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WHAT IS RP?

Yutaka Soeda

One cannot fail to be impressed, when exposed to British English for the first time, at the great variety of English dialects. (The present writer has visited London, Norwich, Cambridge, Colchester, Dover, Canterbury, York, Leeds, Edinburgh, the Lake District, Oxford, Manchester, Chester, etc.) One of the staff of the Department of Language and Linguistics of the University of Essex told us that he had had extreme difficulty in understanding some farmers from Suffolk when he tried to converse with them about the operation of a German agricultural machine. He also spoke of the kind of prejudice people generally had against Cockney. In Dover the present writer himself found it pretty difficult to understand a middle-aged man, who kindly took him to the station. More interestingly, a few people from Yorkshire, who happened to share the sightseeing bus with the present writer in the Lake District, talked about their difficulty in comprehending people from another region within Yorkshire. In Edinburgh a station employee was heard to pronounce today /taˈdiː/ instead of /ˈteɪdiə/. Thus, if one is careful enough, one can pick up quite easily many such remarkable dialectal variants in the United Kingdom.

But, on second thoughts, this is not a very peculiar character with British English only—much the same may be true for many other languages, e.g. Japanese. Yet, in Great Britain there is a special kind of speech form, which is usually called RP (Received Pronunciation). Of course, it is no wonder that the people have sought a kind of speech standard from the viewpoint of widespread intelligibility, because there has always existed a great diversity in the spoken realizations of English. What is peculiar to RP is its association with class consciousness. Because of RP's use on the air, within Britain RP has become the most widely understood of all accents. But the English are said to be particularly sensitive to variations in the pronunciation of their language. Their sensitivity is closely associated with their class consciousness to the degree that, for example, a son's accent tends to reveal his father's occupation and educational background pretty accurately. In other words, their class consciousness has apparently much to do with their attitude which regards a certain set of sound values as more acceptable, even more beautiful.

But, for a non-native speaker of English like the present writer, it would be almost impossible to discern or judge or share such subtle feeling as antipathy, envy, hostility, jealousy, affectation, class consciousness and the like. All he can
do may be to defer to the judgments of the British authorities. The aim of this paper, therefore, is only to present a general survey of RP in terms of its history, its present status and its future.

1. Now let us briefly review the origin and the development of RP. For reasons of politics, commerce and the presence of Court, RP owes its origin to educated London speech in the fourteenth century. But it must be remembered that the first recognition of the superiority of one type of pronunciation over the others comes later, that is, as early as the fifteenth century. In the sixteenth century, a difference was recognized between upper-class English and the language of the humbler people. Thus this speech form changed from a regional to a class dialect, and now it enjoys a greater prestige than any other. This kind of pronunciation has been called Southern English, Public School English (or pronunciation), the Oxford Accent, the Queen's English, London English, the BBC English, Standard English, etc. It is true that each of them shows part of the origin and historical aspects of RP, yet many of them are misleading in the sense that they tend to obscure the present status of RP.

2. The present status of RP.

When we talk about RP, two distinctions must be made, that is, (1) between DIALECT and ACCENT, the former referring to varieties distinguished from each other by differences of grammar and vocabulary, and the latter referring to varieties of pronunciation, and (2) between Standard English being not the dialect of any social group, but of educated people throughout the British Isles (speakers of Standard English naturally have some regional dialect forms in their speech) and RP being not the accent of any region. RP is spoken by only about three per cent of the English population, those at the top of the social scale as may be represented by the following simple diagram:

![Diagram](https://example.com/diagram.png)

(Hughes and Trudgill, 1979)

Thus British English has a vertical (social) as well as a horizontal (regional) stratification. Again, RP is unique among many speech forms in that it is not the accent of the capital or of any other part of the country, that is, RP-speakers are found all over the country. In other words, RP is a status symbol,
an indication of social standing. But Quirk (1956) has this to say;

RP embraces a pretty wide range and, what's more, it is changing all
the time and has changed very much over the past half-century.

It is a well-known fact that in RP there are at least three types, that is,
conservative, general and advanced. For instance, the word fire is pronounced
/faɪə/ (conservative RP) by the older generation, /feɪə/ (general RP) by the
BBC, and /faː/ (advanced RP) by highly educated young people. Advanced RP,
however, is usually judged 'affected' by other RP speakers. What is more, all
RP speech, however conservative, sounds affected for many non-RP speakers.

For some typical variants within RP, let us see Gimson (1970). What follows
is a list of RP vowels and consonants having variants of various degrees. (Only
references will be given.)

VOWELS

1) Variants of /ɪ/ amongst RP speakers .................. pp. 101–2
2) Variants of /e/ amongst RP speakers .................. pp. 104–5
3) Variants of /æ/ amongst RP speakers .................. p. 106
4) Variants of /ʌ/ amongst RP speakers .................. pp. 107–8
5) Variants of /ə/ amongst RP speakers .................. p. 115
6) Variants of /ʊ/ amongst RP speakers .................. p. 120
7) Variants of /ɔ/ amongst RP speakers .................. p. 122
8) Variants of /ə/ amongst RP speakers .................. p. 124
9) Variants of /ɜ/ amongst RP speakers .................. p. 128
10) Variants of /ɑ/ amongst RP speakers .................. p. 130
11) Variants of /ɔɪ/ amongst RP speakers ................. pp. 132
12) Variants of /ɒɪ/ amongst RP speakers ................. pp. 136–7
13) Variants of /diphthong+(ə)/ amongst RP speakers ... pp. 138–9
14) Variants of /ʊə/ amongst RP speakers ................. p. 142
15) Variants of /ɛə/ amongst RP speakers ................. p. 143
16) Variants of /uə/ amongst RP speakers ................. p. 145

CONSONANTS

1) [ɔː] replacing /t, d/ ........................................... p. 163
2) [ɔː] replacing /k/ ........................................... p. 169
3) Variants of an unstressed h-syllable ..................... p. 192
4) Variants of /θ/ ............................................. p. 199
5) Variants of /r/ amongst of RP speakers ............... p. 208
6) Variants of /ʍ/ amongst of RP speakers ............... p. 217
Most variants amongst RP speakers are of vowels, as is illustrated above, and so we may say that, as far as the consonants are concerned, very few important variants occur in RP as in dialects. (Also see Jones (1960), §§271, 294, 300, 330, 388, 471, esp. footnote 5 to §64.)

According to Abercrombie (1967), who seems to the present writer at least a little prejudiced against RP, RP arouses considerable hostility in some quarters, and it is a sign of the type, not of the degree, of education which its speakers have received. The present writer heard an educated English woman complaining of the BBC being in favor of a more varied style. The BBC has changed its former, strict standards for the kind of pronunciation they adopted, and the upper classes no longer have a single, typical style of speech. Certain regional forms have entered in their speech. This changing status made Gimson (1970) feel that he had to re-write the pages dealing with RP.

3. The future of RP.

As we saw above, quite a number of variations are to be found in RP, and it must not be thought that RP is absolutely uniform. RP has had a marked effect on the regional forms of pronunciation, with the result that there is a type of pronunciation called ‘modified regional’ speech, but now we had better speak of ‘modified’ RP, which has in its turn been influenced by dialects. Since most work, segmental and intonational, has done on this variety and many educated speakers of other accents tend to it and also it is geographically unmarked, it is and will be the most suitable one as a model for foreign students. Of course the choice is still between RP and American pronunciation.

Viewed in relation to the present status of RP and its various aspects—linguistic, social and psychological—Gimson (1970) seems to be quite right in saying that within the next century RP might be so diluted that it could lose its historic identity and that a new standard with a wider popular and regional base would emerge. Even today Brown (1977) thinks it more meaningful to expand the term (RP) to include what might be called ‘educated southern English’.

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