The phonological variable examined is phoneme /r/ in word-final position. In Malay and its dialects, the word-final /r/ prompted a problem statement. In other words, depending on the dialect studied, variants for the /r/ were detected. For example, Zaharani Ahmad (1993) found that the /r/ in Perak Malay dialect appears as [ ], such as /biar/ [biya] 'allow it' and /kisar/ [kisa] 'blending'. Farid Mohamed Onn (1980, p. 16) reported in Standard Malay that "the /r/ seldom occurs in word-final position or when another consonant follows". However, Teoh (1994) found that the empty X-slot of the /r/ deletion relinks to the empty X-slot, resulting in a lengthening vowel. As a result, the final vowel following the /r/ deletion is a long vowel [:]. For instance, /besar/ [bəsa:]. Noriah Mohamed (2009), on the other hand, claimed that the phoneme /r/ at word-final position was a familiar structure in Chetti language especially among the older generation. For the purpose of this study, variant [r] instead of variant [ø] is considered as the standard variant.

2.4 Interview

Data for the study were obtained through interviews with respondents, and the researchers made regular visits to the settlement until all necessary data were collected from each respondent. The interviews were systematically recorded using a Canon EOS 250D camera to ensure comprehensive coverage and prevent oversights. The recording proved essential in the analysis of phonological variants in the respondents' speech, adding an indispensable dimension to this research. With only 37 houses remaining in Kampung Chetti, a representative was chosen from each house, establishing the list of houses as the sampling frame for this investigation. In essence, the residential home became the primary criterion for sampling, prioritizing it over specific names. Thus, anyone aged 18 years and above in a particular house was deemed eligible to be selected as an informant. Buchstaller and Khattab (2013) argue that linguistic studies often use smaller samples of informants compared to other social science research due to the time-consuming nature of linguistic data collection and transcription. In contrast, other social sciences often rely on secondary data or less labour-intensive methods like surveys and questionnaires. Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling method is useful for large, heterogeneous populations, but this study focuses on an older dialect with only about 150 speakers. Shuy et al. (1967) faced similar challenges, analysing speech samples from only 36 out of 702 individuals due to time constraints. Linguistic research typically gathers numerous observations from fewer informants, as demonstrated by Khattab and Al-Tamimi (2013), who used data from 10 infants but analysed 5,697 words. Based on the insights by

Buchstaller and Khattab (2013), Khattab and Al-Tamimi (2013), and Shuy et al. (1967), this research then randomly selected 37 respondents from the population list.

2.5 Data Analysis

A linguistic variable's degree of use can be determined in two ways: first, using the significant test, and second, by using the index score. The non-parametric statistical tests, i.e. the Kruskal Wallis Test and the Mann-Whitney U Test, were used to confirm the significant difference between stylistic variations and within social variations since the data collected were not normally distributed. Conversely, the researcher employed the index score as a means of examining and drawing conclusions on the potential influence of social and stylistic variances on the formation of linguistic variables. The index score is introduced as a quantitative measure to gauge the tendencies and likelihoods of using specific linguistic variants. It involves measuring the pronunciation shift of a variable, such as moving from a standard variant to a less standard one or vice versa. This score helps researchers quantify the extent of variation and understand the preferences of different social groups regarding the usage of specific linguistic forms.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Social and Stylistic Variations of Variable (r) Word-final

Table 1: Comparison of variable (r) word-final based on stylistic variations

Stylistics Variations	Variants	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Median	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Sig.
WLS	[r]	37	42.45	1570.50	22.00	501.500	-1.981	**0.048**
	[Ø]	37	32.55	1204.50	8.00			
RPS	[r]	37	20.27	750.00	4.00	47.000	-6.918	**0.000**
	[Ø]	37	54.73	2025.00	11.00			
FS	[r]	37	22.15	819.50	0.00	116.500	-6.297	**0.000**
	[Ø]	37	52.85	1955.50	16.00			
CS	[r]	37	22.30	825.00	0.00	122.000	-6.320	**0.000**
	[Ø]	37	52.70	1950.00	14.00			

Based on the analysis, it is found that there are two variants of variable (r) word-final. The analysis of Mann-Whitney U in Table 1 above demonstrates that there is significant difference

in the two variants of variable (r) word-final for WLS (MWU=501.500, Z=-1.981, p<0.05). The finding shows that the median of variant [r] (22.00) is statistically higher than variant [ø] (8.00). As for RPS, the result shows that there is significant difference between the two variants (MWU =47.000, Z=-6.918, p<0.05). Variant [ø] scored the highest median which is 11.00 compared to variant [r] (4.00). For FS, the difference is also significant, (MWU =116.500, Z=-6.297, p<0.05). The finding shows median of variant [ø] (16.00) is statistically higher than variant [r] (0.00). Lastly, for CS there is also significant difference in terms of the two variants of variable (r) word-final (MWU =122.000, Z=-6.320, p<0.05). The median for [ø] (14.00) is the highest compared to variant [r] (0.00). Overall, there are significant differences in the use of variable (r) in word-final for all speech styles. Based on the median values, it appears that for WLS, variant [r] is preferred by the respondents. WLS is the most formal speech style compared to the other three speech styles. However, for RPS, FS, and CS, variant [ø] is used mostly compared to variant [r]. It can be deduced here that the context of the speech plays an important role in determining the preferred variant among the respondents in the case of variable (r) word-final. Labov (1966) emphasized how individuals may adjust their speech style depending on the context, speaking 'less carefully' or 'more relaxedly' in certain situations, which results in the use of features associated with the local style. Therefore, the respondents' speech patterns can vary not only between individuals but also within the speech of a single individual across different contexts. Hence, a distinction is made between 'social variation', indicating differences between social groups, and 'stylistic variation', denoting variations within the speech of individuals across various situations.

3.2 The Association between Age and Variable (r) Word-final

Table 2: Comparison of variable (r) word-final based on age and stylistic variations

Stylistic variation	Variable (r) word-final	Age	N	Mean Rank	Median	Kruskal-Wallis H	df	Sig.
WLS	[r]	18-30	8	18.13	16.5	3.765	2	0.152
		31-59	16	22.72	22.5			
		60 and above	13	14.96	13.00			
	[ø]	18-30	8	19.88	13.5	3.765	2	0.152
		31-59	16	15.28	7.50			
		60 and above	13	23.04	17.00			
RPS	[r]	18-30	8	22.5	4.50	8.149	2	**0.017**
		31-59	16	22.78	4.50			
		60 and above	13	12.19	2.00			
	[ø]	18-30	8	15.5	10.50	8.149	2	**0.017**
		31-59	16	15.22	10.50			
		60 and above	13	25.81	13.00			
FS	[r]	18-30	8	12.5	0.00	11.224	2	**0.004**
		31-59	16	16.97	0.00			
		60 and above	13	25.5	1.00			
	[ø]	18-30	8	14.06	9.00	2.255	2	0.324
		31-59	16	19.72	17.50			
		60 and above	13	21.15	17.00			
CS	[r]	18-30	8	25.44	1.00	7.696	2	**0.021**
		31-59	16	15.66	0.00			
		60 and above	13	19.15	0.00			
	[ø]	18-30	8	23.5	20.50	1.802	2	0.406
		31-59	16	17.44	10.00			
		60 and above	13	18.15	14.00			

Table 2 shows the comparison of variable (r) word-final based on age and stylistic variation. For WLS, the results show that there are no significant associations between age and variant [r] (KW=3.765, df=2, p>0.05) and variant [ø] (KW=3.765, df=2, p>0.05). For RPS, the results confirm that there are significant associations between age and variant [r] (KW=8.149, df=2, p<0.05) and variant [ø] (KW=8.149, df=2, p<0.05). By looking at the median, for variant [r], group of age 18-30 years (4.50) and 31-59 years (4.50) old have higher median as compared to the group 60 years and above (2.00). For variant [ø], group of 60 years and above (13.00) has higher median than group of 18-30 years (10.50) and group of 31-59 years (10.50). Next, for FS, the result demonstrates that there is a significant association between age and variant [r] (KW=11.224, df=2, p<0.05). By looking at the median, group of age 60 years and above (1.00) old has higher median of variant [r] as compared to the group of 18-30 years (0.00) and 31-59 years (0.00). However, no significant association is found between variant [ø] and age (KW=2.255, df=2, p>0.05). Moreover, the result indicates that there is a significant association between age and variant [r] (KW=7.696, df=2, p<0.05) for CS. By looking at the median, group of age 18-30 years (1.00) old has higher median of variant [r] as compared to the group 31-59 years (0.00) and 60 years and above (0.00). Nevertheless, no relationship is found between variant [ø] and age (KW=1.802, df=2, p>0.05).

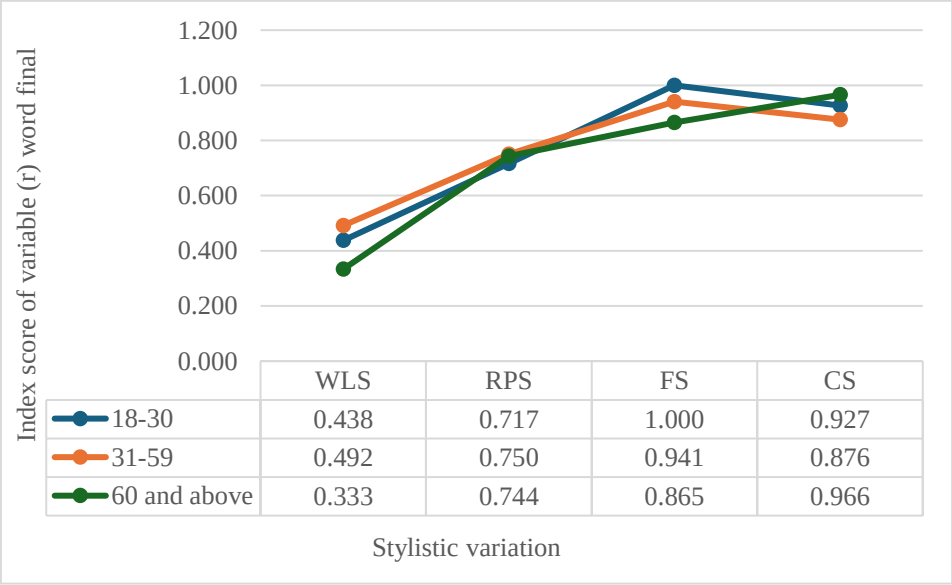


Figure 1: Index score of variable (r) word-final by age and stylistic variation

Figure 1 above representing the index scores of variable (r) in word-final position across age and stylistic variation, reveals an upward trend. The use of variable (r) by the three age groups

becomes more divergent from the standard usage as the speaking style transitions from formal to less formal with little space between the lines.

Based on the analysis in Table 2, it is revealed that there are relationships between variable (r) in word-final and age across RPS, FS, and CS. In RPS, according to median values, variant [r] is predominantly utilized by youth and adult groups, while the elderly group favours variant [ø]. These findings are intriguing as they contradict with those of Noriah Mohamed's (2006). In her research, she concluded that the retention of variable (r) in word-final position is common among the elders, indicating its prevalence in the Chetti language. However, this study presents a divergent view. Here, the youth and adult groups predominantly employ variant [r] in their speech, while the elderly group opts for variant [ø] in RPS. This discrepancy might be influenced by the formality of the context. The youth and adult groups may choose to pronounce variable (r) as variant [r] in word-final position, perceiving it as the standard form. Relationships between variable (r) and age are also evident in FS and CS. In FS, the elderly group appears to favour variant [r] compared to the youth and adult groups. However, this study shows that in CS, younger individuals seem to pronounce variant [r] more prominently than the adults and the elders. Although both groups demonstrate the preference to [r] variant albeit in different speech styles, they may have exhibited this preference based on different motives. The retention of variant [r] among the elders in FS may reflect a resistance to linguistic change or a desire to maintain linguistic continuity with past generations. In contrast, younger individuals in CS may be more receptive to linguistic innovations, borrowings from other dialects or speech communities or even the perception of 'standardness' leading to the increased use of variant [r] in word-final as part of their linguistic repertoire. Rebita (2016) research illustrated how adolescence exerts a considerable influence on linguistic innovations, as young individuals actively choose words. The dissemination of these linguistic changes is largely facilitated by media, social networks, and globalization. Hayet's study demonstrated that in Mostaganem, as well as across Algeria, adolescents and young adults are at the forefront of language evolution, demonstrating linguistic creativity in everyday discourse and aiding in the propagation of novel vocabulary.

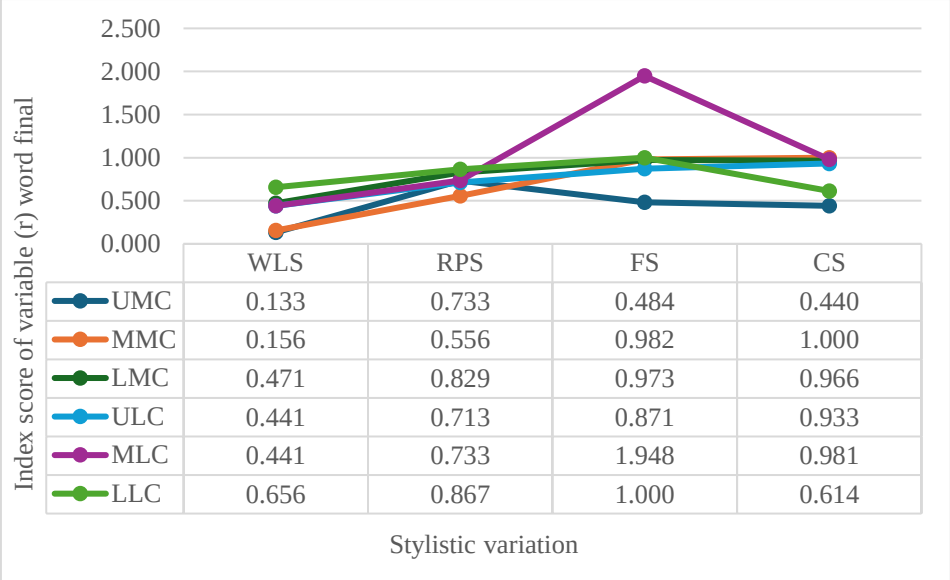
3.3 The Association between Social Class and Variable (r) Word-final

Table 3: Comparison of variable (r) word-final based on social class and stylistic variations

Stylistic variation	Variable (r) word-final	Social Class	N	Mean Rank	Median	Kruskal-Wallis H	df	Sig.
WLS	[r]	LLC	3	26.5	26.00	9.840	5	0.08
		MLC	9	10.89	7.00			
		ULC	13	19.85	22.00			
		LMC	7	23.07	26.00			
		MMC	3	26.83	25.00			
		UMC	2	12.75	13.00			
	[ø]	LLC	3	11.5	4.00	9.840	5	0.08
		MLC	9	27.11	23.00			
		ULC	13	18.15	8.00			
		LMC	7	14.93	4.00			
		MMC	3	11.17	5.00			
		UMC	2	25.25	17.00			
RPS	[r]	LLC	3	5.83	1.00	12.892	5	**0.024**
		MLC	9	14.72	2.00			
		ULC	13	18.46	3.00			
		LMC	7	24.86	6.00			
		MMC	3	32.33	8.00			
		UMC	2	21	4.00			
	[ø]	LLC	3	32.17	14.00	12.892	5	**0.024**
		MLC	9	23.28	13.00			
		ULC	13	19.54	12.00			
		LMC	7	13.14	9.00			
		MMC	3	5.67	7.00			
		UMC	2	17	11.00			
FS	[r]	LLC	3	12.5	0.00	3.628	5	0.604
		MLC	9	18.33	0.00			
		ULC	13	21.46	0.00			
		LMC	7	17.14	0.00			
		MMC	3	17.33	0.00			
		UMC	2	24.75	8.00			
	[ø]	LLC	3	22.67	17.00	5.130	5	0.400
		MLC	9	24.00	22.00			
		ULC	13	15.88	11.00			

		LMC	7	18.29	16.00			
		MMC	3	21.83	18.00			
		UMC	2	9.50	7.50			
CS	[r]	LLC	3	14.5	0.00	3.727	5	0.589
		MLC	9	18.94	0.00			
		ULC	13	20.12	0.00			
		LMC	7	22.14	0.00			
		MMC	3	14.5	0.00			
		UMC	2	14.5	0.00			
	[ø]	LLC	3	14.5	8.00	4.096	5	0.536
		MLC	9	16.06	11.00			
		ULC	13	20.88	16.00			
		LMC	7	22.93	27.00			
		MMC	3	21.17	16.00			
		UMC	2	9.75	6.00			

Table 3 presents the relationship between social class and variable (r) word-final. For WLS, the result shows that there are no significant associations between social classes and variant [r] (KW=9.840, df=5, p>0.05) and variant [ø] (KW=9.840, df=5, p>0.05). However, for RPS, the finding shows that there are significant associations between social classes and variant [r] (KW=12.892, df=5, p<0.05), and variant [ø] (KW=12.892, df=5, p<0.05). By looking at the median, for variant [r], social class of MMC (8.00) scores the highest median of variant [r] compared to others. For variant [ø], social class of LLC (14.00) has the highest median. Next, the findings show that there are no significant associations between all social classes and variant [r] (KW=3.628, df=5, p>0.05) and variant [ø] (KW=5.130, df=5, p>0.05) in FS. For CS, the results also show that there are no significant associations between all social classes and variant [r] (KW=3.727, df=5, p>0.05) and variant [ø] (KW=4.096, df=5, p>0.05).



	WLS	RPS	FS	CS
UMC	0.133	0.733	0.484	0.440
MMC	0.156	0.556	0.982	1.000
LMC	0.471	0.829	0.973	0.966
ULC	0.441	0.713	0.871	0.933
MLC	0.441	0.733	1.948	0.981
LLC	0.656	0.867	1.000	0.614

Figure 2: Index score of variable (r) word-final by social class and stylistic variation

Figure 2 above illustrating the index scores of variable (r) in word-final position by social class and stylistic variation indicates that most social classes adhere closely to the standard use of variable (r) in WLS. However, as the speaking style shifts from WLS to FS, there is a trend of increased divergence from the standard use, except for the UMC.

The analysis of variable (r) word-final and social class indicates a relationship between these two factors in RPS. MMC, which ranks second from the top social class scored the highest median value for [r] variant. However, for variant [ø], representing the absence of variable (r), MMC scored the lowest median value, especially when compared to LLC, which scored the highest. These findings highlight a significant relationship between the pronunciation of variable (r) in word-final and social class within RPS. Specifically, for [r] variant, MMC tends to exhibit the highest median value, suggesting a stronger association with the pronunciation of variable (r). They may perceive this pronunciation as prestigious or indicative of their status within the social hierarchy. In contrast, the UMC, being at the top of the social hierarchy, may not feel the need to use linguistic features associated with lower classes for social differentiation. Conversely, for [ø] variant, LLC, representing the lowest social class, displays the highest median value, indicating a pronounced tendency towards non-rhotic pronunciation in word-final among lower social classes. Moreover, variable (r) in word-final may be perceived differently in terms of 'standardness' and correctness within different social classes. The preference for [r] variant among the MMC could stem from a perception that it adheres more closely to the standard or prestigious pronunciation norms of RPS, while the preference for [ø] variant among the LLC may reflect their own linguistic norms and perceptions of

correctness. Thus, these results imply that pronunciation patterns, particularly concerning variable (r), are influenced by social class within the context of RPS.

3.4 The Association Between Gender and Variable (r) Word-final

Table 4: Comparison of variable (r) word-final based on gender and stylistic variations

Stylistic variation	Variable (r) word-final	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Median	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Sig.
WLS	[r]	Male	18	18.08	325.5	21.00	154.5	-0.502	0.615
		Female	19	19.87	377.5	23.00			
	[ø]	Male	18	19.92	358.5	9.00	154.5	-0.502	0.615
		Female	19	18.13	344.5	7.00			
RPS	[r]	Male	18	20.67	372	4.00	141.0	-0.924	0.355
		Female	19	17.42	331	3.00			
	[ø]	Male	18	17.33	312	11.00	141.0	-0.924	0.355
		Female	19	20.58	391	12.00			
FS	[r]	Male	18	18.42	331.5	0.00	160.5	-0.375	0.708
		Female	19	19.55	371.5	0.00			
	[ø]	Male	18	20.42	367.50	17.00	145.5	-0.776	0.438
		Female	19	17.66	335.50	15.00			
CS	[r]	Male	18	20.78	374	0.00	139.0	-1.292	0.196
		Female	19	17.32	329	0.00			
	[ø]	Male	18	16.89	304	9.00	133.0	-1.157	0.247
		Female	19	21	399	16.00			

Man-Whitney U test was conducted to examine the association between gender and variable (r) word-final in all speech styles as shown in Table 4. For WLS, the finding reveals that there are no significant associations between gender and variant [r] (MWU=154.5, Z=-0.502>0.05) and variant [ø] (MWU=154.5, Z=-0.502, p>0.05). For RPS, the finding also shows that there are no significant associations between gender and variant [r] (MWU=141.0, Z=-0.924, p>0.05) and variant [ø] (MWU=141.0, Z=-0.924, p>0.05). Then, for FS, the finding indicates that there are no significant associations between gender and variant [r] (MWU=160.5, Z=-0.375, p>0.05) and variant [ø] (MWU=145.5, Z=-0.776, p>0.05). Lastly, for CS, the result also reveals that there are no significant associations between gender and variant [r] (MWU=139.0, Z=-1.292, p>0.05) and variant [ø] (MWU=133.0, Z=-1.157, p>0.05).

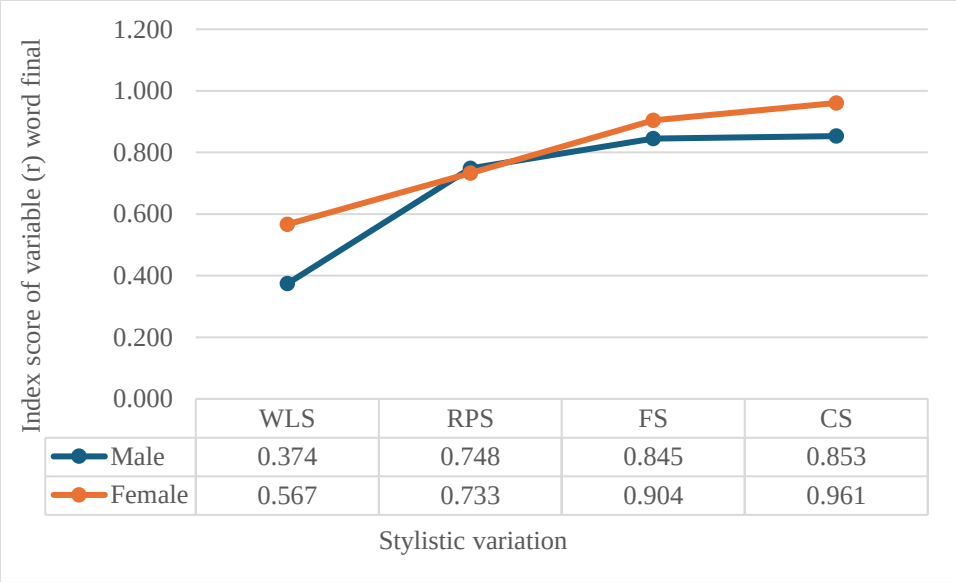


Figure 3: Index score of variable (r) word-final by gender and stylistic variation

The index score of variable (r) in word-final position, analysed by gender and stylistic variation (Figure 3), demonstrates an upward trend for both male and female speakers. In other words, as the context becomes less formal, there is an increasing divergence from the standard use of variable (r) which based on the scope of this study is the use of variant [r]. The analysis between variable (r) in word-final and gender shows that there is no association found between these two elements. Some linguistic variables may be more salient or socially meaningful to certain social groups than others. In sociophonetic research, variables that are highly salient to particular social identities or contexts are more likely to exhibit systematic patterns of variation related to those social factors (Docherty, 2022; Henriksen et al., 2023; Natvig & Salmons, 2021). If the variable (r) is not particularly salient in terms of gender identity or social

categorization, differences in its pronunciation between genders may be less noticeable or significant. Pronunciation patterns are often shaped by the speech community to which individuals belong and the social norms within that community. Gender-based differences in pronunciation may be more prevalent in certain speech communities or dialects where gender plays a more prominent role in linguistic identity and socialization. In other communities or dialects, social class, ethnicity, or regional identity may be more salient factors influencing pronunciation compared to Chetti community.

3.5 Distinctive Phonological Variations Exhibited in Chetti Language

The outcomes of this investigation conspicuously reveal notable differences in the utilization of the variable (r) in word-final encompassing the alveolar trill [r] and the absence of it [ø] across the four speech styles. Upon meticulous scrutiny, it becomes apparent that the median values associated with variant [ø] consistently surpass those attributed to variant [r] across all three speech styles except for WLS. This signifies a predominant adoption of variant [ø] by the respondents in their verbal expression. This shows that a language change, specifically a phonological change has taken place where variant [r] in word-final is not a common pronunciation among the Chetti speakers now as compared to the finding made by Noriah Mohamed (2009).

Furthermore, when investigating a correlation between the variable (r) in word-final position and age across the four speech contexts, some significant differences are discovered. In RPS, for variant [r], youth and adult group tend to use more variant [r], while the elderly group prefers variant [ø]. In FS, the elderly group leans towards variant [r] since they scored the highest median. However, in CS, younger individuals pronounce variant [r] more frequently than adult and the elderly groups where they scored the highest median. Based on the results discussed, across contexts, there is a noticeable variation in the preference for [r] and [ø] based on age. In informal contexts like CS, younger individuals tend to favour variant [r], while the elderly may prefer [ø]. In more formal settings like FS, preferences vary more based on age, with the elderly group showing a stronger preference for [r]. Therefore, while there is variation across contexts, a general trend emerges where age influences the preference for [r] or [ø], with younger speakers often favouring [r] and older speakers showing more variability.

Next, the analysis of variable (r) in word-final position suggests a relationship with social class, particularly in RPS. The MMC, ranking second from the top, exhibits the highest median value for the [r] variant, indicating a stronger association with this pronunciation, possibly perceiving it as prestigious. Conversely, the UMC, at the top of the social hierarchy,

may not feel compelled to use linguistic features associated with lower classes. For [ø] variant, LLC, representing the lowest social class, shows the highest median value, suggesting a preference for non-rhotic pronunciation among lower social classes. Overall, the analysis reveals a lack of significant correlation between social class and the use of the variable (r) word-final among the respondents. However, while there might not be significant statistical relationships in some instances, there are clear trends. First, variant [r] tends to be associated with prestige or standardized pronunciation across all social classes and speech styles. Moreover, social class does seem to influence the choice of [r] or [ø] in word-final position, with higher social classes favouring [r] and lower social classes favouring [ø]. Nonetheless, the analysis of variable (r) in word-final position does not reveal any association with gender.

4.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the shift from [r] to [ø] in word-final positions among Chetti speakers indicates an ongoing phonological change, reflecting the dynamic nature of language evolution within the community. This change may be influenced by social and cultural factors, including interactions with other linguistic groups. Understanding the influence of age and social class on phonological preferences can inform sociolinguistic research and contribute to the development of more nuanced models of language variation and change. This awareness can also enhance linguistic and cultural preservation efforts by highlighting the factors that drive linguistic shifts. The findings can inform language policy and educational strategies, particularly in preserving and promoting the Chetti language. Recognising the phonological preferences of different age groups and social classes can help tailor language teaching methods to ensure that the linguistic heritage of the Chetti community is effectively transmitted to future generations. The study underscores the importance of phonological features in shaping cultural identity. By understanding how different social groups within the Chetti community use language, efforts can be made to strengthen cultural identity and cohesion through targeted linguistic initiatives. Further research is warranted to delve deeper into the intricate relationships between language, identity, and social context among diverse linguistic communities.

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