

THE PHONEMIC TENDENCIES OF ESTUARY ENGLISH

The phonemic tendencies of Estuary English are investigated in this paper. The description of phonemic variety of this pronunciation standard is analyzed. The popularity of the Pronunciation Standard in mass media is given.

Key words: *phonemic variety, Estuary English, pronunciation standard, Received Pronunciation.*

Estuary English (EE), named after the banks of the Thames and its estuary, is to be heard in the House of Commons, the City, the Civil Service, local government, the media, advertising and the medical and teaching professions in the south-east. What is more, in recent years it began to be heard around three other estuaries- the Humber in the north-east, the Dee- in the north-west and the Severn- in the West-because of the relatively easy rail and motorway commuting networks.

The importance of the present article is underlined by the necessity of the complex and profound investigation of the recent dynamic processes taking place in the pronunciation standard generalised as "EE".

The aim of the research is to describe the general nature of EE as the super modern accent of British pronunciation and to classify the phonetically relevant shifts in its dynamic nature.

To reach the present aim we have to solve the following **tasks**:

- 1) to generalise the common features of EE as modern pronunciation standard;
- 2) to trace out the most typical phonological features of the given accent;
- 3) to select the features, which are essential for the existence of the accent;

The object of the article is the innovative phonetic phenomena and its phonemic tendencies introduced into modern pronunciation standard.

The subject of the article is the phonological features relevant for the realisation of the innovative phonetic phenomena in speech continuum.

The practical value of this work may be determined by the possibility to use the main proceedings of the research in practical course of phonetics of the English language, as it deals with the up-to-date pronunciation standard and reflex the most real pronunciation situation.

The theoretical significance of the article can be specified in close unity with the practical value. In particular, it is important in theoretical view, as its major results considerably benefit the theoretical database of the English pronunciation norm, particularly the phonological nature of the current innovative phonetic units.

EE is like Received Pronunciation (RP), but unlike Cockney, in being associated with standard grammar and usage; it is like Cockney, but unlike RP (as traditionally described), in being characterized by the following tendencies:

The Pronunciation of /t/.

Among the most revealing of all the features is the pronunciation of t. While it is certainly not true to say that all RP speakers tap their ts and all Cockney and Estuary English speakers omit their ts in the middle and at the ends of words, it is certainly true to say that RP speakers tap the most ts and Cockney speakers tap the fewest. Estuary English speakers may differ from one another, but find themselves in the middle range. Take as an example the sentence:

In Scotland the butter and the water are absolutely outstanding.

This sentence contains five instances of /t/ which are of interest to us. An RP speaker may tap all five of the ts in question, but equally well may tap only four or even three of them:

In Sco(t)land the butter and the water are absolutely ou(t) standing.

A true Cockney speaker, on the other hand, will tap none of the five ts, producing the sound known as the 'glottal stop': In Sco'land the bu'er and the wa'er are absolu'ely ou'standing. (If indeed s/he would describe water and butter as 'absolutely outstanding' in the first place!). Estuary English speakers towards the Cockney end of the spectrum will produce similar results, while those towards the RP end of the spectrum will tap as many as three ts - the same ones, in fact, as the bottom-of-the- scale RP speakers.

The Pronunciation of /l/

When local computer shop promised to phone back with information, the assistant assured: "I'll give you a bell, Paul." All the final is had become ws: I'uw give you a beuw, Pauw. This Cockney feature appears- in stronger or weaker forms- extremely frequently in Estuary English speech. It is not by any means restricted to the end of words, but can occur in many different places in the word. For example:

tauw(tall), bauwpoin'(ballpoint), Mauwden (Maiden), fauw'(fault).

Both Danny Baker and Jeff Banks (who, at the time of writing, could be seen- and heard- advertising detergents on TV) hit their ts much more frequently than true Cockney speakers, but their ts certainly tend towards w. So it is possibly to have the /w/ pronunciation of /l/ and yet not always to use the glottal stop where a true Cockney speaker would do so. This distinctive pronunciation of /l/ seems to extend quite a long way across the Cockney-Estuary English-RP spectrum.

The Pronunciation of /o/

Still closer to the RP end of the spectrum we find the distinctive pronunciation of /o/, as in the word no. Vowels are even harder to represent in ordinary script than are consonants, out you will get some idea of this particular vowel quality if you take the average RP speaker's pronunciation of now, row('quarrel') and town. [1, p. 89]. For Estuary English speakers this pronunciation would represent the words no, row ('series') and Tone (Tony). So an Estuary English cinema-goer wanting to tell her partner to choose seats in another row rather than the one he had lust walked into, might say:

Now, no' in tha' row, Town! (No, not in*that row, Tony!)

The Pronunciation of /or / aw / au/ and the /u/ sound

Certain other Cockney-influenced vowels also occur in Estuary English and extend a long way across the spectrum. Take, for instance, the Estuary English pronunciation of /or/aw/au/ as in the words organise, awful and author. While in RP the mouth remains open during the production of this vowel, in EE the mouth is first open and then comes together to form a w. The overall effect is to produce a rather nasal sounding /auw/:

Wha' enauwmous meeuw! (What an enormous meal!)

I've cauwt an auwfuw cowwd. (I've caught an awful cold.)

Similarly the Estuary English pronunciation of the /u/ sound in words like cup, love, hut is much closer to the RP pronunciation of a as in cap, lav, hat:

Cam to my hat for a cap of tea, lav. (Come to my hut for a cup of tea, love.)

Lessav sam fan in the san ea'ln' bans. (Let's have some fun in the sun eating buns.)

These are just two examples of several vowel sounds that have come into Estuary English from Cockney. [2, p. 12; 3, p. 18-23]

So isn't Estuary English just a kind of Cockney? Because Estuary English lies between RP and Cockney and has features of both accents, people tend to pick on the obvious Cockney features and classify Estuary English speakers as Cockneys. Of course, a person who has in their speech all the Cockney features outlined above and has them to a strong degree might well be a Cockney speaker. But a person who has some of the features and to a lesser degree is more likely to be a speaker of Estuary English. Certainly it is possible to hear all these distinctive pronunciations well outside the London area and used by people who would certainly not regard themselves at Cockneys. The pronunciation of /t/ is one of the most revealing features to listen out for in all speakers, whether they are speakers of RP, Estuary English, Cockney, or indeed other kinds of English.

The RP Pronunciation of /t/

In older forms of RP the t was tapped in almost all positions in a word. For example:

end of a word: hat, hit, can't, Kent
mid-word, end of a syllable: Gat-wick, knit-wear, apart-ment
between vowels: water, butter, hospital
beginning of a word: tea, today, total

Practically the only position in which [^]was not pronounced was in combinations with /s/ or /f/ (1) between a vowel and -en, and (2) between a vowel and -ie. Words like listen, hasten, fasten and soften from the first group, and castle, wrestle, jostle and whistle from the second group were - and still are -pronounced:

lissn, hayssn, fahssn, soffn, cahssl, ressl, jossl, wissl

Incidentally, the t in the word often is frequently pronounced nowadays, presumably under the influence of the spelling. But why this has not also happened with listen, soften and all the others remains a mystery. Over the last few decades there have been changes in RP and now only more conservative RP speakers continue to tap the t in the mid-word, end-of-syllable position when the next syllable begins with a consonant:

Gat-wick, knit-wear, apart-ment

In general the t is dropped and is replaced by a glottal stop. It has therefore become entirely respectable to say:

Ga'wick, kni'wear, apar'ment.

Nowadays, it is even relatively common for RP speakers - along with speakers of many other varieties of English - in relaxed mode, talking among friends or family, to drop the t in the end-of- word position:

ha' (hat), hi' (hit) y can^can't), Ken' (Kent).

In fact, people can sound a little prissy or over-precise if they tap all their ts. There are some who even go as far as re-inserting the traditionally unpronounced /t/ in Christmas and say Krist-mas. These people also tend to pronounce tissue as tiss-you instead of the more generally accepted tishoo. Such speakers were at one time favoured by TV advertisers of certain delicate products (such as toilet tiss-you). They are actually over-articulating their words, which may be appropriate in some contexts (for example, on a bad phone line), but in normal situations sounds over-formal and can even lack authority. It is, by the way, interesting to note that among the frequent or excessive i-tappers, women are undoubtedly in the majority. The more macho people wish to appear, the fewer ts they tap. [4, p. 125-130]

The Glottal Stop

While it is respectable to miss the t in the positions just described, it is not yet considered respectable to exchange the /t/ for a glottal stop between vowels and say: *wa'er, bu'er, hospi'al.*

This is a feature of Cockney, as well as of many other accents from around the British isles, including Geordie and Glaswegian; but it has not yet been taken into RP. In Cockney and other accents, the /t/ is similarly exchanged for a glottal stop at the beginning of certain words in rapid, connected speech:

Jewonn'a cumm'a my pah'y?

(Do you want to come to my party?)

Accents incorporating this feature are still at the present time stigmatised, that is, regarded as uncouth by the majority of the population, and often even by the very people who speak in this way. Using the glottal stop between vowels is a bit like wearing a tattoo: whether you realise it or not, certain doors will be closed to you. It is a statement about you and about where you belong, or where you think you belong, in British society. Stigmatised behaviour - whether it be a manner of speaking or the wearing of tattoos - does, of course, have a certain protest value for those who want to rebel against the Establishment. No doubt this is one reason why it is so prevalent among the young and among those who feel, for one reason or another, rejected by society. But an additional reason for the adoption of the glottal stop seems to be the one mentioned earlier - namely

the wish not to come over as too 'posh'. It is perfectly possible to have little or no desire to shock, repel or rebel, but at the same time to feel that a 'cut-glass' or 'plum-in-the-mouth' accent is simply not right for life in modern Britain.

Whatever the reason, more and more people are not only going down the Ga 'wick, apar'ment road, but are also extending their use of the glottal stop to the, as yet still stigmatised, bu'er, wa'er group of words. The inevitable effect will be gradually to reduce the stigma attached to the latter group. Before long we may find that the users of glottal stops have not only become the majority but have also assumed some of the powerful positions in the land, so that this feature will form part of the prestige-bearing variety of English and will be taught to foreign learners of English. Already among certain groups of relatively influential people, such as those involved in sport and the media, the glottal stop is not only accepted but almost seems to be a prerequisite - for boxers and chat-show presenters, for example. [5, p. 27]

The Breathy /t/

One further point must be made about /t/ before we move on. The t at the beginning of a word and followed by a vowel (tea, top, tell) is much more breathy in Cockney than it is in RP. This kind of /t/ is impossible to represent in ordinary script, but the nearest transcription would probably be:

tsea, tsop, tsell.

This appears in some Estuary English speakers, not only at the beginnings of words but often also in the middle - where a Cockney speaker would use a glottal stop. So the RP sentence:

Tell Natalie to butter twenty plates of toast, Terry.

would come out in Cockney as:

Tseuw Na'alie 'a bu'er tswen'y play'sa tsows, Tseuw [Tel].

In some Estuary English speakers this would become:

Tseuw Natsalle tsa butser tswentsy playsa tsowst, Tseuw.

The Pronunciation of /t/ across the Speech Spectrum

The next examples demonstrate the possibilities across the spectrum from conservative or over-articulating RP speaker at one extreme to Cockney speaker at the other:

1. Over-articulating RP speaker:

At Matt's Christmas party Patricia presented Peter with a cotton sweatshirt.

All the ts would be firmly tapped.

2. Average RP speaker:

At Matfs Krissmas party Patricia presented Peter with a cotton swea'shlrt.

Most of the ts would be tapped, but not so firmly as in example. Particularly in words like cotton, the tt would barely be touched and would be nearer to a /d/.

3. RP speaker |n relaxed or less formal mode:

A 'Matt's Krissmas party Pa' presented Peter with a cotton swea'shlrt.

4. Estuary English speaker towards the t-pronouncing end of the spectrum:

A 'Mats Krissmas partsy Pa' presentsed Petsuh with a corson swea'shlrts.

5. Estuary English speaker nearer to the Cockney end of the spectrum:

A 'Mats Krissmas Pah'y Pa' presen'ed Pee' [Pete] with a co'on swea'shlr'.

6. Cockney speaker:

A 'Mats Krissmas pah'y Pa' presen'ed Pee' wiv a co'on swea'shlr'.

Note that the th in with has for this speaker been transcribed as wiv. While tills feature does sometimes occur in Estuary English it is less frequently found than the glottal stop version of /t/. [6, p. 168-172]

Although Estuary English is first and foremost an accent, there are some features other than pronunciation that are worth looking at. This material considers words, expressions and grammatical features which, although they may not be by any means exclusive to Estuary, are nevertheless fairly typical of Estuary speakers. As far as widely

used words and expressions are concerned, the ones that spring to mind are the often quoted cheers, mate and basically.

TV and Radio

If the professional world does not provide sufficient evidence to destroy the stereotype, we may turn to a world that is familiar and accessible to everyone, the world of television and radio. Of course, we expect certain kinds of media stars to be firmly in the Estuary camp, perhaps even at the Cockney end of the spectrum. Comedians and boxers seem to fall into this category and, if we direct our attention to a popular boxer like Frank Bruno, our expectations are confirmed. He is readily identifiable as a Cockney speaker.

In this utterance taken from Clive Anderson Talks Back, Bruno reveals his Cockney allegiances:

lorn fur'ee a' this rnowrnen' . . . louw be si'in' in rnuh rockin' chair wiv rnuh gran'children, shaowin¹ urn auw rnuh cah'in's ah'ov the piper.

(I'm thirty at this moment... I'll be sitting in my rocking chair with my grandchildren, showing them all my cuttings out of the paper.)

Most of the features we have already looked at as being of Cockney origin are present here, and a few more beside.

But, even among boxers living in the south-east, we are not entirely safe in our preconceptions. Have you ever listened to Chris Eubank's accent? On the phone he could easily pass for a bank manager - though having said that, there are, of course, plenty of Estuary-speaking bank managers, too!

Newsreaders

Admittedly there are not many television news readers in the Estuary camp. Newsreaders have to carry authority. At the moment RP is the most authoritative vehicle for newsreading. People are not yet ready for:

British raluw wiuw be cu'ing the cost of traveuw to Paris through the Channeuw Tunneuw.

(British Rail will be cutting the cost of travel to Paris through the Channel Tunnel.)

But innovations have taken place even in this sphere over a couple of decades. It was initially considered unsuitable for women to read the news, either on radio or on television, since it was felt that their mode of speech lacked authority. It was also feared that black news readers might offend the more 'sensitive' viewer. Nowadays some of the best news readers are women or black or both, and the authority of news reading has not been undermined. But the final bastion, that of accent, still has not been breached as far as 'serious' news (BBC and ITV main newscasts) goes.

Things are different in radio, where only a few stations (notably Radio 4) provide serious news cover. On most of the commercial and local radio stations anything goes as far as accent is concerned. An Estuary accent is certainly no barrier here. In fact there is hardly an RP accent to be heard. Classic FM, a serious but popularist and supposedly non-elitist station, has gone as far as using an Australian newsreader whose accent is 'educated anti-podean'. Australian English and Estuary English do have certain similarities, but the modified vowels of the educated Australian seem to be preferred to the 'common'-sounding vowels of Estuary when it comes to serious newsreading! [7, p. 189]

Advertising

But news reading is the exception that proves the rule as far as TV and radio are concerned. A wide range of regional accents can be heard, and among them a good proportion of Estuary speakers. This is also the case when it comes to advertising. First thoughts might suggest that RP voices would be most successful at promoting products, since the authority and credibility of the speaker are of paramount importance in persuading people to spend their money. And if an RP accent provides authority for the news, then it will do the same for commercial products, won't it? Well, it seems that this

is not necessarily so. The commercial world is quick to sort out what works best, and if that were an RP accent in every case the advertising agencies would be using only RP speakers. But they are not: on the contrary, there is a substantial demand for Estuary speakers. A quick review of recent ads on TV throws up Jonathan Ross for Rover cars, Paul Merton for Imperial Leather soap, Jeff Banks for Ariel and Danny Baker for Daz.

And it is not only media personalities whose Estuary tones are used for product promotion. The Bacardi ad set in the West Indies successfully uses an unknown Cockney-end-of-the-spectrum male voice, and the image-promoting Wella ad for hair-styling mousse uses a female Estuary voice. An ad on Meridian for a new golf club near Canterbury is seeking to attract members by stressing on the one hand the quality of the course and on the other hand the open-door membership policy. No exclusivity here - a fact brought home by the Estuary tones of the voice-over.

These speakers have been chosen because of their accents not despite them. It is clear that the advertising agencies believe Estuary English can appeal more successfully to a certain target audience than an RP accent. They also believe that these potential customers exist in sufficiently large numbers and have sufficiently high incomes to justify special attention.

There are, of course, still certain ads that use conservative RP female speakers. Fairy washing-up liquid ads are a case in point. One might be forgiven for thinking that advertising for washing-up liquid was directed at the same target audience as advertising for detergent, yet the approach is quite different. Perhaps this is because Fairy is promoting a soft and gentle image which is deemed to be best served by soft-voiced females using conservative RP. It is presumably for the same reason that Comfort and Lenor adopt a similar approach.

Media personalities

Media personalities in two spheres of life, then, the academic world and the world of TV and radio, Estuary speakers abound and are on the increase. The same observation can be made of practically every occupational group. Of course, the Estuary speakers in the more intellectual professions (for example doctors and lawyers) tend to be towards the RP end of the spectrum, and those in the manual occupations tend to be nearer the Cockney end of the spectrum.

But even this generalisation has its notable exceptions. Just consider the respected botanist and zoologist, David Bellamy. Theoretically, he should have only hints of Estuary English in his accent, if any. But in practice, he is a good way along the spectrum towards Cockney. Talking of flower remedies, David Bellamy says:

Infinitely diluted, the wauwter in which the flaaahwes have been sow ked will become the faahndation of wahn of the Bach flaaahwe remedies.

(Infinitely diluted, the water in which the flowers have been soaked will become the foundation of one of the Bach flower remedies.)

The ts in diluted and water are pronounced, which they would not be in Cockney or in an Estuary speaker even nearer to Cockney than Bellamy is himself. But the vowel sound in water has the distinctive auwflavour, which occurs frequently in Bellamy's speech. His versions of the /ow/vowel in flowers (flaaahwes) and of the /ou/ vowel in foundation (faahndation) are very broad, and typical of Cockney, as are his renderings of one as wahn and soaked as sowked.

As might be expected, the /l/ is pronounced as /w/ in all the predictable places. A particularly good example was:

Essenshauw oluw of lavendah was thauwt to be good for the pauwzy.

(Essential oil of lavender was thought to be good for the palsy.)

David Bellamy provides yet another example which contradicts the commonly held stereotype of an Estuary speaker as an uneducated and ill-informed person. Here we clearly have an expert who has been chosen to present TV programmes partly because of his knowledge and his zealous enthusiasm for his subject, but also no doubt because of his 'common touch' and his appeal to the ordinary viewer.

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