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Variability and Change in Received Pronunciation

A study of six phonological variables in speech of television newsreaders

In 2006 a dissertation was written investigating the speech of television newsreaders in order to ascertain whether RP undergoes changes. The author of the paper collected data from 30 speakers of both genders representing 3 channels, namely BBC World, Sky News and the ITV News Channel. The author restricted the research to presenters dealing with current affairs and international news, and analysed 30 hours of speech altogether (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 127). Currently, the widely spoken variety of RP, which is also the core one of the study, is Mainstream RP which is “the unmarked, neutral, modern type of RP, typically spoken by BBC newsreaders”. Besides this, Near-RP is recognised as a variety which differs from Mainstream RP only by containing regional pronunciation features (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 16). It is important to note that both varieties are commonly heard among BBC newsreaders. The definition of RP, however, remains unresolved because RP is liable to change, vary and develop. On top of that, the accent is spreading through Britain, and thus is not limited either to any particular region, or social group. The latter aspect is so called non-localisability, which helps clarify RP (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 20-33). The process, whereby typical features of RP have disappeared, and on the other hand under the influence of other varieties gained new features of non-standard accents, is called accent levelling. It is Estuary English, that is widely believed to be situated in the Southeast of England, and features of which are exercising considerable influence over RP. Estuary English is considered to occur between RP and Cockney; and is regarded as being an “unmarked variety that attracts speakers from both ends

of the social spectrum”, and those who wish to sound less snobbish will most likely resort to Estuary (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 50-53).

Six phonological variables identified as areas in RP that are prone to change have been selected, and will be briefly introduced in this paper with the findings.

Cure lowering stands for words pronounced with the sound /ʊə/ which is being replaced by /ɔ:/. Such phenomenon occurs in monosyllabic words such as *poor, sure, tour, your*, less in sparse words *dour, or gourd*. (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 102). As it turned out, newsreaders prefer /ʊə/ to /ɔ:/, and thus providing proof that /ʊə/ is not vanishing. Moreover, the sounds depend on the environment. The sound /ʊə/ is pronounced after the consonant + /j/ (*cure*), or before prevocalic /r/ (*tourist*). The sound /ɔ:/ is prevalent in words in which the vowel is in the final position (*poor*), or is followed by other consonant than /r/ (*tournament*). (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 150-153).

GOAT allophony includes words pronounced with /əʊ/ (*home, know, boat, go*) gradually being substituted by /oʊ/ before non-prevocalic and mainly dark /l/ (*cold, soldier, poll*). Due to a phoneme split, /əʊ/ has extended its usage into the GOAL set of words including /l/ in the final prevocalic or preconsonantal position, such as *wholly, controlling or gold* (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 104). GOAT allophony has proved to be incorporated in RP to a large extent. In addition, it goes beyond the accents of London, Estuary and the Southeast area, which makes it into supra-regional feature, and a part of non-regional RP (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 155-157).

R-sandhi consists of linking /r/ which is inserted into a hiatus between a word ending with /r/ and a word beginning with a vowel, for example *far away*; and intrusive /r/ which is added to a gap between words spelled without /r/, for instance *law and order*. Generally, linking /r/ is favoured over intrusive /r/ in Mainstream RP, as the latter does not correspond to

spelling of words (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 106-108). Despite the status of linking /r/, it is less frequent, possibly because newsreaders concentrate on proper articulation, and also associate linking /r/ with less accepted intrusive /r/. Linking /r/ is mainly encountered in short grammatical words, or fixed expressions (*more of, four o'clock*), but it is omitted in names: *Doctor Austen*, and before or after another /r/: *terror attacks, border area*. Still, intrusive /r/ turned out to be less common, above all due to its lower status. As well as linking /r/, it is likely to appear in grammatical words (*China and*), and less likely in names (*saw Anthony*). In combination with another /r/, intrusive /r/ is used in a long, stressed vowel between the two /r/ sounds as in *draw a* /drɔːr ə/, or two syllables between /r/s: *area of* ɛəriər əv/. It is less used in the neighbourhood of unstressed weak vowels: *drama around* /'dra:mə(r) ə'raʊnd/. At last, R-sandhi tends to fluctuate in different situations differentiating in terms of formality. It decreases in more formal newsreading as opposed to more casual interviews, which is determined by speakers' attention to speech, rather than the rate of speech (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 158-181).

T-voicing refers to the shift from intervocalic /t/ to a voice tap realised as a voiced plosive /d/ as in *British*, whose symbol is /ɾ/ (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 112). The research has revealed that although /ɾ/ is less usual than /t/, it has its place in RP, and not predominantly in non-standard accents or casual style as was suggested in many studies. T-voicing is inclined to be uttered in intervocalic final positions of words, primarily immediately those followed by unstressed vowels, and in monosyllabic function words for example *what about, but, at a, a lot of*, etc. The findings also support the claim that /ɾ/ is rather informal, as its amount of utterances truly rises in interviews, and apart from that it remains unaffected by speech rate (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 182-198).

Smoothing in the paper is confined to triphthongs /aʊə/ (in *power*) and /aɪə/ (in *hire*) which are thanks to the process reduced to diphthongs /aə/ or a long monophthong /a:/

(Hannisdal, 2006, p. 116-118). The research has brought to light that smoothing is a widespread phenomenon in RP. Furthermore, it has been disclosed that the set of words with /aɪə/ is more subject to change than words with /aʊə/, but the resultant variable for both sounds is mostly /aə/, rendering /a:/ rare. Smoothing is left out in words such as *buyer* or *highest*, as they retain their meaning and lexical complexity without /ə/: *buy*, *high*, but without /ɪ/ their meaning would be twisted. By contrast, when /ə/ is an integral part of the word, then smoothing is applicable, for example: *fire* (no fi exists). The sound /aə/ is more present when there is linking /r/ (*fire/r/ away*), than before a pause. On the whole, smoothing occurs independently of the pace, and the degree of formality of speech (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 199-208).

Yod coalescence „is a type of assimilation where the approximant /j/ (yod) fuses, or coalesces with preceding /t, d/, resulting in affricates /tʃ, dʒ/, e.g. *tune* /tju:n/→/tʃu:n/“ (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 120). Since the phenomenon is more extensive in unstressed syllables in RP as in *educate* /edʒukeit/, the author narrows the scope of research for widely less accepted yod coalescence in stressed syllables. The substantial high score of using /tʃ, dʒ/ strengthens position of yod coalescence in RP even though the score is somewhat distorted by items consisting of the word *during* (*undue, deduce, produce, or dual*), which is a special case owing to its pronunciation with yod coalescence more than the other words. In spite of the fact that yod coalescence is spreading in RP, the /j/ sound is far from being lost (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 209-217).

To sum up, those variables show “the importance of keeping the definition of the accent updated and in line with social changes, and underlined the value of specifying which definition is the basis for descriptions of RP or for discussions of its status” (Hannisdal, 2006, p. 228).