

Accent Goes to War and the Retreat of Conservative Received Pronunciation

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Abstract

This paper describes how the once dominant dialect, conservative Received Pronunciation, has seen its influence diminish dramatically since the mid-twentieth century. The author explains the historical rise to prominence of the dialect before highlighting a key moment in Britain's history that symbolised a weakening of conservative Received Pronunciation's prestige and its hold on public life. This moment, during the early stages of World War Two, saw two English dialects employed by Germany on the one hand and Britain on the other in propaganda to win the hearts and minds of the British people. The paper gives details of the two key protagonists in this battle, William Joyce and John Boynton Priestley, better known as J. B. Priestley, along with an explanation of the events. The author concludes by discussing the implications of the decline in conservative Received Pronunciation, particularly with reference to the English language classroom, as well as introducing a research project that aims to further explore these implications.

Keywords: *dialect, Received Pronunciation, English*

1. Introduction

Teachers of language around the world are familiar with the question of which dialectal variety of the target language to teach to their students. And all languages have a plethora to choose from, making the answer to this question a less than simple one. One answer is to use the de facto prestige dialect, and it is hard to resist the logic of instructing students in the dialect that is recognised by the target speech community, or even the global community, as the standard, the one that is most likely to open doors to economic chances and to enable the speaker's message to be readily understood by the largest number of

target language speakers. In the case of British English¹, most people assume that the standard dialect is described by the term Received Pronunciation (RP). While Hughes, Trudgill and Watt (2013, p. 3) point out that RP nowadays holds a ‘rather dated—even negative—flavour in contemporary British society’, this author will use the term RP for consistency, and because of the particular variety of RP that is central to this paper, which is discussed below.

English has no doubt become the dominant global language (for an excellent summary of its global position see, Crystal’s chapter in Mugglestone, 2006), but which English? For most non-linguists, the terms American English or British English are all that are needed to explain the variety of English they are referring to, but once we break these terms down we have a multitude of variations, and that is not including the recognition of the importance of world Englishes (see Jenkins, 2000; Pennycook, 2001). The default variety for British English had, since the late 19th and early 20th century until fairly recently, been RP.

In the next sections, we will describe a historical event that symbolised the wane of RP’s influence in British life, and hence its implications for English in the classroom. The discussion will start with the historical context before describing in more detail what we mean by the term RP. There are two interconnected themes running through this paper, history, and dialect and accent. The author hopes the narrative nature of the paper will be both informative and stimulating. The writer also apologises in advance for the British-centric nature of the paper, but as someone from those shores it is hard, when discussing dialect and accent, not to bring one’s own linguistic background in to the spotlight.

2. The Historical Context

It was the May in 1940. Europe and much of Eastern Asia were at war. In Western Europe, the German army rapidly advanced across the territories of Holland, Belgium and France, while simultaneously pushing northwards to Denmark and Norway. Its forces gathered at the northern coast of France, readying themselves to destroy the British Expeditionary Force, which it had trapped at the port of Dunkirk. Once this was done, the way was open for German forces to cross the English Channel, invade Britain and bring to end resistance to Nazi Germany’s expansion. However, over a period of ten days, from the 25th of May to the 4th of June in 1940, the British Expeditionary Force was evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk, escaping the enclosing German army. Victory was snatched from defeat, and the remarkable escape later became the inspiration for the British people to fight on until allies could join the fight and turn the tide. While some have questioned just how factually correct the idea of the whole nation pulling together to rescue the troops is (Harmon, 1980), it is true to say that psychologically the evacuation provides an immensely powerful morale boost for the beleaguered British nation.

One of the most famous wartime speeches given by the then Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, was given on the 4th of June, 1940, in which he rallied the nation with

the famous lines:

We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender. (p. 104)

In describing preparation for this speech, Churchill commented on how important it was to sound a note of optimism within a realist message (1986, p. 103), and this hints at another worry that he had away from the battlefield, one found in newspaper stories and on the airwaves. Since 1939, Germany had been transmitting a radio broadcast to Britain and America from Hamburg, with the aim of undermining the British public's will to fight as well as their trust in their leaders. After the defeat of the BEF and the commencement of air raids over Britain, and notwithstanding Dunkirk, the whole British nation was on edge, suspecting Fifth Columnists of laying the groundwork for an invasion, for passing on information to the Germans, and with the lack of success on the battlefield, the battle of the airwaves waged between Germany and the British Broadcasting Corporation (the BBC) was an important element in the British government's fight for survival. It is the voices of these broadcasts that interest this author, as the choice of voice and dialect is a telling one. One of the dialects was the careful, clipped tones of RP. Before continuing with the historical story, the paper will briefly outline what is meant by RP and its historical background.

3. The Historical Development of Received Pronunciation

The sociolect, or class dialect, Received Pronunciation, that we recognise from the late 19th century through to the present day developed from a dialect centred around a region of the east midlands and London in the 15th century (British Library, 2016). There is no surprise at this, as dominant dialects naturally grow from the regions that are centres of power: economic, social or political. From the 15th century onwards, the south east of England became such a centre, with the royal court and palaces in London and its surroundings and the prestigious seats of learning, Oxford and Cambridge, all located here. This is also the area where the new printing presses proliferated after Caxton's first press opened in 1475, stimulating discussion about issues of standardising orthographic rules and vocabulary, as printers and authors considered what forms should be printed and fixed on the pages of the new literature being printed and disseminated through ever wider geographical locations and social circles.

The city of London itself was becoming increasingly more important as a trading port. At that time the dialect was very different from the form we associate with the RP of the modern day, but nonetheless, this is where its roots can be geographically located (Parsons, 1998, p. 5). As with all dialects, over centuries, various phonetic and lexico-grammatical

features evolved and changed, and it was not until the late 18th and early 19th centuries that RP became recognised as a standard or elite dialect, one removed from a fixed location but carrying social prestige. As Mugglestone (2003) remarks:

Ideas of a spoken and non-localized ‘standard’ in this sense were to prove remarkably powerful. Over the course of the nineteenth century, images of a national harmony dependent upon, and generated by, a shared and uniform accent for all remained evocative. (p. 39)

By the end of the 17th century the interest in a standard English or how to describe English grew, but it is also worth remembering that English was still very much in the shadow of Latin as a prestige language. For example, in 1687, the famous polymath Sir Isaac Newton printed his most famous work, *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy) in Latin rather than English, to reach a wider scientific audience; the educated elite used Latin as a mark of their standing, and English dialects and accents were not such important social class markers, with a variety of English dialects heard at court: most famously perhaps, Sir Walter Raleigh, the swashbuckling captain, had a broad accent from his native Devon. However, the drive towards a standard continued apace with the improvement of transport facilitating the flow of people around the country, with each encounter between different dialects raising the question, especially amongst linguists, of what was the ‘correct’ way to speak, a fact illustrated in 1569, by John Hart, a phonetician, who wrote that he hoped his book *Orthographie* would help ‘the rude countrie Englishmen’ be able to pronounce English ‘as the best sort use to speak it’, and the English spoken by the best sort of people he refers to is the London and south-east dialect.

The first time the term Received Pronunciation was used as a descriptor of the sociolect was in 1791 in John Walker’s *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language* (Fisher, 1993). A. J. Ellis picked up on the term again in 1869 in his *On Early English Pronunciation*, but there was still no consensus as to what to call this dialect until the early 20th century, when Daniel Jones, the influential British phonetician, after a few alternative labels², defined this dialect in his 1917 publication *English Pronouncing Dictionary* thus (Mugglestone, 2003):

The pronunciation used in this book is that most generally heard in the families of the Southern English persons whose men-folk have been educated at the great public boarding-schools. This pronunciation is also used by a considerable portion of those who do not come from the South of England but who have been educated at these schools. (p. 265)

From this point on, Received Pronunciation became the accent familiar to many from the early broadcasting history of the BBC, second-world war era films and the British royalty. Indeed it has often been described as BBC English or Queen’s English. The powerful social elite, who went to the public schools referenced by Jones, such as

Eton, Harrow and so on, became the judges, politicians, military leaders, and university professors, and the vast majority spoke RP. Access to this dialect through entry to these educational institutions or through family provided access to power. From a dialect of the east midlands spreading to London, adopted by the court and government, through to the accepted form for printed literature, to a prestige accent seen as ‘better’ and ‘more correct’ than others, RP becomes the dialect of the powerful, through its adoption in the public schools of late 19th century England.

This form of RP, as with all dialects and accents bearing many variants, is often referred to as conservative Received Pronunciation (Gimson, 1984, p. 88). Contemporary speakers of this variant are a shrinking group, with younger speakers dropping many of its features (Hughes et al, 2013, pp. 4-5), and conservative RP no longer is an accent to aspire to, instead it is received fairly negatively by most British speakers. However, this was not the case in the mid-20th century when those in authority, government ministers and broadcasters used RP.

4. Propaganda: Two Voices From World War Two

Having briefly described the historical background to RP’s rise to prominence, I will now turn back to the historical events of the Second World War introduced above. The events focused on in this paper act as a marker of when conservative RP started its decline into a more general contemporary RP of now. This is when accents went to war.

In Britain, in 1940, the morale of its citizens was low, and the German propaganda machine hoped to play on the British public’s fears with its radio programme ‘Germany Calling’ broadcast by the Reichsrundfunk, the German equivalent of the BBC. These programmes often contained information about air raids, casualties and events in Britain that were accurate, leading many to believe that spies must be passing on information to the Germans, a fact which increased feelings of paranoia and unease: exactly as the Germans hoped. The fact that the German broadcasts contained such accurate news was aggravated by the fact that in the early years of the war, the Ministry of Information pressured the BBC into not reporting casualties or the effects of bombing raids and attacks, as they feared it would undermine morale. This attitude was counterproductive as Germany Calling became increasingly popular. The BBC was sufficiently worried by the broadcasts (Doherty, 2000):

That picture is of an England where the people are misled by corrupt and irresponsible leaders, where the small wealthy class leaves the masses to misery, unemployment, hunger and exploitation; of an Empire built on brutality and rapacity, now as decadent and as divided as its Mother Country; of an England hated by the world for her selfishness and ruthlessness. (p. 55)

Germany employed William Joyce to be their ‘English’ voice on their radio transmission. Joyce’s upbringing saw him born in the US to an Irish father and an English mother,

and the family moved to Ireland where he lived until he was fifteen, and then moved to England. In England, his political views soon became apparent, and he became involved in right-wing politics. His anti-semitic beliefs (McPherson, 2010) led him to join the British Union of Fascists in 1931. He was a staunch supporter of Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, and was a prominent member at many speeches and rallies, until he was dismissed from the organisation in 1937, as his increasingly anti-semitic views diverged from Moseley's.

A week before war was declared on the 1st of September 1939, Joyce fled to Berlin and soon was employed on the airwaves as another weapon in the arsenal of the German military machine. His broadcasts were listened to by a large audience in Britain, who nervously wondered how much of what was said could be believed. This paranoia was what the Germans and Joyce hoped to play on. If ordinary people lost their faith in their leaders and with the direction of the war, Britain might capitulate and would either come to an agreement with Germany and Hitler or collapse completely, allowing the German army to cross the English Channel from France and take control of Britain.

English journalists nicknamed William Joyce 'Lord Haw Haw', mocking his upper-class accent (see Appendix). The name stuck, but despite the derogatory moniker, Britons still tuned in to Joyce's broadcasts, which of course worried Britain's war time leaders, who, as has been mentioned, were aware of how fragile the moral of the nation was. The broadcasts were a mix of accurate news, subtle threats to the social order, and humorous attacks on Britain's leaders.

To counter Joyce's message, the BBC decided to act. Initially they tried to broadcast popular programmes to coincide with the broadcasting of *Germany Calling*, featuring, for example, George Formby and Gracie Fields, popular entertainers of the war years, but still, in early 1940, nearly a third of radio listeners in Britain were tuning in to *Germany Calling* (Lord Haw Haw, n.d., para. 3). Furthermore, data gathered by Mass Observation research was still making the establishment nervous (Doherty, 2000, p. 104), as it reported how popular the *Germany Calling* programs were to many, especially in the working class, as these extracts illustrate:

"I think he's very good. He's very nice. We aren't educated enough to understand all the words he uses, but he's very interesting, and a lot of what he says is true." (Woman from Lambeth, London)

"Oh, he's good. you ought to have heard him the other night, skitting about. I always listen to him." (Woman from Bolton)

It was time for a new strategy and the BBC decided to counter the German broadcasts with a new program, which came to be known as *Postscripts*. After a few programmes with different presenters, the *Postscripts* finally found a broadcaster and a voice that was to become synonymous with British resistance to the German threat in 1940. The BBC chose the writer and playwright, J. B. Priestley, and from the week after Dunkirk

through to the Blitz in the autumn of 1940, the *Yorkshireman's* more than twenty down-to-earth and reassuring addresses to the listening public played a huge role in countering the propaganda being broadcast from Hamburg, Germany (Smith, 2001). Priestley's soft Yorkshire accent appealed more to the ordinary men and women when compared to the more common cut-glass conservative RP accents of BBC presenters. In this sense, accent was deployed as a propaganda weapon in the hope of encouraging the British working class to stop listening to Germany's message in the form of the prestige accent that William Joyce adopted.

Priestley broadcast his first Postscript on the 5th of June (see Appendix) just after Sir Winston Churchill had delivered his iconic 'We shall fight them on the beaches' speech. It was Priestley's broadcast, employing a 'domestic and intimate tone' (Hanson, 2008) along with the Prime Minister's defiant one that played such an important part in creating the Dunkirk spirit.³ Priestley's programs were not delivered in a strong Yorkshire dialect, rather a softer version with certain features of Yorkshire accent, but standard grammar and vocabulary.

The choice of a Yorkshire accent here should not be underestimated. It was a recognition by the establishment in the BBC and the government that RP, far from uniting the people in a standard form of English, which made understanding easier, was a marker of division, which separated people into those with privilege and access to the top schools and jobs, and those who did not have such opportunities. It also signalled a recognition, taken for granted now, that having a non-standard dialect was not an indicator of poor education or lower intellectual capability, but simply a part of who we are, an expression of identity. Of course, the vast majority of BBC broadcasts were still delivered by men and women with conservative RP accents, but war and the threat of social division had meant ordinary voices had to be listened to, as well. The door was opened by the establishment, and through it stepped a man with a Yorkshire accent, to take on a German sympathiser with the prestige accent of Britain, RP. Priestley's broadcasts became so popular that at one point he had fourteen million listeners, a number only surpassed by the Prime Minister Churchill himself.

5. Conclusion

By 1941, the battle of the airwaves had been won and the threat from William Joyce's *Germany Calling* program had faded. Conservative RP is rarely heard now in Britain, on the BBC or even in Parliament; rather a more mainstream RP, which has undergone a variety of changes over the last century is much more likely to be heard amongst the elite public schools. Even this variety can be seen as a hindrance in society. A story in the *Daily Mail* newspaper in 2008 reported on how the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, had been receiving speech coaching to make him sound 'less posh'. The politician went to the prestigious St. Paul's school in London, and, when faced with falling ratings in the polls, decided to take action to become less elite sounding. Indeed,

RP accents are reserved for the stage or, in popular culture, villains in Hollywood movies: for example, Shere Khan in the Disney animation *Jungle Book*, Darth Vader in *Star Wars*, and more recently Magneto in the *X-Men* films. Hughes et al. (2013) describe how RP is increasingly an irrelevance (p. 13) in the 21st century, being seen as antiquated and losing its importance as a key to success in the job market. This paper started by positing that RP is the term used by many to define what kind of British English accent and dialect is taught in the English as a second or foreign language classroom, but this usage is misleading, and RP has now perhaps simply become a label that actually describes something very different, the standard English described by Hughes et al. (2013).

So, if RP is not the standard that is taught in the classroom by English language teachers, what is this standard and what are teachers' attitudes and beliefs about what they teach? This author has started a small research project at a higher education institution to explore these questions. Native speakers of British English, teachers and non-teachers, have recorded samples of speech based on short paragraphs. These passages contain words and elements that could signal a Received Pronunciation accent, such as initial /hw/, yod retention, the BATH vowel, and so on. The participants also responded to a short survey on their background and attitudes to accent. The author is now in the process of interviewing a selection of respondents and hopes to present the findings in a future paper.

Notes

- 1 The author recognises that, since the first half of the 20th century, Britain's varieties of English have been increasingly dominated and finally eclipsed in the global TESOL field by the United States of America's rise to global pre-eminence in political, military, and economic terms. As Crystal says, 'the language behind the US dollar was English' (1997, p. 10). However, this paper is focused narrowly on Britain.
- 2 Standard English and Public school English were two ideas, and Standard Southern English another: the latter is quite ironic given that the almost identical term Standard Southern British English is favoured by many linguists now, as mentioned above.
- 3 According to the Macmillan online dictionary the phrase derives 'From the brave attitude of people who went in small boats from England to Dunkirk, on the French coast, to rescue soldiers from the German army during the Second World War.'

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Appendix

Many audio files of both William Joyce and J. B. Priestley can be accessed online. As this paper is concerned with accent and dialect, the author thought it prudent to provide links to some of these resources:

Recording of a William Joyce 'Germany Calling' programme

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/hawhaw/8902.shtml>

Recording of a J. B. Priestley's 'Dunkirk' BBC Postscript programme

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/dunkirk/14310.shtml>

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