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RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION: WHO "RECEIVES" IT AND HOW LONG WILL IT BE "RECEIVED"?

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In this paper I want to consider the proposition that British "Received Pronunciation" (RP) no longer exists. This may seem at first sight to be a dubious claim, as it is certain that many people in Britain speak with an accent similar to that described in great detail in major textbooks such as Jones (1956) and Gimson (1970). Thus, in a purely linguistic sense, there is still a set of phonetic/phonological norms conforming approximately to those of RP that can be heard in Britain. However, there is more than this involved in the definition of what RP is. The linguistic structure of RP as a variety is only part of that definition: the idea that this accent is "received" further requires us to consider what is meant by the term "received", and, clearly, this involves social, rather than purely linguistic factors. We need to ask in what sense speakers in social contexts "receive" a particular accent, how they received it in the past, and whether they receive it in the same way now. In a social sense RP has not been merely a variety on a par with all other varieties: it has been a special accent, usually described as special in a number of ways by experts on the subject. Since social change in Britain has been quite rapid in the second half of the twentieth century, there seems to be good reason to reconsider this social, or sociolinguistic, aspect of the definition. I will discuss here how far the social and ideological changes of the last half century may have led to a situation in which RP is no longer the same socio-political phenomenon that it used to be, and in the discussion I will also consider some of the accounts that have been given of the earlier history and background of RP. This is important because, to make an adequate judgement, we need to understand the social conditions that led to the establishment of this accent as a specially marked accent. Accounts of the historical background of RP have sometimes been predicated on a rather simplified view of

what the social history of Modern English has actually been like. Let us start, however, by considering RP as a "standard" accent.

Unlike "network American", for example, RP has never been a mainstream accent used by a large section of the population. It has always been a minority accent, used by no more than 5% of the population, and for this reason alone it must be inherently vulnerable to changing social conditions, unless it is in some way protected and socially maintained. In this respect, there is some difficulty in defining RP as a standard, as general acceptance by a population is usually considered to be one property of a standard variety. Leaving this aside, however, there are several ways in which RP certainly does have the characteristics of a standard (relative invariance and codification being among them), and one of these seems to be especially relevant here. This is the sense of a standard as a reference point against which other things are measured, with an implication that reaching that standard is desirable. Anything failing to reach it is not simply "non-standard": it is also "*sub*-standard" (this distinction is important). In this sense, to reach the "standard" is rather like struggling to achieve a passing grade in an examination. It is certainly true that RP has been a standard in this sense, but chiefly for that portion of the population who have wished to be regarded as members of the English professional and business classes. For them it has constituted a standard in this sense, but for the much larger number of working people – miners, dockers and labourers, for example – it has not, and few of those people have ever been much interested in acquiring it.

One reason for questioning the present position of RP as a standard in this limited sense is that general observation of present-day usage suggests that it may no longer have the exclusive position as a reference point that it seems to have had in the past. It is no longer so vitally important for those who wish to be regarded as "educated". One can now frequently hear Anglican clergymen and regular army officers on the media who have distinctly non-RP accents, and as Honey (1989: 85) points out, ex-public school pupils at Oxford or Cambridge may feel embarrassed about the privileged status of their RP accents and may therefore modify them considerably. According to a student quoted by Honey, "Eton accents are decidedly uncool". Although it is true that young people in every generation tend to violate the norms of their elders, these observations suggest that the "received" or specially marked status of RP may now be endangered. The social factors that led in the past to the development and maintenance of this special accent have altered – possibly to the extent that its future maintenance as an elite accent is no longer secure.

As for the phonetic characteristics of RP (its internal linguistic form), some of its formerly salient phonetic features are recessive in that they are not favoured by younger speakers; they are avoided by those whose social group has traditionally been RP-speaking. Front-raising of the kind described by Daniel

Jones (1956) for the lowest front vowel (/a/ in *man, bad*) has given way to a lower vowel near [a], and the diphthongal variant of /o:/ (as in *stone, home*), with unrounding and fronting of the nucleus, as described by Gimson (1970), is no longer frequently heard in highly educated or high-status speech. Indeed, some of the vowel-pronunciations associated with the highest status – those used by older members of the Royal Family – are generally avoided and often made fun of. The cartoonist Steve Bell represents Prince Philip as saying *hice* for 'house', and this is a matter of great jocularity.

Of course, we can take two opposing views of this: we can say, on the one hand, that RP is changing within itself as a distinct variety partly through influence from regional accents, and John Wells (1994) has spoken of the "Cockneyfication" of RP. As virtually every observer has noticed, glottal stops for /t/, intrusive /r/, and other formerly non-standard features are now used by speakers of high social standing. The "correct" pronunciation of *wh-*, formerly so highly favoured by schoolteachers, is now seldom heard in younger RP speakers, most of whom happily merge *whine* with *wine* and *where* with *wear.* In this view, RP still remains as a continuing but changing variety, and, if it still is a clear variety, it is entirely reasonable to describe these intra-linguistic changes as changes within that one variety. The accents used by some newscasters on the BBC World Service (on which we expect RP to be used), however, sometimes have a rather fronted and slightly diphthongized /u:/ (as in *through*) and slight rounding on the nucleus of /ai/ (as in *wide*). Of course it is possible to argue that these pronunciations (which seem to my rather conservative ear to be definitely regional) are now variants permitted in RP. Even so, in the present ideological climate, we may still feel a little uneasy about the idea that some forms are "permitted" or "received", and it may not be clear exactly WHO does the permitting and receiving. If linguists are doing the describing, then perhaps it is they, rather than the general population, who are doing the receiving also (we will return to the authority of linguists below). However this may be, if this minority accent is believed to have been spreading more widely through the population, it cannot be expected to have done this without undergoing substantial change in form.

The second view of this matter is that, as a result of social change, RP is being dislodged from its exclusive received position and replaced (rather than simply modified) by an accent now used by a much higher proportion of the population and therefore more widely distributed downward in the social spectrum. This accent (or accent-cluster, for it is as yet not very well defined), we may refer to as "mainstream (southern?) British English", and we can suggest that it is in the process of what has been called *focussing* or *levelling*. From a rather diffuse set of varying conventions, variously distributed regionally and socially, it has begun to form itself into something more recognizable as an almost distinct

variety, largely based on the speech of south-eastern England and the London area (this area being the original regional base of RP also). This accent is, in some of its details, used by high-status speakers who would formerly have used RP, as well as lower-status speakers who would formerly have used more distinctive regional varieties. In its more demotic forms, it is sometimes labelled "Estuary English"[1] and often stigmatized by commentators in the press, but more generally it is a geographically and socially diffusing variety that is noticeably south-eastern English in character. If we call it "Modified RP", we have to accept that it has a much wider social base than what was formerly called RP, and it seems at least equally acceptable to say that it is something else with partly different social and linguistic origins. From this point of view, the process involved is replacement of an accent rather than internal modification of it.

The general argument here depends on an assessment of how far varieties of language are subject to internal change and how far to externally induced change, and at what point we can say that a variety is replaced rather than simply modified. These dichotomies have always been problematic in historical linguistics. We have to be willing to accept it as a possibility that changes that appear retrospectively to be spontaneous changes within a single variety may in reality have been externally induced, and we need to recall here that historians of language have been reluctant to accept the reality of external structural change, preferring to believe that single varieties have had a continuous existence through time. This internal view of change falls out naturally from the nineteenth-century Family Tree model of language ancestry. The strongest recent arguments that I know for the priority of continuity and internal change come in a book by Roger Lass (1997), and the resistance to contact-based explanations for change is often still very strong. The effect of taking this internal view, however, could well be to describe some particular historical change as wholly internal to some dialect when in reality it may have been triggered by influence from speakers of some other dialect. Furthermore, whole accents may effectively have been replaced by other accents, rather than simply modified, and, clearly, the view of history that is involved in this kind of argument is quite different from the model of continuity that is the dominant one in the subject. Be that as it may, the replacement of prestige forms from external (lower prestige?) sources rather than through internal change has analogues in the earlier history of English. It seems to have happened before, and so it may well be happening again.

[1] This 'Estuary English' has been widely commented on in the popular press, usually disapprovingly, as vulgar, careless, over-informal, etc. Yet, in *The Observer*, 19 Dec, 1999, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, is described as speaking it. I am suggesting here that Estuary English represents part of a trend towards a more widespread mainstream accent, and not that this mainstream accent, when it becomes more focussed, will necessarily be identical with what is observed today.

With regard to high prestige accents such as RP, it is also relevant to note that Labov (1972) has argued on the basis of empirical findings that innovations normally originate and diffuse in the middle ranges of social hierarchies and not from the top or the bottom, and historians of English (e.g., Strang 1970: 164) have rather routinely commented that changes in early modern standard English seem to have come from below. To the extent that RP is the accent of higher social groups, these observations suggest that successful linguistic change should not always be expected to originate within it as spontaneous internal change, but to be frequently externally induced – to consist of innovations originating in other varieties and imported into RP from those sources. Indeed, if we go far enough back, it can be strongly argued that the late Middle English east midland variety, which is, broadly speaking, viewed as the ancestor of present-day Standard English, contained many borrowings from other dialects. In that variety, the word *one* (for example) should have rhymed with *stone*, as the spelling suggests. The usual modern pronunciation with an initial [w-] glide is believed to be a borrowing from a south-west midland or south-western dialect. There are many other examples of probable borrowings in early standard or pre-standard English. Thus, we can expect present-day varieties also to be likely to borrow – to admit innovations originating in other varieties, whether regionally or socially defined: it is also possible that in this process the variety concerned is effectively replaced rather than merely altered in some details. However we view this, external influences on varieties of language depend on the behaviour of speakers and are socially transmitted, so it is appropriate to turn briefly to some of the social aspects of RP in recent times.

The expert phoneticians who described RP some decades ago always stated that, although it has a southern English origin, its distribution is social, not regional, and the claim that it is a "class dialect", not a regional one, goes back over a century – to Henry Sweet. As John Wells observes: "An important and defining characteristic of RP is … its non-localizability within England" (1982: 14). Let us accept for the sake of argument that this is correct. In this respect the English situation has often been said to be unique amongst the better known European languages, and quite different from the American English situation, in which the standard or mainstream accent ("network American") is regionally distributed. RP speakers can originate in any part of the UK, but are always of relatively high social status. This state of affairs is associated with very strong class-consciousness that seems to have persisted longer in England than in some other nations and which was still very salient into the 1950s and later. There was still an annual cricket match between the "Gentlemen" (amateurs) and the "Players" (professional cricketers), and I remember reading in the press that all but two members of Anthony Eden's 1955 cabinet were old Etonians (former pupils of a single high-status fee-paying boarding school). The extreme

class-consciousness that lay behind these things (to an extent that is difficult to appreciate today) was strongly bound up with accent. The Gentlemen spoke RP, and the Players had regional accents. RP had by then become a gate-keeping accent: it could be used to exclude regionally-accented people from career advancement. Yet, undemocratic and elitist as this may have been, it does not follow that the origins of RP were so totally elitist, and we now consider this further.

Although its ancestry may be more ancient, the status of RP as a special regionless accent dates back, according to most authorities, only to the later nineteenth century, and its recognized status was not so much associated with any general process of standardization and focussing throughout the community as with the effects of a high status politically powerful in-group (or set of interlocking social networks and coalitions) based on the public schools (i.e., private, mainly boarding, schools), where in the later nineteenth century it became a generally used accent. Around 1900 it seems that speakers of RP were almost always likely to have been educated at a public school, and, before that from an early age, at a private preparatory school. Whatever its origins may have been, RP had become a network accent and a badge of identity that showed membership of a fairly clearly defined stratum spanning the higher professional and business classes (they are often loosely referred to as "the ruling class"). What seems to me to be most important about this in general social affairs, however, is the fact that possession of RP was also at that time a guarantee that the speaker could be regarded as educated. This association with education has been pointed out by Honey (1989) and others, and I would like to take this point a little farther here. Although RP speaking had become identified with educational status, very few people reached a high level of education in the middle of the nineteenth century, and it is important to bear this in mind.

Linguists know less than they should about the educational system in the nineteenth century (and I am no exception to this), but it is crucial to our understanding of the rise and development of RP. In the population at large, it is quite clear that around 1850 the level of illiteracy was monstrously high. Cipolla (1969) presents figures that show that nearly forty percent of brides and bridegrooms in England and Wales were unable to sign their names in the marriage register. In such a situation it is hard to believe that all those who actually could sign their names were necessarily functionally literate. Thus, the possession of a particular accent, uniquely based on the public schools, must have appeared as a guarantee that the speaker was educated and literate and, probably, capable of taking on demanding commercial or professional duties. Of course, some others might also be equally capable, but if they did not use RP, their training for responsible positions could not be so readily relied on in a situation in which localized usage was a sign of low literacy. There were many uneducated people, and most educated ones were public school products. I shall touch again on this important question of educational standards at various points in this paper. The social position of RP in the period 1870-1950 is in this view to a great extent a product of the configuration of the educational system as it developed in the later nineteenth century, spanning its defects as well as it strengths – its failure to educate the many and its success in educating the few.

Although it is often pointed out that RP is a perfectly "natural" accent for those who use it (it is their acquired vernacular in childhood), this may not always have been so in the beginning. The general opinion now seems to be that its twentieth century position as a non-regional class-marked accent arises from its position as a Victorian public school accent.[2] According to Honey (1989) it was imposed in the public schools in the late nineteenth century mostly by peer pressures rather than by teachers. Mugglestone's (1995: 258-315) account of nineteenth century education suggests, however, that the expansion of the public school system in mid-century or so led to a great deal of pressure on educators to instil the correct accent in newer institutions, some of which catered for the sons of prosperous tradesmen rather than for the upper classes. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that a minority accent so uniform throughout the country could have been inculcated and maintained in any way other than consciously and deliberately. At that time, it seems that slight local accents were stigmatized and children were shamed into losing them; in the teaching of reading, certain "faults", such as /h/ dropping, were seized upon and corrected. Before that time there had of course been concern with "polite" or "genteel" usage, but there is little doubt that prior to this expansion in education, upper class and upper middle class people from different regions did use localized pronunciations relatively freely. Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*, for example, represents a titled aristocrat as having a strong Hampshire accent. The prime minister, William Gladstone, who was educated at Eton in the 1820s, retained his Liverpool area accent all his life (Honey 1989: 24-25, cites this example and several others). For over a century now old Etonians have been speakers of RP: a few years ago it would have been astonishing if there had been any exception to this. But this history suggests that RP as a distinctive marker of educated status was adopted for social

[2] Gerry Knowles (1997: 148-150) is rather skeptical about this view, which he ascribes largely to the retrospective opinions of Jones and Wyld (1927, etc.) – it is almost as though they invented RP retrospectively. He points out that Alexander Ellis (1875: 1089) said: "I have not even a notion how to determine a standard pronunciation". I interpret this as meaning that Jones and Wyld were among the first to claim that the public school accent was the "standard" accent, and it is important to remember that their codifications of RP were influential. Although some aspects of RP may be traced back to the "genteel" speech of the eighteenth century, what is important here is that the public school system had enormous influence in establishing it as non-regional and confirming its universality in upper-class and educated speech.

and socio-political reasons at a particular time and place, even though regional accents had previously been acceptable in the ruling class. Use of RP by now identified a small cadre of educated people. It is a very special phenomenon – a product of a particular set of social conditions – and the conditions that led to it are in the main no longer present. I shall mention below what I think were the most important of those conditions, but first we shall look at views expressed around 1950 – at a time when the position of Britain as a world power had greatly declined.

In a paper written in 1951, David Abercrombie (1965) expressed some alarm at the social dominance of RP in England and the resulting discrimination against other accents. He spoke of an "accent-bar" as analogous to what was then called the "colour-bar":[3]

> All over the world people are intolerant of each other's accents: unfamiliar customs seem as silly and wrong in speech as they do in everything else. But the exceptional accent-bar in England gives this natural human intolerance an exceptional importance. I believe that the continued existence of this accent-bar, which no longer reflects social reality, is having a harmful effect on Standard English speech in England (1965: 15).

Abercrombie was writing shortly after the Second World War, and he had probably perceived that the cataclysmic events of those years had greatly accelerated change in British society. In earlier decades educated people were normally RP speakers, but by the 1950s, these RP speakers were, as Abercrombie points out, outnumbered by "the undoubtedly educated people who do not talk RP" (1965: 15). What is clear is that the spread of education to many more people than before had altered the situation in which only RP speakers could be regarded as educated and therefore trustworthy in demanding career positions. Public attitudes had not caught up with this change, and RP was still a gate-keeping accent that implemented an accent-bar. Indeed, RP also frequently went along with other academic accomplishments, such as the ability to compose correctly scanned Latin hexameters, which, although not necessary in a journalist, politician or high court judge, were also potential gate-keeping skills that could appear to exclude those who were not adept in them. Although class-consciousness was clearly an extremely important factor, the background

[3] "In England, Standard English speakers are divided by an "accent-bar", on one side of which is RP, and on the other side all other accents. And very often the first judgement made on a stranger's speech is the answer to the question: which side of the accent-bar is he? ... It is not easy to put into words exactly how this accent-bar works. There is no doubt that RP is a privileged accent; your social life, or your career, or both, may be affected by whether you possess it or not (Abercrombie 1965: 13)".

to these attitudes in academic educational status seems to me to be of crucial importance.

In some places these exclusive attitudes to accent remain, and, like many people of my age, I could if I had space demonstrate this repeatedly from my own experience: for example, the chairman of an appointments board resisting the appointment of a particular candidate because he had a (slight) London accent. Similarly, Edwards (1993: 235) quotes a letter from an appointments board to a rejected candidate for a teaching post in 1974, explaining very kindly that although he was impressive, he had problems with "grammar" and "aspirates". Attitudes of this kind still remain in some areas of our educational system and elsewhere, and they are directed somewhat selectively against the accents of large conurbations. They are recognized by commentators such as Honey (1989), whose solution to the problem is essentially that everyone should be trained at school to pronounce standard English correctly, as possession of a localized accent may disadvantage them in life. In this belief, he belongs to a long tradition going back to the eighteenth century, which was often concerned with providing greater equality of opportunity by teaching children speak "correctly", but because of the nature of language as a social phenomenon, this approach always has been, and always will be, doomed to failure. It seems to have succeeded only for a minority – those who were brought up in the limited, authoritarian and cloistered circumstances of the Victorian public school.

Elitist attitudes to accent have in general declined considerably. To judge by media interviews, army officers and Oxford professors are now not particularly likely to speak RP as it was defined by linguists a generation ago. But there is no doubt that the origins of RP were strongly bound up with education – both positively and negatively (if you didn't speak RP you might have left school at ten or twelve years old). The association with education – together with its non-localized character and associations with careful public speaking – may be why so many regional speakers perceive it as artificial, even though it is not artificial for those who have always spoken it. It is also important to note that until very recently, people have generally assumed that RP is also the most careful accent, and we also need to consider this briefly, because of course careful speech is necessarily highly valued – especially in public and formal contexts.

Careful diction is possible in any accent, but there has been a general – quite mistaken – belief that it is possible only in RP. This emphasis on careful public speaking is retrospectively very clear in H.C. Wyld's tract on "The best English", published in 1934. "R.S ["Received Standard", i.e., RP: JM]", says Wyld, "is superior, from the character of its vowels, to any other form of English, in beauty and clarity, and is therefore, if for no other reason, the type best suited to public speaking" (cited from Crowley (1991: 213)). Later, he states that "as the most pleasing and sonorous form" it is "the best suited to poetry and oratory"

(1991: 214). Opinions may vary as to whether RP is pleasing and sonorous, but Wyld's emphasis on careful diction was of course understandable in the early years of sound broadcasting, and it may have been quite natural for many to consider that only RP should be used for this reason. The hegemony of RP in broadcasting into the 1970s was very strongly influenced by such views, partly, one assumes, because it was thought to be the most appropriate accent for formal speaking. Formal diction, indeed, was accompanied by formal dress: announcers wore dinner jackets to read the news, even though in the early days they could not be seen. If you wore a dinner jacket, you could hardly have read the news in anything other than RP.

Yet, the idea that careful diction is possible only in RP is completely false. Every dialectologist must have interviewed, or listened to, very careful speakers of other varieties. What is important here is to recognize how strongly RP became identified with careful speech, and to reflect on whether its association with a type of schooling and a good education might also have influenced this. There are of course casual, and even careless, styles of RP. But it seems to me to be worth considering how far an educational system, with dependence on spelling as a key to pronunciation might have influenced the development of RP more directly as a "careful" accent (Mugglestone's (1995) account leaves us in little doubt as to the crucial role of educators). Leaving this in the background for the moment, however, it may now be useful to go farther back in time to consider developments prior to the later nineteenth century. Accounts of the history of RP (including Gimson 1970; Honey 1989) commonly state that RP has a long continuous history going back to the aristocratic speech of the Elizabethan court. In what follows, I shall question some aspects of this belief.

Although we think of RP as a high social class accent, it is worth considering that its development in the public school system may not have been a simple continuation of the very highest class accent. There are some indications that the public school accent was in the first place resistant to some forms that had become markers of "polite" speech. There were some usages considered to be desirable and sophisticated, such as palatalization of initial [k, g] (an audible [j]-glide following [k] or [g] in words of the type: *car, garden*) that were subsequently avoided in RP. By 1800 this had been prevalent for over a century, and according to sources cited by McKnight (1928: 456) it had been "essential in polite pronunciation" (Mugglestone (1995) gives evidence of its subsequent decline in the nineteenth century). Dropped aitches and participial *in'* (as in *goin'* for 'going') were avoided even though there is evidence that these two remained upper class features into this century (Winston Churchill was given to [h] dropping), and both have a long history in the language.[4] As the public school system was instrumental in spreading access to professional advancement well into the middle class, a middle-class, rather than upper-class focus should perhaps be expected in early RP, and it is now easy to find evidence that middle class speakers tend to be very conscious of the need for careful speech – Labov (1966) demonstrated this in New York City, and it has been shown frequently since then. The desire to speak carefully is mainly a middle-class phenomenon, and one of the reasons for it seems to be anxiety to appear educated, knowledgeable and sophisticated.

Yet, it may be more important to take into account another aspect of the educational origins of modern RP, as in such a situation, some reliance on spelling conventions is rather likely, and this reliance may be part of the reason why some previously fashionable pronunciations, not signalled by spelling, were avoided in RP. Schoolmasters had traditionally been inclined to take spelling as a guide to pronunciation – a tendency satirized by Shakespeare in *Love's Labours Lost.* Several salient pronunciations of around 1800, such as the glide following [k, g], were not signalled by spelling. It is notable too that RP is virtually the only major accent of England that sounds initial [h] – a feature that the upper classes could seemingly dispense with – and the association of RP with schooling may well suggest the explanation. The letter *h* appears in spelling, and it is quite easy to imagine a schoolmaster insisting that, for this reason alone, it must be pronounced (I have elsewhere (J. Milroy 1983, 1992) attempted to show that [h] dropping in speech goes back to the thirteenth century). Whatever the history, the so-called "correct" use of [h] became the chief Victorian shibboleth, condemned by a gallery of worthies including Alford (1864) and Kington Oliphant, who comments (1873: 226): "Those whom we call 'self-made men' are much given to this hideous barbarism … Few things will the English youth in after-life find more profitable than the right use of the aforesaid letter". The lesson could not be more clear: to fail to pronounce [h] was to mark oneself as uneducated, but its correct use would open doors for the more ambitious. It was an easily identifiable badge of educated status. Indeed, [h] dropping might even break up a marriage: "So important indeed is the question of h's in England, … that no marriage should take place between persons whose ideas on the subject do not agree." (Hill (1902) cited by Mugglestone (1995: 186)). Marital infidelity and violence may be bad, but disagreement on [h] is clearly disastrous. What is rather odd about these strong feelings on – indeed obsession with – [h] is that, as noted above, it had largely disappeared from most accents of English. Its categoricity in RP therefore requires some sort of explanation, and it is tempting to suggest that its careful preservation may be largely due to the efforts of schoolteachers to preserve the relation between spelling and pronunciation, or at least to use spelling as a guide. It is also worth considering the possibility that the "correct" use of *-ing* and *wh,* and the avoidance of intrusive [r], may have been similarly affected by spelling conventions: intrusive [r], for example, as in *law[r] and order,* does not appear in spelling. Similarly, eighteenth century "po-

lite" speakers are known to have omitted consonants and glides that are now usual in RP (for example, [w-] in *Edward, awkward*) and rhymed words of the type *join, boil* with *dine, while* (see McKnight 1928). It seems that the salient markers of RP as careful speech were taught by reference to spelling conventions. Although it is dangerous to assume too readily that spelling conventions may have an influence on linguistic change, we are dealing here with a situation in which inculcation of standard English through literacy was important for both practical and ideological reasons, and it is in general very clear that many details of modern educated pronunciation have been influenced by spelling.

Conversely, in the late nineteenth century RP seems to have adopted some features that had been denounced as vulgarisms. Mugglestone (1995: 194-199) gives evidence that the back variety of /a/, as in *grass, path*, was resisted in some quarters in the late nineteenth century, as it was of course also a Cockney feature regionalized to the south-east of England; yet, it was finally adopted in RP (except by some RP speakers of northern origin). There is also much evidence that non-prevocalic [r] was still around in some educated speech in the nineteenth century (see Lass 1997: 281-289), and that the origin of this [r]-loss in RP may have been – yet again – Cockney or low-status south-eastern varieties generally (Alford ([1889]: 35-36) seems to have assumed that the use of intrusive [r], which depends on total loss of non-prevocalic [r], was Cockney). But RP has adopted [r]-loss and – now more saliently – intrusive [r]. Thus, in its origin RP seems to have adopted features that were definitely not conservative upper-class usage and were sometimes considered "vulgar" (the occurrence of similar features in Cockney could be an embarrassment), despite the efforts that the more conservative speakers (and teachers) are likely to have made to retain them. Although the evidence on attitudes to [r] loss is difficult to interpret, we now have plenty of evidence to show that established usages tend to be protected by older and influential speakers (and educators) and new usages stigmatized. The loss of [r] from educated accents of English is not at all likely to have been an unopposed process.

All this suggests that the view formerly put forward (e.g., by Gimson and others) that RP comes down in a straight line of descent from earlier English courtly usage is somewhat over-simplified. Gimson (1970: 84-85) puts it this way:

> The speech of the Court, however, phonetically largely that of the London area, increasingly acquired a prestige value and in time, lost some of the local characteristics of London speech. It may be said to have been finally fixed, as the speech of the ruling class, through the conformist influence of the public schools in the nineteenth century.

It could not have been quite as simple as this, and of course there is no reliable evidence that RP is directly derived from courtly language. There is little reason to suppose that we are dealing with the unilinear history of a continuous upper-class variety, as from a sociolinguistic point of view such a unilinear history is intrinsically unlikely. High prestige features can lose prestige over time, and low prestige features can gain prestige. Indeed, upper-class features can be avoided and even stigmatized. Moreover, before 1920 or so, speakers could have had little opportunity to hear and imitate the speech of royalty and courtiers, and they would be unlikely to have much casual conversation with these people – conversation being the channel in which language change is normally passed. As a highly focussed variety, the spread and maintenance of RP is most immediately traceable to nineteenth century changes in the power-structures of Britain. If it is peculiarly characteristic of the late nineteenth century public school system, we should look for the reasons for its success in the background of that system, rather than in a continuous history of elite accents. We have already suggested that the highest class accents are not involved in the origin of successful changes (they diffuse in the middle ranges of society), and this implies that such accents tend to be recessive in some particulars. Nineteenth-century RP was certainly not recessive, and in the first place it was not wholly of upper-class origin either.

On social change in the nineteenth century, I can only make a few general observations here. This century was the height of the British Empire, and there was a twin commitment to military strength and efficient colonial government. The need for well-educated administrators was urgent and expanding, and the old aristocracy was not capable of servicing all the higher administrative needs of empire. Thus, successful middle-class families – to a much greater extent than before – could hope to participate in high political and commercial functions. To this extent, RP is a product of a high degree of upward social mobility among educated people, and the changes within it were not necessarily (possibly not usually) dictated by upper class usage. Much more often than before, prime ministers, generals, bishops and higher civil servants were of middle class origin, rather than from the landed aristocracy. The expansion of the public school system was instrumental in bringing about this limited social mixing, admitting middle class people and the sons of tradesmen to positions of power and influence, and the use of RP became symbolic of the suitability of an individual for high office. The access of the Victorian middle class to a high standard of education seems to have been a vital factor in the establishment and diffusion of RP. It was an immediate product of a high degree of upward social mobility in the middle class.

In this scenario, boarding education (mainly in the public schools) also served an important function. Many civil and colonial servants spent much of

their lives abroad or moving from one place to another and therefore sent their children to English boarding schools. Boarding was the only feasible way for the children to acquire a continuous high-level education. By all accounts this education was highly rigorous in inculcating the virtues of obedience and authority – it was openly stated to be a training for assuming positions of authority. At its best it included high academic standards, but it could also include features that nowadays would be considered abuses, such as beating and bullying of those who did not conform. Amongst other things, the cloistered nature of the public school system could be seen (and often was seen) as protecting pupils from contamination by localized accents, which as we have noted, served as a badge of illiteracy. But to return to the sociolinguistic results of all this: RP became, in H.C. Wyld's words, the language "of the Oxford Common Room and the Officers' mess". It was common to all people of the colonial classes – the same in Africa as it was in India or China. It was a levelled and highly uniform accent with very little variability, and it was maintained in this form by exposure to private boarding education. If it was a standardized accent (in the sense of a largely invariant accent), it was standardized within a social stratum that was still relatively narrow. It also acquired a gatekeeping function, as we have noted above: if you didn't use RP, you wouldn't get a post in the higher echelons of the Civil Service or, subsequently, the BBC, however good your qualifications. To speak RP therefore became one of the most important passports to career preferment and remained so long after the demise of the British Empire.

So far we have emphasized the idea that RP was a product of a particular time in English social history, but there are several recurrent beliefs about RP in its heyday that I think should be questioned. One of these has been mentioned – the belief that RP was directly descended from older elite accents. Another is the belief that as RP was considered a desirable accent to acquire on the part of aspiring people who did not have a public school background, its forms were likely to spread downward in society. In terms of longer-term linguistic change, this assumption, which is made by many commentators, proposes a scenario in which change comes from the top and moves downward. Indeed, as RP was the most important variety (although also a minority variety), it must have seemed to be "common-sense" to believe that it would spread in this way. But it does not follow that if a minority of speakers aspire to speak RP, then longer-term linguistic change will go in that direction: there will still be a majority that does not have these aspirations. Furthermore, it is just as likely (or more likely) that these aspiring speakers will import some of their own forms into the dominant dialect and that RP will itself become subject to "change from below". It is also likely that the "correct" RP forms will be adopted sporadically and inconsistently by individual speakers (as Labov (1972: 179-180) predicts in his account of "change from above") and may therefore not lead to permanent change. We

must also bear in mind that it is dubious whether RP has been used as a model by a very large number of speakers, as many seem to have regarded it as effete, affected and artificial. For the majority, in most situations, it simply has not been an appropriate model to aspire to and millions of people still do not care about it. Indeed, the academic's belief that everybody wants to acquire RP may well come from spending too much time in universities.

These beliefs about RP have led to predictions about longer-term change that have proved to be inaccurate. One of the predictions made by Gimson (1970: 88) is that the nucleus of the diphthong in /o:/, as in *soap*, which in Advanced RP was wholly unrounded and virtually a front vowel, would "become more general in a very short time". It was used by the Queen in the 1960s, but she has since modified it, and the general trend has been away from that highly distinctive vowel towards an audibly more central nucleus. Similarly, the raised and diphthongized variant of short /a/ characteristic of conservative RP and described by Jones and Gimson has disappeared except in very old speakers and has been replaced by a low-vowel short variant, which is sometimes so retracted (especially in young women) that *bad* sounds like *bud*. It is easy to use hindsight to show that older scholars' predictions were wrong (Henry Sweet predicted in 1899 that in a century English would have broken up into different languages), but it does encourage one not to make too many predictions oneself. The problem for the prophet is that no one knows precisely what the variables will be that will contribute to the direction of change – or how those variables will combine and interact. We will not be right in very many of our predictions.

However, it is the scenario in which these predictions were made that is of most interest here. Gimson had observed that younger speakers who could be described as RP speakers were preferring the advanced variant of /o:/ and had (probably correctly) concluded that the vowel was being increasingly favoured in that particular pre-defined group. To observe a generational trend in one group is not, however, to observe a permanent direction of change. To detect this requires a comparison of different groups and different styles (and we may still be wrong!). Gimson was also treating RP as a distinct variety developing within itself rather than considering possible contact influences, and assuming that high social status would ensure its survival as a distinct variety for some time. Yet, no language variety exists in a vacuum. The kind of model of language change that we have been advocating (Milroy – Milroy 1985) would predict that change would enter RP to the extent that RP speakers develop numerous weak-tie contacts with speakers of other varieties. Although there are still some bastions of privilege to which access is restricted, the very noticeable social changes that have more generally come about since 1960 or so ensure that numerous weak-tie conditions are present for changes to enter RP, or what was formerly RP, more

rapidly than before – to the extent that RP no longer occupies the sociolinguistic position that it used to have.

We must also consider here another recurrent belief that is found in the work of the phoneticians and historians of English of a few decades ago. This is the belief that the rise of sound broadcasting from the 1920s onward has had an effect in promoting knowledge of RP and hence its use by more speakers in the British Isles. A familiar prediction by these writers is that broadcasting will have the effect of increasing the use of RP. Gimson (1970: 85) stated that RP could no longer be said to be "the exclusive property of a particular social stratum" and, further, that this change was due partly to the influence of radio, which brought this accent constantly "to the ears of the whole nation". The scenario envisaged here is one in which constant exposure to the sound of RP, without participation in any conversation, will cause speakers to adopt RP or some of its features. Unfortunately, this is only a belief – one which cannot be demonstrated empirically to be true, and which general observation suggests is unlikely to be generally true. When Lesley Milroy was working in the Falls Road in Belfast (L. Milroy 1980 [1987]), television sets were constantly switched on with RP-speaking newscasters constantly talking, but try as we might we could find absolutely NO influence of RP in the language use of the inner-city lower-class communities that we studied. This is not surprising of course when we consider that personal interaction is seldom with RP speakers in that environment, but with local friends and neighbours who speak with local accents. Exposure to RP may enable one to imitate it, but not to speak it habitually and carry on a full conversation in it, and even if one could do this, it would usually seem quite inappropriate. As for the influence of the media, Allan Bell's research (1984) suggests that broadcasters are followers rather than leaders and that broadcasting accents are adapted to the varying audiences of the broadcasts. Admittedly, the early BBC made no attempt to do this and preferred to broadcast in an accent that very few listeners used and which gave an impression of distance and authority. George Orwell (1944) was eloquent on the irrelevance of its stilted, bookish language to the lives of ordinary people. Television and radio speech is not part of the speech community, and the belief that broadcast speech has a strong effect on people's daily conversational accents is a myth. The use of RP in broadcasting has probably had very little effect in spreading its use by speakers: their knowledge of it is passive only, and if it were to disappear from broadcasting they would forget it.

After this digression, let me return finally to the association of accent with educational systems. By 1950 it was no longer true that the only highly educated people were public-school educated. A hundred years before, however, the general state of education in England seems to have been quite deplorable. We have noted above that in England and Wales in 1850, nearly 40% of brides and bridegrooms were unable to sign their names (Cipolla 1969). This was one of the highest total illiteracy rates in Europe. The Education Act of 1870 sought to correct this by making sure that everyone (in a period of rapid population growth) had at least an elementary education, and by 1900 only 3% were unable to sign their names. It was not until 1944 that free secondary education was made universal. Before that time, many well-qualified people did receive free education at grammar schools, and by 1950 it is true that many well-educated adults had not attended private boarding schools. If we consider access to positions of importance, such as those of cabinet minister and prime minister, the social trend is quite clear. In the early nineteenth century and before senior government functionaries were often upper class; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century they were often middle class, but usually with a private boarding education. Eden's Old Etonian cabinet in 1955 seems, however, to have been almost the last throw of the old order. Between 1964 and 1997 there were five prime ministers, none of whom had public school backgrounds, and British cabinets now tend to have a minority of public school members. The same trends apply in many professions, including academic life. The decline in the salience of RP in these high status situations is surely associated with this gradual democratization of public and professional life (this being itself associated with the loss of empire), rather than with the belated efforts of the BBC to appoint non-RP broadcasters. The BBC has almost nothing to do with it. RP is a product of a particular period of British history, during which time it served important social and political functions. As the conditions that supported its continuance as a high prestige accent have altered dramatically, its uniquely "received" status has largely disappeared.

It is appropriate now to bring together the major points about RP that I have attempted to make in this paper. There is no doubt that RP is still heard in Britain: what I have attempted to show is that it is no longer uniquely "received" in the way it used to be. Regionally accented forms are now heard frequently in situations in which RP was used in the past, and there appears to be a trend in progress toward the replacement of RP by a more widely used variety also based on southern English accents. The population who use this developing variety is much larger than the 5% or less who used RP. I have tried to emphasize that RP as a received accent was a product of a particular time and place and that a major characteristic was dependence on a particular type of education, which, almost uniquely at the time, ensured that the RP speaker could be regarded as educated. Regional accents, on the other hand, were taken to be a sign of uneducated status, even illiteracy. Seen from this point of view, the high status of RP is entirely understandable, and given the social changes and wider access to education in the later twentieth century, the decline of RP as uniquely statusful is also understandable: the social conditions that maintained it as an in-

fluential minority accent have greatly weakened, and as a minority accent it is particularly vulnerable to change or replacement. I have also tried to show that sociolinguistic predictions made by phoneticians about the spread of RP and the influence of broadcasting depend on assumptions that are not generally supported by sociolinguistic research, and, further, that it is by no means clear that RP is wholly in a line of direct descent from upper-class accents of earlier times. It seems rather to be a product of a distinctive set of social, educational and political conditions in the nineteenth century. As these conditions have changed, the time is ripe for a replacement accent to emerge from a broader popular base.

As a final comment, let me cite another prediction made by Gimson (1970: 86). Noting that young RP speakers of the time were sometimes affecting more "popular" accents, he suggested that "if this tendency were to become more widespread and permanent, the result could be that, *within the next century*, RP could become so diluted that it could lose its historic identity and that a new standard with a wider popular and regional base would emerge [my italics: JM]". I would avoid the term "diluted", but it seems to me that in a fraction of a century the scenario envisaged by Gimson has already largely come about.

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