

English Pronunciation Standards

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Annotation: The problem of pronunciation standards of a given language is certainly a most interesting and important one, and it is surely the first that a person wishing to acquire an acceptable pronunciation of a foreign language has to solve. Exposure to a number of varieties of the foreign language may play an important and useful part in the study, and the question arises as to which of the various forms of pronunciation to choose. As regards the English language, this question is even more serious, for it is a fact that nowadays over 400 million people speak English as their first language

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Every national language has two material forms: written and spoken. Written form can be defined as “the literary language” and second one as “the speech of the nation”.

The written form of particular language is accepted generally, considered to be a standard and is the same to all over the country. But spoken form of the language is not so uniform; it may differ distinctly from land to land.¹

During the period of first settlements, a river or a mountain served as an obstacle to communication. This is why territorial types of pronunciation are due to geographical conditions of residence.²

A branch in phonetics which learns the varieties among national spoken languages which differ from locality to locality is called dialectology.³

Because of economic, political, cultural and social factors only one regional dialect becomes the literary spoken language of the country and the pronunciation of this dialect turns into an orthoepic standard. A "standard" may be defined as "a socially accepted variety of a language established by a codified norm of correctness"⁴

As far as standard pronunciation of English concerned, In the Middle English period, within the East Midland, one of the five main regions - Northern, West and East Midland, Southern and Kentish, a triangle of cities stands out - London, Oxford and Cambridge, which formed a kind of “enlightenment ring of England”. In the middle of the 14th century, one of the written standards used in London, a political, commercial and cultural center, became the language of government and official documents, thereby gaining popularity. So, on the basis of London speech, Received Pronunciation is formed - a standard pronunciation, which is still, to some extent, a national pronunciation norm. The name “Received Pronunciation” is used in the sense of “accepted in the”

¹ Vassilyev V.A. English Phonetics (A normative course). Leningrad. 1980. p. 256.

² <https://refdb.ru/look/1247789.html>

³ Vassilyev V.A. English Phonetics (A normative course). Leningrad. 1980. p. 257.

⁴ Mitchell A.G., Delbridge A.B. the pronunciation of English in Australia. Sydney. 1965.p. 76

best “social circles”. It is a prestigious dialect that historically developed from the speech of the royal court and private privileged schools.⁵

The term Received Pronunciation was borrowed from the dialectologist AJ Ellis, who first used this term in 1869 in “On Early English Phonetics”. At the beginning of the century in the first editions of the English Pronouncing Dictionary D. Jones defined the standard pronunciation as Received Pronunciation or Public School Pronunciation, he defines RP as “... merely widely understood pronunciation ... in the English - speaking world ... ,,. In 1997 in the fifteenth edition of the English Pronunciation dictionary edited by P.Roach and J.Hartman about the pronunciation standard is written as follows: “The time has come to abandon the archaic name Received Pronunciation. The model used for British English is that is referred to as BBC English”. Nowadays the term "General British"(GB) is used by some linguists instead of RP. However, some phoneticians prefer the term “standard English” or “uniform English”.

The term “orthoepic norm” is used by a linguist A.A. Abduazizov in order to express the “orthoepic standard” and he defined it as “...the sum of rules of the spoken form characterized by the unity of the sound material formed in the process of its historical development...” . By the term norm he means more or less constant and stable feature of pronunciation and all the components of the phonetic structure-phonemes, syllables, stress and intonation. He cited that there are the following regional pronunciation types exist in Great Britain: 1) Southern English pronunciation; 2) Northern English pronunciation; 3) Scottish pronunciation; 4) Irish pronunciation and of course among them the Southern English pronunciation is selected as the standard English pronunciation for modern English and he finds out that this type of pronunciation is often called Standard English.⁶

In this case I want to mention that J.S.Kenyon cited:"...speech is immeasurable and there is no absolute standard of pronunciation... It is quite evident that we are not entitled to conclude that there is only a simple standard of pronunciation and only one correct way of speaking English".⁷

As proof of this, we can cite the views of Abercrombie and Gimson on Standard English pronunciation.

As D. Abercrombie mentions that even in England there are different ways of pronouncing RP itself. He differentiates three groups of people according to their pronunciation; 1) RP speakers - people who speak without an accent; 2) Non-RP speakers - people who speak with an accent; 3) dialect speakers.⁸ In 1962, A.C. Gimson also states that there are three main types of pronunciation within RP speakers: first, the conservative RP form used by the older generation and by special professions or social groups; second is the RP forms most commonly used and classified by the pronunciation accepted by BBC; and the last is, advanced RP forms mainly used by young people of special social groups.⁹

Above definitions of three options, the use of which depends on social status, education level, age, gender of the native speaker, etc., allows us to note that RP is not a rigidly unified pronunciation norm and allows some variation.

In support of the above point, linguists have done a lot of research on RP and note that RP, which is considered the Standard English pronunciation, has undergone some changes due to external factors. For example, Wells J. states that contemporary General RP is influenced by its garbled

⁵ P.Roach. *Introducing Phonetics* edited by D. Crystal. L., 1992. p 34.

⁶ A.A. Abduazizov. *English Phonetics. A Theoretical Course*. T., 2006. p 56.

⁷ Kenyon J.S. *American Pronunciation*. Michigan, 1962, p. 265.

⁸ Abercrombie D. *Elements of general phonetics*. Edinburg Univ.Press. 1982. p 203.

⁹ Gimson A.C. *An introduction to the pronunciation of English*//2-nd edition. 1972. p. 320.

variants and American language. In the area of phonetics, mainly at the segment level, this influence is felt by the Cockney, a dialect of the London working class. In the linguistic literature, this phenomenon is called "cocknification" and he also adds that RP is also influenced by a new pronunciation pattern - Estuary English, an Essex accent that spread along the banks of the Thames southeast of London, taking over the Oxford-Cambridge-London triangle.¹⁰

According to Rosewarne's observations, modern children and young people, whose parents speak Common RP, tend to use the problem of the modern pronunciation model of Estuary English is reflected in a large number of works of foreign linguists, for example: P. Coggle, "Do you speak Estuary?", 1993 ; P. Coggle, "The changing sounds of English", 1994; P. Kerswill and A. Williams, "A new dialect in a new city", 1994; D. Rosewarne, "Estuary English", 1984; D. Rosewarne, "Estuary English: tomorrow's RP?", 1994; D. Rosewarne, "Pronouncing Estuary English", 1994; J. Wells, "Accents of English, vol. 2", 1982 and others. A large discussion about the new pronunciation model of Estuary English has been developed on the Internet: Internet - Estuary. They have a pronunciation different from their parents in their speech. This applies to both children attending public schools and those enrolled in private schools. Their pronunciation tends to be either heavily modified RP or Estuary English.¹¹

"Cockney" would be unlikely to pronounce the phonetic [j] which is found in RP after the first consonant in such words as "news" or "tune". The process of shedding [j]s is now established in RP. Many speakers of current General RP do not pronounce a [j] after the [l] of "absolute", "lute", "revolution", or "salute". Similarly, it is common not to pronounce the [j] after the [s] of "assume", "consume", "presume", "pursuit" or "suit(able)". It could be argued that these are now the established form of current General RP and that those who pronounce the [j]s in these environments are what Professor Gimson would term "Conservative RP speakers"

A feature of "Estuary English" which seems to have received no attention to date is the [r]. This feature is to be found neither in RP nor "London" pronunciation. It can sound somewhat similar to a general American [r], but it does not have retroflexion. For the [r] of General RP, the tip of the tongue is held close to the rear part of the upper teeth ridge and the central part of the tongue is lowered. Vowel qualities in "Estuary English" are a compromise between unmodified regional forms and those of General RP. For example, vowels in final position in "Estuary English" such as the [i:] in "me" and the second [i] in city, are longer than normally found in RP and may tend towards the quality of a diphthong.¹²

But this must be taken into account that a language which is the mother tongue of more than one nation, also has national variants of pronunciation. One of such languages is English. As a result of the colonial expansion of British imperialism, the English language spread from the British Isles to all the continents of the Earth and as the colonies and dominions British Empire gained their independence and attained nationhood, English became the national language of several countries such as The United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, while in Canada and the Republic of South Africa it is the mother tongue of the greater part of the population.¹³

According to the latest Internet data, of 2020, of the total number of English speakers in the world there are 369 million who speak it as their first language.¹⁴

¹⁰ Wells J.C. Longman Pronunciation Dictionary. Longman, 1991. p. 93.

¹¹ Rosewarne D. Estuary English. 1984. Times Educational Supplement. p. 64.

¹² <https://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary/rosew.htm>

¹³ Vassilyev V.A. English Phonetics. A theoretical course. M.,1970, p. 323.

¹⁴ <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/how-many-people-speak-english-and-where-is-it-spoken>

All the national varieties of the English language have very much in common but they differ from standard pronunciation. Standard pronunciation is the pronunciation controlled by the orthoepic norm. It is the pronunciation of the literate classes. It is used by radio and television, and is regionally neutral. The social standard within Britain is the so-called Received Pronunciation or RP. It is the teaching norm at schools and higher learning establishments.¹⁵

In the United States of America the most wide-spread type is General American. As RP in Great Britain, GA in America is the public standard: it is regionally impartial, it is used by radio and TV, in scientific and business discourse, and it is spoken by erudite Americans.¹⁶

English was brought to the American continent by the English colonists in the first half of the sixteenth century.¹⁷

There are also different variants of pronunciation in the USA and among them Western type of American English is accepted as the Standard American English. This type of pronunciation is known as General American (abbreviation GA). General American is spoken in Mid-Atlantic States: New York State, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin.

We need to be able to manage the thought used to answer the question of why GA is considered the Standard Pronunciation of English.

According to J. Kenyon (A Guide to Pronunciation), there are different type of English Pronunciation but we cannot consider all of them as Standard English pronunciation. Standard Pronunciation must be chosen as a teaching norm in countries where English is not native and there are three objective criteria for this.

First objective criterion is the degree of understandability. Second important objective criterion is the extend of investigation and third is the number of textbooks, audio-visual aids.

Shahbagova mentions that no other type has been so thoroughly investigated in all of these components as RP and GA. For centuries, linguists believed that only RP meets all these requirements but nowadays there are millions of people who speak GA, enough investigations are held and it has enough textbooks and audio visuals as much as RP.

The reason why GA is accepted as Standard English is not only because it is spoken by colossal number of people but also because it is accepted as a teaching norm.

Reference

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¹⁵ Leontyeva S.F. Theoretical phonetics of English language. M., 1988. p. 210.

¹⁶ Bronstein A.J. The pronunciation of American English. Prentice Hall. 1960. p 50

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