

LINGUISTICS

THE HISTORICAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF ELITE ACCENT CHANGE: ON WHY RP IS NOT DISAPPEARING

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ABSTRACT

There is a perception common in the UK today, especially amongst journalists, that the RP accent is disappearing: for example, Public School pupils and younger members of the Royal Family are now often said to be speaking Cockney instead of RP. This claim is totally erroneous, but it is possible to point to a number of factors which can account for this perception. This paper attempts to elucidate what these factors are; and it uses evidence from the history of English to argue that the linguistic events currently affecting RP are sociolinguistically nothing new or modern, and indeed are the result of sociolinguistically inevitable processes of diffusion and change which have persisted for very many generations.

1. Introduction

There is a perception common in the UK today, especially amongst journalists, that RP is disappearing, even if these journalists are not actually familiar with the term “RP”. For example, younger members of the Royal Family are said to be speaking in a lower-class manner. And Public School pupils are said to be speaking Cockney. Indeed, even the phonetician John Wells has written a paper called “The Cockneyfication of RP?” (1994), although he was very careful to append a question mark to his title.

There are a number of reasons for this erroneous but understandable misperception. First, non-RP accents are now found in public situations from which they would have been excluded only a few decades ago, as I pointed out in Trudgill (2001). It is a matter of common, and certainly correct, 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 than they were forty years ago. And telephone sales companies now think about

which regional accents will be most effective rather than automatically employing people who speak non-regional RP. It is therefore easy to gain an impression that there are fewer RP speakers around than formerly.

Secondly, although discrimination on the grounds of accent still unfortunately occurs in British society, it is no longer permitted to be *seen* to discriminate against someone on the basis of their accent – it has to masquerade as something else. This hypocrisy is a sign of progress, of an increase in democratic and egalitarian ideals. And this has also had the consequence that an RP accent can be 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”. Many fewer people than before are now therefore speakers of what Wells (1982) has called *adoptive 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. Since the kind of people who in earlier generations would have been speakers of adoptive RP no longer are, there really are fewer RP speakers around than formerly, even though there are no fewer *native* speakers.

However, the third and by far the most important, reason for this perception has to do with linguistic change. RP, like all other accents, is subject to change. The middle-aged journalists who are proclaiming the demise of RP are observing some of the currently ongoing changes in the accent, and are emerging with a faulty analysis of what is happening. This is because they are being misled by the nature of some of these changes.

The interesting question for linguists is why exactly this misperception is occurring; and the explanation would seem to have to do with the nature of the changes, and more especially with their source.

2. Change from below

A historical perspective helps us to see what the source of changes in modern RP is likely to be. According to Strang (1970: 160) “standard speakers as a group achieved consciousness of superiority” by the time of Chaucer. And Gimson and Cruttenden (2004: 78) say that for at least the last five centuries there has been a notion in England that “one kind of pronunciation was socially preferable to others”. From the 1500s, the speech of the Royal Court, which was phonetically that of the London area, “increasingly acquired a prestige value and, in time, lost some of the local characteristics of London speech”. It became the accent of the ruling class, and “its dissemination as a class pronunciation throughout the country caused it to be recognised as characteristic not so much of a region as a social stratum”. This variety was thus in origin a southeast of England accent which eventually came to be social rather than geographical.

It is this ruling-class variety that David Crystal (2002) refers to as the “forerunner of RP”; and there is a clear line of descent from this forerunner to modern RP, with its peculiar lack of regionality having been strengthened by a peculiar set of sociolinguistic conditions: the ruling-class accent underwent extra focussing as a result of the 19th-century development of residential, and therefore non-regional, schools for the children, especially the sons, of the upper-classes, the so-called Public Schools. Indeed, it is 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.

Nevertheless, it is clear that RP is basically, like its precursor, an accent with its origin “in the London area”; and it is one which remains southeastern typologically. For example, unlike accents from the southwest of England, RP is non-rhotic. And unlike the accents of the north of England, it has /a:/ rather than /æ/ in the lexical sets of BATH. And again unlike the accents of the north of England, it has /ʌ/ rather than /ʊ/ in the lexical set of STRUT.

But this now raises a rather obvious question. We say that modern RP is clearly of southeastern origin because it is non-rhotic; because it has the TRAP – BATH split; and because it has the FOOT – STRUT split. But in the 1500s the southeastern-based forerunner of RP was *not* non-rhotic, because loss of rhoticity did not occur in English until the 1700s. Equally, the ruling class accent of the 1500s did *not* have pre-fricative lengthening in the BATH set, leading to the TRAP – BATH split (Wells 1982), because this process was not completed until 1800 or so. And it almost certainly did not have the FOOT – STRUT split either, since this became established in the south of England only in the mid 1600s (Wells 1982: 197).

So the revealing question is: where did the accent of the ruling class acquire these features from, and why is there this coincidence between RP and the English southeast that leads us to say that RP today is still typologically southeastern?

There are a number of important clues. Baugh and Cable (2002: 239) write of the 1500s that items from the lexical set of *clean* etc. were pronounced with /e:/ but that “a pronunciation approximating that of today [i.e. /i:/] was apparently in use among some speakers but was considered substandard”. So this FLEECE merger, which Wells (1982) dates to completion by 1700, began in lower-class speech and only later spread to the precursor of RP.

I therefore suggest that the answer to the question is that RP is typologically southeastern because there is a long history of changes spreading, in the same way that the FLEECE merger did, *from* the lower prestige southeastern local accents *into* RP. There is of course a theoretical possibility that it was the other way round, but in fact all the evidence indicates that this was not the case.

What is the evidence exactly? Let us consider precisely the three characteristics we have just used to define RP as southeastern. First, the TRAP – BATH split. It is apparent that the lengthening of original short *a* happened first in lower class speech and only later spread upwards to the ruling class. Pyles and Algeo (1992: 223) are very clear about this. They write of pre-fricative lengthening in the BATH set that “up to the end of the 18th century [a:] in such words was considered lower class”. Now it is of course no longer so; and in the North of England, where local accents have not experienced pre-fricative lengthening, it is actually found in upper-class speech only.

Secondly, on loss of rhoticity, the evidence also runs strongly in the same direction. Smith (1996) says that at the beginning of the 19th century poetic rhymes involving *r*-lessness were regarded by many people as “Cockney”, and Mugglestone (1995) also tells us that John Lockhart referred to the spoken jargon of Cockneys. And Jespersen (1949: 360) cites Thomas Wright Hill [1763-1851] as saying that “*r* ought more carefully to be preserved for posterity, than can be hoped, if the provincialists of the Metropolis and their tasteless imitators [are] to be tolerated”. Wyld (1936: 299) also cites loss of rhoticity as having begun amongst “London speakers of the humbler sort”.

Thirdly, on the FOOT – STRUT split, the evidence is also very clear. Gimson and Cruttenden (2000: 114) locate the origins of the change geographically by saying that it had occurred “by or during the 17th century in the London region”. Exactly which London sociolect it originated in is then suggested by Strang, who writes (1970: 112) that although foreign observers commented on this change in the late 1500s, “English writers only gradually admit its existence in correct speech in the late 17th century”. And, crucially, the social origins are much more clearly signalled by Ihalainen (1994: 261), who says that “unrounded *u* was regarded as vulgar until the mid-17th century, when Simon Daines [(1640)], a Suffolk schoolmaster, described it as the accepted pronunciation”.

The clear conclusion to draw from this is that modern RP, just like 16th century pre-RP, continues to be of a southeast of England type because it has, as it were, kept up with, although with some time lag, changes that originally occurred in lower-class dialects in the southeast. There is a clear picture that the normal pattern for many hundreds of years has been one of “change from below”, to employ Labov’s deliberately ambiguous terminology (Labov 1966). The normal pattern is one of changes spreading from lower sociolects to higher sociolects – with these developments generally happening in the first instance below the level of conscious awareness.

The conclusion is, then, that forms from lower-class speech spread and continue to spread into middle-class and then into upper-class speech, not the other way round. But why should this have been? Why should this be? After all, it is

a common perception that notions of prestige and “correctness” are very instrumental in leading to the diffusion of linguistic changes.

This perception is in fact more often than not erroneous. It is not usually the case that prestigious forms spread “downwards”, although it does of course happen from time to time. One reason for this may be that “covert prestige” (Labov 1966) is a more powerful factor than “overt prestige”. But the biggest explanatory factor involved here is surely demography. Linguistic changes spread through populations as a result of accommodation in face-to-face interaction. Changes today spread outwards from London, not inwards to London, because there are more Londoners than anybody else, and speakers from a small town of 10,000 inhabitants are one thousand times more likely to be involved in face-to-face interaction with a Londoner than vice versa.

Equally, changes have spread, and continue to spread, from the lower classes to the elite, because the elite are a minority. Because the elite are a minority, “the preponderant usages must be those of outsiders”, as Strang (1970: 164) writes of 16th century English. And she also makes the obvious but often unremarked point that: “if change is to come in the elite language by internal borrowing (i.e. from other varieties), it can only come from socially inferior varieties; there are no others”.

3. The problem of distinctiveness

An interesting question now arises. If it is simply the case that RP is continually absorbing innovations from local accents from London and the Home Counties, then how does the accent retain its clear social distinctiveness?

There would seem to be three mechanisms involved in the maintenance of this distinctiveness. The first is time-lag. Although it is true that features spread into RP from below, RP nevertheless remains distinct by reason of simply being *behind* in these innovations. We can suppose that by the time RP reaches the level achieved by regional accents in a particular change today, the regional accents will have moved on even further, and the difference will remain.

Secondly, there is selectivity. Although innovations spread into RP from lower-status accents, by no means *all* innovations do so. As Wells has pointed out, RP remains distinct by not accepting certain innovations. One obvious case of this is Diphthong Shift. Accents in the southeast of England typically have closing or rising diphthongs – that is, the vowels of FLEECE, GOOSE, FACE, GOAT, PRICE, MOUTH, CHOICE – which are characterised by Diphthong Shift. This term was introduced by Wells (1982: 256) to refer to the most recent ongoing developments associated with the Great Vowel Shift in which these diphthongs /i:, u:, ei, ou, ai, au/ show continuing movement of their first elements, beyond those reached by RP, so:

FLEECE	[flɛɪs];
GOOSE	[gʊʊs];
FACE	[fæɪs];
GOAT	[gəʊt];
PRICE	[praɪs];
MOUTH	[maʊθ].

RP has not gone along with this development and instead remains with diphthongs which are more conservative. For example, the FACE vowel does have Long-Mid Diphthonging, but has more or less the same quality, approximately [eɪ], as the FACE vowel of the regional accents of Manchester or Liverpool.

Similarly, RP does not have H Dropping, although this is normal in the regional accents of the English south.

The third factor is endogenous change. Like other accents, RP does of course produce internal changes of its own which have not occurred in regional accents. For example, the first element of the GOAT vowel has undergone fronting and unrounding over the last several decades. Gimson (1962) wrote of this vowel that conservative RP had back rounded [oʊ], while four decades later Gimson and Cruttenden (2000: 135) say that older speakers of RP commonly use an advanced, rounded first element, while now, for younger speakers, “the lips are neutral”.

4. Current and recent changes from below

However, change from below remains the major factor leading to changes in RP, and to its retaining its southeastern character. This assertion is strengthened by the fact that we can find many other cases of features of RP which began life as lower-class southeastern linguistic innovations and then spread upwards.

4.1. Intrusive /r/

Intrusive /r/ refers to the phenomenon which occurs only in non-rhotic accents such that a non-etymological /r/ is inserted between certain vowels and another following vowel, as in *the idea of it, law an order*. Jespersen (1949: 370) says that “at first the insertion of *r* is condemned as vulgar” – and that Elphinston described it as “grossness”. Wells (1982: 227) says that the earliest reference to intrusive /r/ he is aware of is from 1762, when Sheridan mentions it as a characteristic of London speech; and then Wells suggests that “it has probably characterised RP since the early 19th century”. Arithmetic indicates therefore that the change made its

way into RP perhaps 50 years after it had appeared in regional London speech – the time-lag we discussed above. Jespersen confirms this rise in the social status of the feature when he goes on to say, in contradistinction to Elphinston, that “more recent authors, most of them excellent observers, mention the phenomenon as frequently occurring among educated people” (1949: 370).

4.2. *GOOSE* Fronting

According to Gimson (1962) a central variant of the vowel /u:/, i.e. [ɯ:], is a characteristic of Cockney; while in RP /u:/ is a “close back vowel” i.e. [u:]. However, forty years later Gimson and Cruttenden (2000: 83) now list the “fronting of /u:/ to [ɯ:] e.g. *soon* [sɯ:n]” among current changes in RP. Specifically, although it is not a change “almost complete”, it does come into the category of “changes well-established”.

4.3. *STRUT* Fronting

The *STRUT* vowel is a recent arrival in the phonological inventory of English, and many local varieties in England and southwestern Wales do not yet have it. The history is that in the late 1500s the vowel /ʊ/ began to lose its lip-rounding in the southeast of England, giving [ɤ]. Subsequently it lowered to [ʌ], Gimson (1962: 103) postulates this “for the eighteenth century”, and a back vowel a little front of [ʌ] had become the RP norm at the beginning of the 20th century. In the English of London and other parts of the southeast, however, the change has progressed a good deal further through fronting, giving “an open front vowel very close to *C* [a]” (Gimson – Cruttenden 2000: 113). It is therefore no surprise to find that during the course of the 20th century the RP vowel was also fronted, although so far only as far as [ɐ] (see Roach 1983: 16), with the phonological symbol /ʌ/ which is still used by most writers masking this phonetic change. This is another good illustration of the time-lag factor.

4.4. T Glottalling

T Glottalling, as is well known, refers to the realisation of syllable-final /t/ as a glottal stop. It appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon, perhaps no more than 150 years old, with its origins in lower sociolects in London and/or Glasgow and/or East Anglia. Originally it was heavily socially stigmatised, and associated mainly with working-class speech. However, “it must have spread very rapidly in the course of the present century” (Wells 1982: 261), with this spread being geographical, social, and stylistic – as well as spreading from phonologi-

cal context to phonological context. According to Wells, T Glottalling did not occur in RP “in the traditional sense” (1982: 253). However, also according to Wells, it has now become a feature of recent RP in environments such as: *quite good, quite likely, nights*. And some younger RP speakers also have it in *quite easy*, though for Gimson and Cruttenden (2000) this latter is a change “on the verge” of RP. So far, however, it does not occur in RP, as it does in regional accents, in the environment: *quite!, mattress, button, bottle*. But we can assume that this is probably just a matter of time.

It is undoubtedly this particular high-profile feature which has led journalists today to report that Public School pupils, including the royal princes, now “speak Cockney”. Indeed, the technical term “glottal stop” has actually occurred in some newspaper reports.

Our historical perspective, however, enables us to say that this is most certainly not the case, and that the journalists are wrong. We can say that what is happening in RP today is simply what has always happened. Speakers are not abandoning RP for Cockney or other regional accents. It is rather that RP, as it has always done, is acquiring features *from* regional accents. But it still remains, for all that, clearly RP.

4.5. *HappY* Tensing

The criterion for the inclusion of any feature as a feature of RP must be that it is not a regional feature. This of course implies that there will be features which for a period of time, while movement into RP from below is taking place, may have an indeterminate status. One good example of this is provided by the case of what Wells (1982) calls *HappY* Tensing, which has been associated with south of England regional accents. This involves the replacement through time of word-final unstressed /ɪ/ by /i:/, so that /hæpɪ/ becomes /hæpi:/.

Traditional RP always had /ɪ/ in such items. This was the one respect in which RP 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, it is now clear that *HappY* Tensing is in the process of becoming a feature of RP. The experts are agreed on the RP situation: in 1962 Gimson commented that *HappY* Tensing was increasingly occurring in the RP of “the younger generations”; and now Gimson and Cruttenden (2000) list it among “changes well-established”.

Soon, if not already, *HappY* Tensing will 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.

Equally, T Glottalling used not to be a feature of RP, but now it is. We do not say that because the royal princes use T Glottalling, they are speaking Cockney. We say that, because the royal princes use T Glottalling, T Glottalling has now become a feature of RP.

5. The future

Finally, we can suppose that just as change from below has been happening for the last several centuries, it will continue to happen. For example, Wells (1982: 259) makes a prediction about L Vocalisation. He says that from its origins “in the local accent of London and the surrounding counties, L Vocalisation is now beginning to seep into RP. It seems likely that it will become entirely standard in English over the course of the next century.” Gimson and Cruttenden (2000: 83) also agree: vocalisation of dark /l/ is listed by them as an innovation “on the verge of RP”. Watch this space.

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