Studia Anglica Posnaniensia 36, 2001

LINGUISTICS

RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION: SOCIOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS

PETER TRUDGILL

University of Fribourg

1. RP as a minority accent

An often cited statistic has it that in Britain RP speakers constitute only 3 percent of the population. When this statistic first became commonplace in the sociolinguistics literature, it was not unusual for people to dispute it. It certainly, at least in the 1970s, seemed as if there were many more RP speakers around than that. However, a little reflection showed that this impression was due to the fact that it was much easier to hear speakers of the RP accent in the media than their proportion in the population would indicate. If people disputed the 3 percent figure, it was only necessary to ask them how many RP speakers they had had face-to-face contact with recently. Since most readers of sociolinguistic literature were not members of the Royal Family, the point was, in the end, well taken.

Perhaps, therefore, it will be as well to discuss where this statistic came from. The guilty party was myself. I popularised the 3 percent figure in Trudgill (1974). (Incidentally, I also suggested that only 12 percent of the population were speakers of Standard English, implying that 9 percent of the population normally speak Standard English with a regional accent.) I did not, however, pick the 3 percent figure out of thin air. It was, on the contrary, rather carefully considered. The figure was arrived at in the following way. My sociolinguistic urban dialect study of the city of Norwich, some of the findings of which were presented in Trudgill (1974), was based for the most part on interviews with a random sample of 50 people taken from the population of the city. This sample was a genuine random sample in which the entire voting-age population, at that time people aged 21 and over, had an equal chance of selection. As is normal with such random samples, a small number of people refused to help me, and one person had died. These were replaced in the normal way by others also selected randomly. I also rejected from my sample people who had not been

brought up in Norwich and its vicinity. There was no point in investigating the phonology of Norwich English by talking to Lancastrians. The number of people rejected in this way was also very small – it would certainly have been much larger today. Now, out of this sample of 50 people, only one was an RP speaker. (None of the rejected out-of-towners was an RP-speaker either). In other words, the evidence from my random sample was that the population of Norwich contained only 2 percent of RP speakers.

In considering to what extent I could generalise from this finding to Britain as a whole, I had to bear in mind a number of factors: sampling error could have meant that the true proportion of RP speakers in Norwich might actually have been as high as, say, 5 percent; then I had to consider it probable that there were more RP speakers in some places, such as Cheltenham or Bath, say, than there were in Norwich; equally, though, I also had to consider that there were probably yet other places, such as Glasgow or Hull, where the proportion might have been lower. In the end, I decided that 3 percent was probably about right, but if anybody wishes to say that we should raise the figure to, say, 5 percent, I would have no objection. The point is that RP speakers have always represented a very small proportion of the population of native speakers of English in Britain.

This raises the interesting question: if RP is so very much a minority accent, why do we spend so much effort teaching it to non-native speakers RP, especially since, as David Abercrombie (1956: 55) pointed out, it would make much more sense on purely phonetic grounds to teach, for example, Scottish pronunciation? My own response to the of issue of "why teach RP" is "why not?". We have, after all, to teach something.

2. The sociolinguistic origins of RP

It is widely agreed that from a sociolinguistic point of view, this minority accent – very much a minority accent – is rather unusual, and indeed it is perhaps unique. In many languages in the world that have been heavily standardised, that standardisation extends from lexis, orthography and grammar into phonology to a certain extent, and it is not at all unusual to find a particular regional accent that has higher status than others. What is unusual about RP, of course, is that it is the accent of English English with the highest status and that it is totally non-regional. I take it to be a defining characteristic of the RP accent that, while it is clearly a variety that is associated with England, and to a certain extent also with the rest of the United Kingdom, it otherwise contains no regional features whatsoever. Of course, typologically it has its origins in the southeast of England. Unlike accents from the southwest of England, for example, it is a non-rhotic accent. And unlike the accents of the north of England, it has /ɑː/ rather than /æ/ in the lexical sets of *bath* and *dance*. And so on. But the point is that it is not possible to ascribe any geographical origins to a genuine native RP

speaker other than that they are almost certainly British, and probably English. This peculiar lack of regionality, moreover, must be due to a peculiar set of sociolinguistic preconditions, and has in fact often been ascribed to an origin in the development in Britain of residential, and therefore also non-regional, schools for the children, especially the sons, of the upper-classes, the so-called Public Schools.

3. Regional and social variation

The relationship between social and regional accent variation in Britain has often been modelled as having the form of an equilateral triangle (following Daniel Jones, as reported in Ward (1929) where, however, the diagram takes the form of a cone). The base of the triangle is broad, implying considerable amounts of phonological variation between the different regional accents spoken by the lower social classes. Going upwards from the base, the increasing narrowness of the triangle implies decreasing regional variation between the accents of speakers higher up the social scale. Similarly, the point at the top of the triangle indicates the total lack of regional variation we have already noted as characteristic of the RP accent, spoken as it is by people at the top of the social scale. There is no doubt that this model is an effective one. It is impossible, as we have said, to tell where an RP speaker comes from. It is usually possible to tell from which broad region of the country middle-class speakers come from. And working-class speakers can usually be pinpointed even more accurately as to their geographical origins. Thus an unskilled manual worker might be recognisable by anybody having the appropriate sort of linguistic knowledge as coming from Bristol, a non-manual worker as coming from the West Country, a middle-class professional person as coming from somewhere in the south of England, and an upper-middle class RP speaker as coming simply from England, even if all of them had their origins in Bristol. Equally, a typical middle-class person from Birmingham will obviously have an accent which is phonetically and phonologically different from that of middle-class person from Bristol, but the differences between the accents of two working-class speakers from the same places will be even greater.

There is an interesting complication, however, which we can add to the model which has to do with a number of varieties of English spoken outside Britain, notably in Ireland and in the southern hemisphere – South Africa, New Zealand and Australia. In Australia, for instance, it is usual for linguists to claim that Australian English phonology demonstrates no, or very little, regional variation, but some considerable social variation. It has also become usual to refer to Australian accents as falling into one of three social accent types: cultivated, general, and broad. I do not much like these terms myself, since they suggest three discrete varieties rather than the continuum of varieties which obviously

exists, but the status-ordering is clear from the terminology: cultivated Australian consists of the accents with the highest status, while broad Australian consists of those with the lowest status, and general Australian comes in between. How does one recognise these accents linguistically? The answer is very easy. Until relatively recently, RP had a role to play in Australian society. It was the accent with the highest status in Australia, and RP speakers were the ones who got the jobs in broadcasting. Now, RP as such has more or less disappeared from Australia. RP is associated in the minds of Australians with upper-class Britain, and increasing Australian national self-confidence and cultural independence vis-à-vis the "mother country" has meant that there are now very few, if any, native speakers of RP left in the country. However, the influence of the legacy of RP in Australia is still vitally important: cultivated Australian is precisely the accent type which most closely resembles RP, while broad Australian is the one which resembles it least. We should, that is, make a place in our triangle for regional varieties from beyond Britain as well.

The triangle model is also accurate in that it implies, correctly, that the situation is one which involves continua – both a social accent continuum, from high status to low status accents, and a geographical accent continuum, from one end of the country to another. Accurate, that is, with one exception. The exception has to do with the fact that, like standard dialects, RP is a standard accent which has undergone, albeit implicitly rather than explicitly, codification. The point is that speakers either have an RP accent or they do not. There are many people who have a so-called "near-RP" accent, but a near RP accent is by definition not an RP accent. When it comes to employing a codified language variety, a miss is as good as a mile. Just as someone who otherwise uses only grammatical forms associated with Standard English but habitually says *I seen it* cannot be said to be a speaker of Standard English, it only takes one non-RP feature for a speaker not to be a speaker of RP.

4. Innovations in RP

This raises the interesting quasi-philosophical question of what is and is not an RP feature. RP, like all accents and dialects of all languages, is subject to change. Some of these changes are certainly internally generated. Descriptions of some of these can be found in Gimson (1962) and Wells (1982), and probably include the fronting of the GOAT vowel, and lowering of the TRAP vowel. Other changes, however, clearly make their way into RP over time by diffusion upwards from lower-status accents. Features which used not to be RP and now are RP probably include, in my view:

a) the employment of intrusive /r/;
b) the replacement of /ɔː/ by /ɒ/ in the lexical set of *lost, cloth, off;*
c) glottaling of syllable-final /t/ before another consonant;
d) the merger of /ʊə/, /ɔə/ and /ɔː/;
e) the fronting of /uː/ from [uː] towards [ʉː].

As my discussion above suggested, the criterion for the inclusion of any feature as being a feature of RP must be that it is not a regional feature. This of course implies that there will be features that for a period of time, while a change is taking place, may have an indeterminate status. One good example of this is provided by the case of what Wells (1982) has called HAPPY-tensing. This involves, to simplify somewhat, the replacement through time of word-final unstressed /ɪ/ by /iː/, so that /hæpɪ/ becomes /hæpiː/. At the level of regional accents, this innovation appears to be one which is most characteristic of southern accents but which has been spreading northwards for many decades. For example, the Survey of English Dialects records show that many counties in the south of England which now have -/iː/ had -/ɪ/ in the speech of rural Traditional Dialect speakers in the 1950s and 1960s. And my own mother, for instance, has /ɪ/, while I have /iː/, even though we are both from Norfolk.

Now, RP has always had /ɪ/ in such items. This was the one respect in which it resembled north of England rather than south of England accents. It was also the case that there were many people who had near-RP accents in that they had RP accents except that they had HAPPY-tensing. We could define such people as non-RP speakers because HAPPY-tensing was a regional feature – they were obviously from somewhere in the south of England. However, there is now some evidence that HAPPY-tensing is, or at least is going to be, a feature of RP. The conclusive evidence would be if we could show that younger speakers who otherwise have only RP features and who come from areas of the north of England which do not have HAPPY-tensing, nevertheless do have it, unlike their – we could now say – regionally accented colleagues. HAPPY-tensing will now no longer be a regional feature, though absence of HAPPY-tensing will be. Note that this will force us into the position of having to say either that certain people aged, say, 50 who have HAPPY-tensing are not RP speakers, while certain people aged, say, 20 who have HAPPY-tensing are RP speakers; or, perhaps alternatively, that 50-year-old people who used not to be RP-speakers have now become RP speakers without changing the way they speak at all. I would personally not find either of these solutions ridiculous.

5. Changes in the sociolinguistic situation of RP

Phonetic and phonological changes are of course not the only changes which have been taking place involving RP. In the last few decades there have also been a number of changes in the sociolinguistic situation of RP, and in its relationship to other accents. Much of this appears to stem from a change in attitudes towards RP and other accents of British English on the part of the British

population as a whole. Most of what we know about attitudes to English accents derives from a whole series of research programmes carried out by the social psychologist Howard Giles and his associates (Giles 1987). Giles, very skilfully using a whole range of research techniques, most notably matched-guise experiments, showed that it was a reasonably straightforward matter to gain access to peoples' attitudes to different accents of English without asking them directly – something which would naturally have produced a series of skewed results.

It was apparent from Giles' work that RP was perceived as being an accent associated, in the absence of information to the contrary, with speakers who were competent, reliable, educated, and confident. It was also perceived as being the most aesthetically pleasing of all British English accents. On the other hand, RP speakers scored low on traits like friendliness, companionability, and sincerity, and messages couched in RP also proved to be less persuasive than the same messages in local accents. (Notice also that there is a long history in American science-fiction and horror films for sinister, menacing characters to be given RP accents.)

As far as changes in the last twenty years are concerned, we actually, I believe, lack reliable research on most of these issues, but it is a matter of common – and not necessarily unreliable – observation that the RP accent is no longer the necessary passport to employment of certain sorts that it once was. Non-RP accents are very much more common on the BBC, for example, than they were forty years ago. And telephone sales companies, as I know from frequent telephone calls from such companies asking for my advice, now think about which regional accents will be most effective rather than automatically employing non-regional RP.

Discrimination on the grounds of accent still unfortunately occurs in British society. But this discrimination is no longer against all regional accents but only against those from, as it were, lower down the triangle. And it is also no longer permitted in British society to be seen to discriminate against someone on the basis of their accent – it has to masquerade as something else. I take this hypocrisy to be a sign of progress, of an increase in democratic and egalitarian ideals. This has also, probably, though again we lack the research, had the consequence that an RP accent can be even more of a disadvantage in certain social situations than was formally the case. In many sections of British society, some of the strongest sanctions are exercised against people who are perceived as being "posh" and "snobbish". These factors also probably mean that many fewer people than before are now speakers of what Wells (1982) has called acquired RP: that is, many fewer people than before who are not native speakers of RP attempt, as adolescents or adults, to acquire and use this accent. Even Conservative Party politicians no longer have to strive for RP accents, as a recent Conservative Prime Minister once did.

6. The death of RP?

In spite of these observations, it is as well, I believe, to be sceptical about reports of two different types that appear to be rather common anecdotally, especially on the part of journalists in need of something to write about, at the moment. The first is that RP is disappearing. The second is that RP is being replaced by a new, potentially non-regional accent. I will now discuss these two types of report, which I believe to be largely myths, in turn.

The first myth, then, is that RP is disappearing. There seem to me to be a number of reasons for this erroneous but understandable misperception. First, non-RP accents are now found, as we have already noted, in situations from which they would have been excluded only a few decades ago. In other words, it is easy to gain an impression that there are fewer RP speakers around than formerly. Secondly, the kind of people who in earlier generations would have been speakers of acquired RP no longer are, as we have already observed. So there actually are fewer RP speakers around than formerly, though not necessarily fewer native speakers. Thirdly, RP itself, again as we have already seen, has changed. It has acquired – as it has always over the generations acquired – forms that were formerly part of local, notably southeast of England accents. This is what leads journalists to report that, for example, Public School pupils now "speak Cockney". It is true, again as we have seen, that RP now has a certain amount of certain types of /t/-glottaling which were formerly associated with local accents only. But that most certainly does not mean that it is Cockney. I am reminded of a common perception now current in my own home city, Norwich, where older people frequently complain that the youngsters "talk like Londoners". If you enquire why they say this, they always make the same reply: "Young people say fing instead of thing." This is true. Otherwise, however, they still sound as Norwich people have sounded for decades. One salient phonological feature can lead to utterly inaccurate stereotypical reports.

As far as RP is concerned, the ongoing work of Anne Fabricius from Copenhagen (2000) and Joanna Przedlacka from Warsaw (this volume) shows that the younger generations of those sections of the community one would expect to be RP speakers still are RP speakers. Pupils at Eton, and undergraduates at Cambridge University who are former pupils at the big Public Schools, are still for the most part RP speakers. Their RP has, it is true, some new features, but these features are all, including /t/-glottaling, non-regional features and therefore must still be considered as being RP. (Non-regionality is, of course, a necessary but not sufficient condition for a feature to be considered RP. For instance, if all regions of England were to acquire /h/-dropping, something which will actually happen if, as seems possible, this phenomenon eventually reaches the northeast of England, that would not make it an RP feature!)

7. A competitor for RP?

As far as the second myth is concerned, this has to do with the development of so-called "Estuary English". This is a foolish term which, however, has become widely accepted. Perhaps we should even use it ourselves – "Received Pronunciation" is, after all, not a particularly felicitous term either. It is foolish, I would suggest, because it suggests that we are talking about a new variety, which we are not; and because it suggests that it is a variety of English confined to the banks of the Thames Estuary, which it is not. The label actually refers to the lower middle-class accents of the Home Counties, the counties which surround London: Essex and Kent, it is true, but also parts or all of Surrey, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Hertfordshire. Early "descriptions" to use this label were by non-linguists. However, as described by John Wells (1982) and by Ulrike Altendorf (1999), Estuary English has obvious southeast of England features such as diphthong-shift, /l/-vocalisation and merger of vowels before /l/, but it does not have features typical of working-class accents only, such as TH-fronting.

As I have said, it is easy to get an impression from reading some of the commentators, most of them not nearly so well-informed as Professor Wells, that "Estuary English" is carrying all before it, that it is the new and coming thing. I would like to dispute this, in some measure. It is therefore, I believe, incumbent upon me to explain why some people believe that it is the case. There are, it seems to me, a number of explanatory factors. First, as we have already seen, many people who in earlier generations would have become speakers of acquired RP no longer become so. People who are upwardly socially mobile or who come into the public eye may still in fact reduce the number of regional features in their accents – they will move themselves up the triangle, as it were – but they will no longer remove such features altogether. It is therefore undoubtedly true that many more people than was formerly the case can be heard in public situations, especially in the media, speaking with lower middle-class regional accents. And of course the most prominent of these are the lower middle-class accents of the southeast of England, (a) because this is the largest region of England in terms of population, and (b) because there is a considerable metropolitan bias in the media, with most nationally available media being broadcast from or published in London. Secondly, there has been a certain amount of upward social mobility in the last twenty years which has found people from lower middle-class backgrounds in socially prominent positions in which it would have been unusual to find them previously. Thirdly, it is also true that at least some of the phonological features associated with "Estuary English" are currently spreading, as London-based features have done for centuries now, outwards into surrounding areas. In my own area, for example, /l/-vocalisation has not yet reached Norwich, but, as discussed (with maps) in Trudgill (1986), it reached Cambridge and Colchester some decades ago, and is beginning to affect

Ipswich. It is therefore undoubtedly the case that lower-middle-class southeastern accents cover a wider geographical area than was formerly the case, and will probably continue to spread for some time to come.

What I would strenuously dispute, however, is that this means that "Estuary English" is going to be the "new RP". It will never, in my view, become anything more than a regional accent, albeit the accent of a rather large region covering, together with its lower-class counterparts, the Home Counties already mentioned plus, I would guess, Sussex, Hampshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and parts of Northamptonshire. The sociolinguistic conditions are not such that it could turn into the new RP. There is no parallel here to the nationwide network of residential Public Schools which gave rise to RP. What we know about the geographical diffusion of linguistic innovations, moreover – and we know quite a lot – indicates that there is no way in which the influence of London is going to be able to counteract the influence of large centres such as Liverpool and Newcastle which are at some distance from London. And we also know that linguistic innovations are not spread by radio and television.

Reports that a few individual features such as TH-fronting are spreading across Britain northwards and westwards from London, though undoubtedly true, do not invalidate this point. This spreading of individual features is something which has always happened, and in any case TH-fronting is not to be considered an "Estuary English" feature. The fact that young people in Cardiff are now using /t/-glottaling does not mean that they are speaking London English – or RP! And the fact that young people in Sheffield are now using TH-fronting does not mean that they are speaking Cockney. As anyone who has been to Sheffield recently can attest, people there do not sound remotely like Cockneys – or even like "Estuary English" speakers.

This leads me again to raise the topic of which model to employ for teaching so-called "British English", in reality English English, to non-native learners. It has been suggested that it would now make more sense to teach learners "Estuary English" rather than RP. Of course, it must be true that there are more speakers of "Estuary English" in England than there are of RP. And of course it is a good idea if 24-year-old Poles sound as much as possible like 24-year-old, rather than 94-year-old, English people. I would therefore advocate rather strongly teaching intrusive /r/ and some forms of /t/-glottaling at least to advanced students. But I would not advocate the teaching of "Estuary English" or of features associated solely with it, such as diphthong-shifted vowels or /l/-vocalisation, since these are specifically regional features.

8. New dialect and accent regions

It seems to me important to recognise that the geographical spread of "Estuary English" is part of a much bigger trend. What is happening in Britain – and

probably not only in Britain – as far as regional linguistic variation is concerned is rather complicated. On the one hand, much regional variation is being lost as the large number of Traditional Dialects covering small geographical areas gradually disappear from most, though by no means all, parts of the country. These, however, are being replaced by a much smaller number of new Modern Dialect areas covering much larger areas. The dialects and accents associated with these areas are much less different from one another, and much less different from RP and Standard English, than the Traditional Dialects were. However, and this is crucial, in terms of phonology they are for the most part currently diverging, not converging. The work of the European Science Foundation Network on Dialect Divergence and Convergence, which recently had its final conference in Reading, paints a very similar picture Europe-wide. Work in large urban centres such as Liverpool, Newcastle and Cardiff shows that, although these places are adopting some nationwide features such as labio-dental /r/, /t/-glottaling and TH-fronting, they also demonstrate independent divergent developments, such as voiceless-stop affrication in Liverpool and, from my own work, the fronting of the GOAT-vowel from [u:] to [ʉ:], the widespread smoothing of triphthongs as in *doing* /dɜ:n/, *knowing* /nɒ:n/, and the merger of the vowels of NEAR and SQUARE in Norwich. This is probably part of a much larger scale world-wide pattern where varieties of English around the world, while they may demonstrate lexical convergence, are diverging phonologically: accents of English from New Zealand to the United States are getting less like on another, not more.

What seems to be happening is that, parallel to the development of a large dialect region centred on London, whose lower middle-class accents have been referred to as 'Estuary English', we are seeing the development of similar areas elsewhere, as yet not much studied by linguists, focussing on centres such as Belfast, Dublin, Cardiff, Glasgow, Newcastle, Nottingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Bristol. Jim and Lesley Milroy (J. Milroy et al. 1994), for instance, have reported the development of a levelled but clearly regional variety currently diffusing outwards from Newcastle. (Mats Thelander (1979) reported similar developments 20 years ago now from northern Sweden.) And Dominic Watt (Watt – Tillotson 1999) reports the widespread development in a large area of the north of England focussed on Leeds of a newer GOAT-vowel [ø:] replacing older [o:] and [ɔ:].

London-based journalists have of course not noticed this kind of development, but this is no reason for linguists to ignore it. I would therefore argue that to focus pedagogically on one of the newer, larger regional accents of British English to the detriment of all the others, just because it happens to be spoken in London, would be, it seems to me, the worst kind of metropolitan bias, of which there is far too much in Britain already.

9. Conclusion

I am a non-RP speaker, but I believe that it is convenient that students learning English English still have a non-regional model available to them. The fact is that in spite of the developments I have just outlined, the triangle model remains an accurate one for a description of social and regional patterns of accent variation in Britain. The development of a network of regional varieties in Britain is taking place as it were underneath a non-regional, nationwide layer provided by RP. This layer is thinner than it was – the minority is probably even smaller than it was – but it is likely to remain intact until British society undergoes even more radical changes in its social structure than it has already undergone in the last twenty years.

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