



Sociophonology of Received Pronunciation

Miroslav Ježek

...what else did we do?

we had various things going on ...

that's it

And of course you get to hear

the sound of your own voice...

I'm gonna be free ...

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wp? 'ɛts dɪd wi 'du:
...what else did we do?

wɪː həd ˈvɜːrɪəs ˈθɪŋz ɡəʊɪŋ ɒn ...
we had various things going on ...

ðætʰs ɪt
that's it

ən əv 'kɔːs jə 'gɛt tə 'hɪə
And of course you get to hear
ðə saʊnd ɒf jɔːr əʊn vɔɪs ...
the sound of your own voice...

aɪ ɪm ɡɔːnə bi freɪ ...
AI'm gonna be free ...

Sociophonology of Received Pronunciation

Native and Non-Native
Environments

Miroslav Ježek

**MASARYK
UNIVERSITY
PRESS**

BRNO 2021

KATALOGIZACE V KNIZE – NÁRODNÍ KNIHOVNA ČR

Ježek, Miroslav

Sociophonology of received pronunciation : native and non-native environments / Miroslav Ježek. – First electronic edition. – Brno : Masaryk University Press, 2021. – 1 online zdroj. – (Opera Facultatis philosophicae Universitatis Masarykianae = Spisy Filozofické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity, ISSN 1211-3034 ; 509)

Francouzské resumé

Terminologický slovník. – Obsahuje bibliografii

ISBN 978-80-210-9833-6 (online ; pdf)

* 811.111 * 811.111'271.12 * 81'34 * 81'355 * 81'27 * (=111) * (=162.3) * (048.8)

– angličtina

– spisovná angličtina

– fonetika

– fonologie

– výslovnost

– sociolingvistika

– Angličané

– Češi

– monografie

811.111 - Angličtina [11]

Reviewers: PhDr. Jaroslav Ondráček, Ph.D. (Masaryk University)

doc. PhDr. Pavel Kolář, CSc. (Silesian University in Opava)

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ISBN 978-80-210-9833-6

ISBN 978-80-210-9832-9 (print)

ISSN 1211-3034

<https://doi.org/10.5817/CZ.MUNI.M210-9833-2021>

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1 INTRODUCTION

The present publication aims to offer an analysis of varieties of Received Pronunciation (RP): the prestige accent in England and, to a lesser extent, in the other parts of the UK. RP is an accent that keeps changing just like other accents do. Even such a stable unit as the Royal Family, arguably the most prominent users of RP, change their realisations of particular sounds (cf. Upton 2000b: 44). For several reasons these changes are often not reflected in transcription models of the accent. Among other things, this publication discusses recent innovations in RP and the degree of their acceptability as RP sounds reflected in the model, too. Since English is the most common second language (Crystal 2005: 420), this work also tries to identify the roles this accent fulfils both in the native as well as the non-native environments.

While there are several substantial differences in the understanding of RP, the source of inspiration remains the same: a year-long stay abroad at Leeds University (2006–7), where I had the opportunity to work with Clive Upton (now Emeritus Professor), whose RP model is presented and, to a certain degree, tested here. Upton's model, which has been restricted to the native market so far, is in some important details markedly different from the other models (as details Chapter 3). Equally important was the chance to listen to the enormous variety of accents and, crucially, to realise that RP in the form presented outside the native world seems to be rather rare, and that it is not a necessity to speak RP if a person wants to defend their status in the academic world.

It has already been mentioned that RP is subject to constant change. Yet the model present in ELT publications has displayed very little change since the establishment of RP more than a hundred years ago. The model thus needs to be dusted in order to offer a more accurate picture of the accent. It is hoped that

this work will contribute towards achieving this: it will raise awareness of the variability existing even in such a standardised accent as RP and it will update the model ridding it of certain variants that carry negative connotations in native ears.

As far as sociolinguistic research is concerned, for an academic based in the Czech Republic RP presents the unquestionable advantage of being the accent with which Czech English language professionals are in daily contact. It is, naturally, an accent of utmost importance to non-native learners of English as well. There are also practical advantages linked with this accent: any research dealing with regional accents and local communities would require a stay abroad along with a detailed acquaintance with the community and the social stratification of its members.

1.1 Varieties of RP

The term ‘Received Pronunciation’ has been in existence for almost a hundred years. Since it is the single most important term that runs throughout this work, close attention must be paid to a most complex task of defining what the label ‘RP’ actually represents.

While there are linguists who still trust the label and use it with various modifications, there are also linguists who have decided to drop it in favour of a new one, which in their opinion reflects the reality more adequately.

Trad-RP

The first variety of RP is seen as old-fashioned, outdated, posh, and redolent of privileged upbringing. Various labels attached to this variety are: ‘trad-RP’ (Upton 2008: 239–40), ‘U-RP’ (Wells 1982: 279), ‘Refined RP’ (Cruttenden 1994: 80), ‘marked RP’ (Honey 1991: 38), and ‘conservative RP’ (Gimson 1980:77). Unsurprisingly, Upton’s ‘trad’ is shortened ‘traditional’. Wells’s ‘U-RP’ refers to the upper classes that this variety is typically associated with. Cruttenden finds his own label very fitting because it has ‘positive overtones for some people and negative overtones for others’ (1994: 80). Honey’s ‘marked RP’ means that ‘this accent is associated not so much with an “educated” voice as with a “cultured” voice’; the voice ‘seems to assert a claim to a special degree of social privilege’ (1991: 38–9). It seems clear that the number of speakers that use this accent is declining.

RP

A more modern and relaxed variety of RP also has a number of adjectives attached to it, although Upton refuses to use any adjective and calls this variety just ‘RP’ since it can ‘legitimately lay claim to the RP label without qualification’ (Upton 2000a: 76). Others insist on a qualifying adjective and call this accent: ‘mainstream RP’ (Wells 1982: 279), ‘unmarked RP’ (Honey 1991: 38), and ‘General RP’ (Gimson 1980: 77, Cruttenden 1994: 80). Honey claims that his ‘unmarked RP suggests a fairly high degree of educatedness, although the social class of its speaker need not be very exalted’ (1991: 38). It is supposed that this explanation holds true for all the labels in this group.

Near-RP

This variety is identical with the RP norms in all but one or two aspects. These might be regional or social. Wells calls this variety ‘Near-RP’; it ‘refers to any accent which, while not falling within the definition of RP, nevertheless includes very little in the way of regionalisms which would enable the provenance of the speaker to be localised within England’. Wells adds that this voice ‘will be perceived as [...] “educated”, “well-spoken”, “middle-class” ’ (1982: 297). Cruttenden (1994: 80–1) calls this accent ‘Regional RP’. While the definition offered by Wells allows for certain regional variables to be part of this accent, it omits other variables that are essentially social rather than regional (e.g. the glottal stop, as is argued in 3.2.2.1). Finally, Gimson (1980: 77) calls this accent ‘Advanced RP’: an accent of upper-class young speakers that permit more variability.

On top of the three varieties above, there are several singular varieties that linguists distinguish. Firstly, there is ‘Adoptive RP’ (Wells 1982: 283–4), which is ‘a variety of RP spoken by adults who did not speak RP as children’. As the accent was acquired later in life, it meticulously avoids a number of features that modern RP allows (e.g. intrusive /r/ and the glottal stop in certain environments). Secondly, Wells also distinguishes ‘quasi-RP’: it is an accent that corresponds with ‘Adoptive RP’, but ‘certain allophones are selected for their supposed clarity or carefulness rather than for their appropriateness to RP’ (1982: 285). In my view, this label refers to a rather slavish attempt to imitate RP.

An interesting and an original take on the varieties of RP can be found in Fabricius (2000: 29–30), who makes the distinction between c[onstructed]-RP and n[ative] RP. The former is an abstract model that people come across in various teaching materials while n-RP is the variety they naturally adopt as an accent-in-use.

Labels with no mention of RP

There are some linguists who refuse to use the abbreviation ‘RP’ and they have adopted a different label instead to avoid any negative connotations that RP may carry. Roach et al. (2011: v) adopts the label ‘BBC English’ since it is ‘the pronunciation of professional speakers employed by the BBC as newsreaders and announcers on BBC1 and BBC2 television, the World Service and BBC Radio 3 and 4’. While the link with the BBC and RP may seem considerably strong (cf. Hannisdal 2007), the label, however, may turn out to be rather inappropriate now that the BBC employs many speakers with regional features in their accents (Wells 2008: xix).

Most interestingly, Cruttenden in his latest edition of *Gimson’s Pronunciation of English* has decided to drop the label ‘RP’ altogether in favour of ‘GB’, which stands for ‘General British’. He explains such a radical change as follows:

[d]espite the fact that I and other phoneticians have sought to describe changes in RP to make it a modern and more flexible standard, many, particularly in the media, have persisted in presenting an image of RP as outdated and becoming even more than ever the speech only of the “posh” few in the south-east of England. For this reason I have dropped the name RP and now consider myself to be describing General British or GB. (2014: xvi-xvii)

For a full discussion of why GB seems more appropriate than RP, see Cruttenden (2014: 80–2). While he admittedly has a point, there are reasons to think that his abandonment of RP is somewhat infelicitous. Firstly, ‘GB’ generally connotes above all Great Britain, of course. Secondly, there are many speakers in Scotland, who are British, but their model accent is far removed from what is found south of the border. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that McMahon (2002: 69) uses the label SSBE (Southern Standard British English), thereby making the point that ‘GB’ is far too inclusive.

Further, Cruttenden (2014: 81) also distinguishes ‘CGB’ (Conspicuous General British) and ‘RGB’ (Regional General British): the former roughly corresponds with traditional RP, while the latter is Near-RP (as discussed above). Since RGB ‘reflects regional rather than class variation [...] we should talk of RGBs in the plural’ (2014: 81).

Yet another label is found in Mees and Collins (2013: 3–4), who, strangely enough, do retain ‘RP’ when they speak of ‘Traditional Received Pronunciation’, but they come up with ‘NRP’ (standing for ‘non-regional pronunciation’) for its modern and more relaxed variety. This label (NRP) is clever, but as much because it makes use of ‘RP’ as for any other reason. The advantages of breaking

the axiom of non-localisability of RP are discussed elsewhere (4.2.1.7); it suffices to say here that a label that drops ‘RP’ in such a confusing way as this ‘NRP’ is not likely to ever acquire enough support to catch on among academics.

Having considered all of the possibilities, I have decided to stick with the label ‘RP’ and only add descriptive adjectives where necessary. I use ‘modern’ to refer to the mainstream variety of the prestige accent and ‘traditional’ to refer to the variety redolent of social class and privileged upbringing. As Upton (personal communication) puts it, it is acceptable to ‘stick with good old “RP” and try to educate people in the fact that, as a living accent, it changes, and [it] doesn’t have to be stuck in the past or be relevant of class.’

The other labels have been rejected for the following reasons. First, SSBE is far too regional (exclusive) and it does not say anything about the other parts of the country. Surely, there is a prestige accent in the other regions as well. Second, GB is too inclusive and it strongly evokes Great Britain rather than General British. Third, the BBC accent is especially unsuitable in the non-native environment since it creates the myth that the BBC employs RP speakers only. Moreover, it implies that the BBC is active in the establishment of the accent (it is ‘their’ accent), but the media hardly ever perform the role of trend-setters—they very often merely follow trends set elsewhere (cf. Bell 1984). Last, NRP is unacceptable since it retains the old label RP although the two words stand for something completely different. I deem it very confusing.

1.2 Thesis Outline

Chapter 2 provides a detailed account of the history of prestige accents including RP in England. It offers a solid diachronic foundation that enables a more accurate synchronic perspective. Crucially, it shows that RP has always demonstrated a surprising amount of variability, despite attempts to deny or even stop it.

Chapter 3 draws on the previous chapter insofar as it deals with prestige accents from a purely theoretical perspective: it introduces the key linguistic notions that determine, accompany and influence the processes of standardisation and prescription. These notions are then applied directly to RP.

In Chapter 4 is discussed the phonology of RP; where applicable, different variants of a particular phoneme are presented. Moreover, a number of socially stratified phenomena are discussed in connection with particular phonemes even though they do not belong to RP (e.g. /h/-dropping). Being social, these phenomena are closely related to the issues of prestige, thereby providing further insight into the matters of standardisation, prescription and popular attitudes towards linguistic forms with social values.

Chapter 5 introduces the practical study, providing details about the methodology (the website and the questionnaire placed thereon) as well as the key aspects of the survey: samples, respondents, and selected variables.

Chapter 6 reports and interprets the results of the survey with the focus placed upon the key aspects mentioned in Chapter 4 (above). It also details gathered data and how it is assessed and evaluated.

Chapter 7 compares the latest editions of three existing pronunciation dictionaries: *Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation for Current English* (Upton et al. 2003), *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (3rd ed., Wells 2008), and *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary* (18th ed., Roach et al. 2011). It is examined to what extent the three dictionaries reflect modern changes and innovations in RP (especially the studied variables).

Finally, conclusions are drawn in relation to the research hypotheses put forward in the Introduction (below).

1.3 Research Hypotheses

The practical part of this publication aims to confirm or refute the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1

In view of RP, it is expected that there are several differences between CZ and EN sets of respondents.

The first one regards the notion of RP and how it is mentally constructed; i.e. which (socio)linguistic categories influence the decision-making process whether a particular accent is RP or not (though the question can hardly be approached in terms of binary opposites; as details 5.4.2.1).

Secondly, it is hypothesised that EN respondents should prove to allow more variability in RP than CZ respondents, which should be reflected in higher overall RP scores they award. There are two reasons that support this hypothesis: EN respondents have easier access to modern transcriptions of RP in OUP publications and they naturally have a much closer and more intense contact with the linguistic environment surrounding RP.

Furthermore, it is expected that there are substantial differences between S EN and N EN respondents. Only such differences can justify the inclusion of short BATH as an RP sound (e.g. Upton et al. 2003).

Hypothesis 2

Although the updated model of RP is discussed in its entirety, five variables have been selected for closer inspection. It is hypothesised that they can be considered RP in both environments (i.e. CZ and EN) since English linguists seem to agree that they belong to RP and Czech learners as non-native learners generally accept the model created in England.

Hypothesis 3

It is expected that the model of RP presented by Upton turns out to be beneficial to non-native learners since Upton et al. (2003: xii) claims that it is universal, i.e. beneficial to both native and non-native users.

Nevertheless, two of the five variables under investigation (the glottal stop and FOOT/GOOSE fronting) are not included in Upton's model. Should they be added to it providing they meet little resistance from the respondents? Further, are there, metaphorically speaking, any more changes and innovations behind the RP door waiting for it to open?

2 THE RISE OF A STANDARD

Accent and dialect differences have always existed; they are likely to be intrinsic characteristics of any live language. One of the first instances where such differences are mentioned can be found in the Bible, and nothing less than a human life is at stake:

And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand. (Judges 12: 5–6, King James version)

Forty two thousand people lost their lives since they were not able to pronounce one single sound; namely the initial letter in the word ‘shibboleth’. The Ephraimites gave themselves away by not being able to utter /ʃ/. Their dialect lacked this sound and they only came up with /s/. In the course of time this story enriched the English lexicon with the word ‘shibboleth’, still in use to indicate a word (or a custom) that distinguishes one group of people from another.

2.1 Old English

Old English dialect differences are described in considerable detail for example in Baugh and Cable (2012) and Crystal (2005). The latter identifies four Old English dialects: Kentish, Northumbrian, Mercian, and West Saxon (2005: 34). These

2 The Rise of a Standard

enjoyed various amounts of prestige throughout the period, which is testified by the origin of the documents that have survived till the present day. For instance the majority of texts in Northumbrian date back to the 8th century, i.e. before the Vikings plundered this region and destroyed the well-known monasteries in Jarrow, Iona, and Lindisfarne. Similarly, the West Saxon dialect is represented mainly by texts from the period of King Alfred the Great (871–899) and later—the years when this kingdom was in the ascendancy. What evidence, however, is there of accent differences and potential standards of pronunciation?

Naturally, the period in question did not have any standardised spelling, which would appear a few centuries later with the advent of printing. What people living in this period used was some kind of a phonetic spelling system where ‘an Old English word would be spelled on the basis of how it sounded to the writer, who would instinctively follow his own pronunciation and assign the closest letters he could find’ (Crystal 2005: 41). Thus there were no fewer than three spellings for the modern word ‘merry’ (Crystal 2005: 37): *merry* (open-close front vowel, south-east of England), *myrry* (close front vowel with heavy lip-rounding, London), and *murry* (back vowel with heavy lip-rounding, south-west of England).

Evidence for asserting the existence of a pronunciation standard in the Old English period is only indirect. It is based on the uniformitarian principle, as defined by Labov (1972: 275): ‘the forces operating to produce linguistic change today are of the same kind and order of magnitude as those which operated in the past five or ten thousand years’. Hence we may presume that the dialects from those areas which happened to be dominant in a given period carried about them some amount of social prestige, much as those which happen to be prominent today tend to be popularly looked upon as more prestigious than others. Further, since the overwhelming majority of writings that have survived to this day come from scribes/monks, one can also suppose that the hierarchy of monasteries (or even the hierarchy of scribes within one monastery) dictated which forms were taken as those worth following. Because of the aforementioned phonetic spelling system, it is not unlikely that these written forms then should have made an impact on the pronunciation as well.

2.2 Middle English

The Middle English period is characterised by the dominance of French, which established itself as the dominant language after the Norman Conquest in 1066. It took no less than three and a half centuries before the English monarch could communicate with ease in the English language: it was Henry V, who reigned from 1413 to 1422 (Churchill 2005 [1956]: 404).