

# From Public School Accent to BBC English: defining Received Pronunciation

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## 1 Introduction

This paper discusses the problems involved in defining and circumscribing the accent known as Received Pronunciation, or RP. RP is the name of a specific form of British English pronunciation<sup>1</sup> which has traditionally served as a prestige variety in all parts of Britain and as a model for foreign learners of English. There exist many descriptions of the phonological and phonetic characteristics of this accent, and RP is widely used as a reference accent in the phonological literature on English. There is however not complete agreement among linguists as to how RP should be defined or exactly which features should be included within the variety.

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1 Most writers recognise several subtypes of RP. It is customary to make a distinction between what Wells (1982) calls 'upper-crust RP' and 'mainstream RP'. The former is the more conservative and old-fashioned type of RP, popularly associated with an elderly Oxbridge don, an upper-class army officer, or the older members of the royal family. Mainstream RP is the unmarked, neutral, modern type of RP, typically spoken by BBC newsreaders. A number of people also have accents that Wells describes as 'near-RP': strongly modified regional accents which are close to mainstream RP, but which include a few regional pronunciation features. The type of RP discussed here is the so-called mainstream RP.

In the following I will give an outline of the history of RP and the different ways in which the accent has been defined by linguists. I will discuss the problems involved with the various definitions and argue in favour of a definition based on the concept of non-localisability.

## 2 The history of RP

The historical origins of an English speech standard are commonly traced back to the 16th century (cf. Gimson 1977, Honey 1991, Mugglestone 1995) when prestige became attached to one type of pronunciation. For political and economic reasons, it was the educated speech of the capital and the surrounding areas which emerged as the high-status variant. This localised variety became a social norm associated with the upper classes in the south-east of England. During the 19th century the accent spread geographically and lost its regional identity. This development was made possible primarily by the public school system, which was a nationwide network of residential schools for children of the upper and upper-middle classes.

Honey (1985) dates the emergence of the new public school system to the year 1870, and at about the same time, the term 'Received Pronunciation' was used for the first time to describe the standard speech form. The public school system, and by extension the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, had an enormous influence in promoting RP and establishing it as the most prestigious spoken variety. Honey (1991: 17) writes that 'it was, more than anything else, the emergence of an educated class that gave impetus to the development and spread of a standard accent'. By 1900 RP had become a regionless accent and the most important marker of social class and education. The conformist practices of the public schools spread to all sections of the education industry, and had an eroding effect on local speech forms. One consequence of this development was that it was no longer acceptable for members of the upper classes to speak with a regional accent.

The antecedents of the term 'Received Pronunciation' can be found in the work of Alexander Ellis (1869–89: 23), who defined

'received' (in the now obsolete sense 'socially accepted') pronunciation as 'the educated pronunciation of the metropolis, of the court, the pulpit and the bar'. Henry Cecil Wyld (1920: 2-3) used the term 'Received Standard English' and described it as

the product of social conditions, and ... essentially a Class Dialect. Received Standard is spoken, within certain social boundaries, with an extraordinary degree of uniformity, all over the country. ... It has been suggested that perhaps the main factor in this singular degree of uniformity is the custom of sending youths from certain social strata to the great public schools. If we were to say that Received English at the present day is "Public School English", we should not be far wrong.

Daniel Jones, who played a decisive role in codifying RP and promoting the use of the term, originally labelled it Public School Pronunciation. In the first edition of his *English Pronouncing Dictionary* (Jones 1917: viii) he writes:

The pronunciation represented in this book is that most usually heard in everyday speech in the families of Southern English persons whose men-folk have been educated at the great public boarding-schools. This pronunciation is also used by a considerable proportion of those who do not come from the South of England, but who have been educated at these schools.

In the third edition of the dictionary he changed the label to Received Pronunciation, which was to become the common term used by phoneticians.

The historical base of RP was educated south-eastern English pronunciation as used by the upper classes. However, as Milroy (2001a: 26–27) points out, it is doubtful that the development of RP is just a simple continuation of the highest class accent:

the view ... that RP comes down in a straight line from earlier English courtly usage is somewhat over-simplified. ... There is little reason to suppose that we are dealing with the unilinear history of a continuous upper-class variety, as from a sociolinguistic point of view such a unilinear history is intrinsically unlikely. High prestige features can lose prestige over time, and low prestige features can gain prestige.

Furthermore, through the public school system, access to education and social advancement spread well into the middle classes, thus, 'a middle-class, rather than an upper-class focus should perhaps be expected in early RP' (24–25). There is indeed evidence that in the course of the 19th century RP adopted some features that had their origin in low-status varieties (see Mugglestone 1995: 90, 99–100).

Modern RP is still associated with education and social status, and 'widely regarded as a model for correct pronunciation, particularly for educated formal speech' (Wells 2000: xiii). It is also the usual British pronunciation standard taught to foreign learners of English. However, with the increasing democratisation of British society, RP has lost its former unique position, and non-RP accents are now heard in many contexts from which they were previously excluded.

### 3 Defining RP

#### 3.1 *Descriptions of RP*

RP is by far the most thoroughly described accent of English, and the model for many dictionaries and textbooks on phonetics. In spite of the large number of descriptions of RP, there exists no universal definition of this accent. Honey (1985: 241) talks of the 'extreme divergence of the definitions of RP', and according to Lewis (1985: 247) 'no two British phoneticians are likely to agree on where the line between RP and non-RP is to be drawn'. There are numerous descriptions of RP that list the phonological and phonetic features of the accent, but very few give the criteria for including a feature as part of RP. A number of sources discuss new trends and ongoing changes in RP (e.g. Wells 1994, Wells 1997, Taylor 1998), but without explicitly mentioning which definition of RP forms the basis for the observations.

Modern RP is problematic to define, as the use of RP is not confined to one specific region or one group of people. Moreover, the accent (like all living varieties) is constantly changing, and incorporates a considerable amount of variability. The term RP is not scientifically precise, and linguists disagree as to which features belong within the accent. There is general consensus that the phonological core of RP is identical with the segmental system found

in the traditional descriptions.<sup>2</sup> The problems arise when observers encounter variation and change. The codification of RP has led to the danger of perceiving the accent as static and invariable, and complicates the process of updating the descriptions. This fuzziness should not prevent us from trying to circumscribe RP. As an object of study, RP has to be delimited, or defined. It is not a matter of finding the final, 'true' definition, but the linguistic researcher has to operate with at least a valid working definition of the accent. The choice of definition will affect the decisions regarding which features fall within or outside RP. It is therefore important that the defining criteria are such that they can be used consistently.

Linguists writing about RP have operated with several different criteria for defining RP, some of which will be discussed below.

### 3.2 *The BBC accent*

Because RP was a regionally 'neutral' accent, and was thought to be more widely understood than any regional accent, it came to be adopted by the BBC when radio broadcasting began in the 1920s. RP has since been closely associated with broadcast speech, and with newsreaders in particular. 'BBC English' has often been used as a synonym for RP, and several linguists define RP by reference to 'the form generally used by newsreaders of the BBC' (Gimson 1970: 88). In the latest edition of the *English Pronouncing Dictionary* the editors want to abandon the 'archaic name *Received Pronunciation*' in favour of the term 'BBC English'. They describe the British English pronunciation model (which is identical with the model most other linguists refer to as 'RP') as 'the pronunciation of professional speakers employed by the BBC as newsreaders and announcers' (Roach & Hartman 1997: v). RP is still the accent typically used by BBC newsreaders, and broadcast news is well suited as a source for observing RP in use, but it is problematic to define RP as the

2 Among the diagnostic features are non-rhoticity (lack of non-prevocalic /r/), the phonemic oppositions /æ/ - /ɑ:/, /ɒ/ - /ɔ:/ and /ʊ/ - /ʌ/ in e.g. *ham* - *harm*, *cot* - *caught*, *put* - *putt*, and the realisation of /i:/ and /u:/ as relatively pure monophthongs. Complete descriptions are available in e.g. Wells (1982) and Cruttenden (2001).

pronunciation of BBC newsreaders. British radio and television companies, including the BBC, are much more permissive in their choice of newsreaders and announcers today than they were just a few decades ago, when all presenters were required to speak RP. Several of the BBC newsreaders now have accents that clearly fall outside RP, including markedly regional varieties. RP can therefore no longer be equated with broadcast English, and other criteria are needed in order to narrow the scope of the accent.

### *3.3 RP as an abstract norm*

An important aspect of RP is its role as a model of pronunciation in the teaching of English as a foreign language. One possible definition of RP views it as 'no more than the codified version of English pronunciation' (Wells 1994: 205), and reduces the accent to an abstract construction – a standardised norm which is described in pronunciation dictionaries and textbooks, but which nobody really speaks. The majority of phoneticians, however, agree that we can identify a living speech variety that corresponds to the textbook descriptions of RP, and that some people have this variety as their native accent, others as a norm towards which they modify their speech. The problem is finding a definition which incorporates both these aspects.

This ambiguous use of the term RP is recognised by Fabricius (2000), who distinguishes between what she calls 'constructed RP' (c-RP) and 'native RP' (n-RP). The former refers to RP as a codified norm, the model described in pronunciation dictionaries, while the latter refers to the native accent of a small group of people who have grown up within Great Britain. C-RP 'has specific applications in areas where a standardised, non-variable pronunciation is required, most likely in formal situations such as certain broadcasting genres, while [n-RP] exhibits all of the variation we expect of naturally-occurring speech. The two are closely linked, but separate' (29-30). With reference to RP, such a distinction makes sense to the extent that RP has indeed been codified and functions as a model in dictionaries and textbooks, and the descriptions are (at least in principle) based on observations of 'real' speech. However, the

distinction does not bring us any closer to solving the problem of delimiting the accent. C-RP must be updated by observing the development in n-RP. But if n-RP speakers are identified as those who speak c-RP, the whole concept becomes circular. The dichotomy only works if n-RP is defined on the basis of a social group, and such a definition is problematic (see 3.5 below).

### 3.4 Prestige

RP has traditionally been associated with high prestige and status. The term 'Received Pronunciation' itself reflects a social judgement as to what is 'correct' or 'acceptable'. The evolution of RP as a standard was accompanied by negative attitudes towards local accents and dialects, which by many were considered ugly or vulgar. Honey (1988: 224) quotes from the Report of a Conference on the Teaching of English in London Elementary Schools in 1909, which illustrates these attitudes:

The Cockney mode of speech, with its unpleasant twang, is a modern corruption without legitimate credentials, and is unworthy of being the speech of any person in the capital city of the empire.

There is no doubt that RP still enjoys a considerable amount of prestige. Wells (1982: 115) describes RP as 'the accent which enjoys the highest overt prestige in England'. This prestige has of course been a result of the social prestige connected with the type of people who traditionally used RP.

Prestige is closely linked to the notion of RP as a *standard*. Standard varieties 'cut across regional differences, providing a unified means of communication, and thus an institutionalized norm which can be used in the mass media, in teaching the language to foreigners, and so on' (Crystal 1997: 360). RP has many of the characteristics commonly associated with a standard, in that it has undergone codification and has been used as a model for comparison and imitation. Cruttenden (2001: 78) refers to RP as an 'implicitly accepted social standard of pronunciation'. Ramsaran (1990a) claims that RP manifests itself as a standard in the sense that when speakers with regional accents modify their speech, the

modifications are generally in the direction of RP. According to Milroy (2001b), however, standard and prestige are not necessarily the same, and the two categories should not be mixed. 'Standard variety' is often equated with 'the highest prestige variety', but, Milroy argues, 'it does not follow that high prestige is definitive of what constitutes a 'standard'' (532). He takes invariance to be primary to the definition of 'standard':

In respect of the internal form of language, the process of standardization works by promoting invariance or uniformity in language structure. ... uniformity, or invariance, then becomes an important defining characteristic of a standardized form of language. ... it becomes contradictory to speak of variation in a standard 'variety' of language, as a standardized variety must be invariant.

In this respect it is difficult to define RP as a standard, as total uniformity of usage is impossible to achieve in practice. Uniformity can rather be seen as 'a linguistic goal of standardization as a process' (534). More importantly, though, as Milroy points out, standardisation has had the effect of developing among speakers the notion of a 'correct' form of language, and this is of course closely linked with the prestige RP has enjoyed.

To the extent that RP is equated with the 'correct' variety, it can be defined evaluatively. The social evaluation of RP is discussed by Giles et al (1990), who state that RP can 'be envisaged as an accretion of evaluations, an "ideal" variety of English pronunciation, inherently conservative but predictably varying over time and space' (191). Similarly, Wells (1997: 20) includes the notion of an 'ideal' accent as one possible criterion for defining RP: 'We ask, what pronunciation is correct? What is beautiful, what is admired and imitated?'. Prestige is however difficult to measure in an objective way, and evaluations of prestige will vary according to the background of the listener, the speech situation, and other extralinguistic factors (cf. Giles et al 1990). The relationship between accent and prestige is further complicated by the fact that phonological features can gain or lose prestige over time, 'pronunciations which are vulgar in one century may become



fashionable in the next' (Sweet 1908: 7). In the course of the last 50 years, traditional RP features have lost some of their prestige. Social prejudice against non-RP speech is disappearing, and the marked status of RP is weakened. An RP accent may even be a disadvantage in certain social contexts because it may be associated with social exclusiveness and superiority.

### *3.5 Social definitions*

One approach to defining RP could be to relate the accent to a social group. The earliest accounts of a 'received pronunciation' described the accent of the educated members of the upper classes (cf. 2 above), and the term 'received' originally referred to social acceptance. RP as a standard and as a marker of educated status was the result of certain social and political conditions in Britain in the period 1870-1950. The earliest definitions of RP therefore focus on the social aspect of the accent, and identify the speakers with reference to their class and education. RP was thus originally defined as the accent of one particular section of society.

In present-day Britain, the conditions that gave rise to RP as a special social phenomenon, are no longer present. Up until the middle of the 20th century, RP remained a class accent, and the unrivalled pronunciation standard. Since then, however, there have been radical changes in the structure of British society and in the attitudes towards accents. The class divisions are less strict, people are more mobile, and an increasing percentage of the population has access to higher education. Several of the criteria previously used to delimit RP are irrelevant today, as there is no longer a straightforward relationship between social class and education or profession. We now find RP speakers with a much wider spectrum of social backgrounds, and the upper classes no longer have a uniform style of pronunciation. RP is still linked in the public mind with the concept of 'educatedness', and the speakers are situated above the lowest end of the social scale, but RP is no longer the exclusive property of one identifiable class, and RP speakers cannot be identified solely on the basis of their social background. This fact is recognised by many scholars (cf. e.g. Gimson 1984, Honey 1985). Ramsaran (1990a: 178) states that 'since it is ... quite unrealistic to

try to label the accent as belonging to a particular section of society, it is impossible actually to identify the accent ... in social terms'. Gimson (1977: 157) underlines the need to 'dissociate the definition of a standard from the speech of an easily identifiable and separate ruling class' and points out that 'the upper classes no longer have a single, typical style of speech'.

In spite of the lack of a precise correspondence between social background and the use of RP, several phoneticians prefer a sociolinguistic definition of RP. John C. Wells, who is one of the leading authorities on RP today, defines RP in social terms in e.g. Wells (1994) and Wells (1999). In the latter he describes RP as 'the pronunciation of people at the upper end of the social scale – whatever that is at any given time'. Such a definition is problematic, however, because people from the upper classes speak a variety of different accents, including regionally marked accents. The term 'RP' would then cover an extremely wide range of pronunciations. The statement is modified in Wells (2000: xiii), where he writes that 'the democratization undergone by English society during the second half of the twentieth century means that it is nowadays necessary to define RP in a rather broader way than was once customary'. The question also arises of how far down the social scale one should go when delimiting RP. As Wells (1997: 19–20) points out, '[t]he proportion of the population regarded as upper-class is extremely small, and we clearly need to consider the upper-middle classes as well'.

The question of class and accent is further complicated by the fact that there is no straightforward way of defining social class. The criteria used to divide informants into social groups often refer to differences in occupational status, following the sociological tradition of dividing occupations into social classes. It is however not self-evident how to define e.g. 'manual worker', or where to draw the boundaries between 'skilled' and 'partly-skilled' occupations, etc. (cf. Hudson 1996: 151).

Honey claims that social class was never a defining characteristic of RP, and 'superior social rank was not in itself a guarantee of the right accent' (2000: 3). The correlation was rather with education: RP

was not an exact synonym for the privileged and elite, 'because it only covered those members of the elite who had had an appropriate education, and it also embraced those people not from an elite background who had managed to acquire this accent' (9). Education is however not a reliable criterion for defining modern RP, as 'it is no longer the case that all or even most educated people in England speak RP' (Wells 1997: 20). This observation is also made by Gimson (1980: 91), who notes that 'features of *regional* pronunciation, without any contamination from RP, will be found in highly educated and less educated speech'.

Milroy (2001a) insists on including social factors as part of the definition of RP. He states that 'in a purely linguistic sense, there is still a set of phonetic/phonological norms conforming approximately to those of RP that can be heard in Britain. However, there is more than this involved in the definition of what RP is' (15). He concludes that RP is no longer the socio-political phenomenon that it used to be, and that the social or sociolinguistic aspect of the definition must be reconsidered. However, Milroy does not present any alternative sociolinguistic definition, he merely shows that RP is 'no longer uniquely "received" in the way it used to be' (31). This seems to me to be the same as saying that RP exists, but can no longer be defined in social terms.

Fabricius (2000) employs a social definition of RP in her analysis of the accent: she uses two features of social background, namely social class and education, to define a social group as the basis for RP. Although social criteria were used to select the informants (young Cambridge students with public school background), the author nevertheless has to resort to phonological criteria in the final selection of speakers: 'it was not possible to ignore linguistic criteria entirely. I established a phonemic definition of mainstream RP which I used as a check on the speakers chosen according to social and educational background' (78). From this it would seem that phonological criteria are paramount and that social criteria strictly speaking are redundant.

This is not to say that social aspects are not relevant to RP. The accent undoubtedly has social connotations: it is closely linked with

education and social status, and while it is not exclusive to one particular class, it is typical of the upper and upper-middle classes. The point is that the social background of the speaker is not necessarily relevant when judging whether or not a speech sample represents RP.

### 3.6 Phonological definitions

One approach to defining RP without reference to social class or education, is to refer solely to phonological criteria, and describe the phoneme system and its phonetic realisations. Many writers stress that phonetic specification of RP is central to its definition. Gimson (1984: 46) points out that there is a phonological tradition of a standard, 'a single phonological system which has been evolving in time' and that this 'is the most reliable basis for our definition of present-day RP'. This tradition can be traced through major works like Jones (1960), Wells (1982), Wells (2000) and Cruttenden (2001), which all give detailed presentations of the phonological features of RP. The difficulties arise, as Ramsaran (1990a) points out, when phoneticians disagree as to which features belong within RP, and where to draw the phonological boundaries around the accent. Any phonetician can set up a group of features which he identifies as 'RP' and find a speaker who fits his expectations. Different phoneticians who choose slightly different required features can then end up describing a number of different idiolects which they all refer to as RP (Ramsaran 1990a: 180). These problems are further complicated by the fact that RP, like all accents, is subject to change and variation. If for example a traditionally non-RP feature, such as *t*-glottalling (*ne'work* for *network*), is present in the speech of someone who is otherwise identified as an RP speaker, some will conclude that *t*-glottalling has now entered RP, whereas others will claim that the presence of a glottal stop automatically makes this a non-RP accent.<sup>3</sup>

All accents change over time, and at some point we have to include certain non-traditional features in the descriptions of RP, in

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3 Other controversial features include vocalisation of non-prevocalic /l/ [*fium*] *film*), the use of affricates /tʃ, dʒ/ in e.g. *Tuesday*, *reduce*, and fronting of the vowel of *goose* (from [u:] to [ʊ: ~ ʏ:]).

order to find out how the accent is changing and ensure that RP does not remain fossilised in the form codified by Daniel Jones almost a century ago. A purely phonological description will soon become obsolete if it is not constantly updated. This brings us back to the problem of finding a group of speakers to represent the current usage. As a purely social definition of RP has been rejected, we must resort to other criteria by which to select the phonological features. The criterion which seems most reliable and objective is the concept of non-localisability.

### *3.7 Non-localisability*

RP has its origins in the south-east of England, as the pronunciation of educated speakers in and around the capital (cf. 2 above). Although RP has its historical roots in a specific region, and shares its main phonological basis with south-eastern English, it is now non-regional, or supra-regional, in that it is the native accent of people who come from all parts of Britain. In the 19th century RP spread throughout the country along with the nationwide diffusion of the educational system, and subsequently acquired its present status as a non-regional prestige accent.

Non-localisability is an important characteristic of RP which most writers view as relevant when defining the accent. RP was early characterised as non-regional. Wyld (1920: 2) describes it as 'not confined to any locality, nor associated in any one's mind with any special geographical area'. Trudgill (2001: 4) takes it to be 'a defining characteristic of the RP accent that, while it is clearly a variety associated with [Britain] ... it otherwise contains no regional features whatsoever'. Ramsaran argues that 'if it is possible to identify ... a non-localisable accent and if the social definition of RP is outdated, then why not simply describe this 'non-regional' accent as the current version of RP?' (1990a: 179).

Non-localisability seems to be the decisive factor also in Fabricius (2000). The informants in her study were selected on the basis of their social background, (see 3.5 above), but the final selection was made with reference to localisability: speakers with 'recognisable regional phonemic features' were deemed 'not suitable for the ...

study' (86). Three phonetic experts were asked to assess the localisability of the final speech samples, and 'there was general agreement between the judges that it was difficult to place individual speakers in a specific regional category [and] the group was deemed overall to be representative of non-localisable speakers' (78–79). One of the phoneticians commented: 'they are RP speakers because it is not possible to determine their geographical origin with any degree of delicacy' (79).

Wells (2000: xiii) also describes RP as non-localised, which he defines as 'not associated with any particular city or region'. Furthermore, he mentions pronunciations which are 'widespread in England among educated speakers, but ... nevertheless judged to fall outside RP'. These pronunciations are all localised forms.

There are, however, phoneticians who have a different view of non-localisability and who regard RP as an overall southeastern accent. Gimson (1984: 47) comments that 'what has remained constant is RP's regional base: its characteristic phonological features have always been those of the south-eastern region of England'. Nolan (1999) rejects the notion of RP as non-localisable, which he characterises as the 'common view which refuses to locate RP geographically, and instead views it as a non-regional prestige variety' (86). Nolan holds that RP forms a phonological continuum with local accents in the southeast and that there is no such link between RP and northern accents. He argues that there are parallels between the historical development of RP and the southeastern accents, and that they are undergoing similar changes. These observations are to a large extent correct. Many of the features of RP are also found in accents of the southeast. When RP can be said to be non-regional, it is because the use of RP does not locate the speaker in the southeast, and native RP-speakers are found in all regions of Britain. RP features that were originally southern are today geographically neutral. For example, the use of a rounded vowel in the word *cup*, immediately places the speaker in the north of England. If you use the RP variant, an open central vowel, you are not necessarily from the south. RP is thus a regionally unmarked variant, and in that sense non-localisable. The fact that the origin of

a feature can be traced to a specific region is irrelevant. The historical origin of RP has always been placed in the southeast of England, although RP also contains features that had their origin in other regions (see Trudgill 2001, Ramsaran 1990a, Wotschke 1996).

Nolan defines RP as 'the long-established term for the prestige accent of South East England which also serves as a prestige norm in varying degrees elsewhere in Britain' (Nolan & Kerswill 1990: 316). According to Nolan it is prestige, not non-localisability which is the defining characteristic of RP. Many writers include prestige as a factor in their description of RP (cf. 3.3 above). Prestige and non-localisability can, however, be said to be intrinsically linked, in the sense that only features with a certain degree of (overt or covert) prestige will spread geographically (and socially) and eventually become non-localisable. The fact that a feature is widespread can be seen as a 'proof' of its prestige. Conversely, according to Lewis (1985: 244): 'a fair degree of social prestige is associated with all speech which is completely non-regional'. The same comment was made by Sweet a century ago: 'The best speakers of Standard English are those whose pronunciation ... least betray their locality' (Sweet 1908: 7). In Britain, it has traditionally been a sign of social status to speak 'without an accent', that is without any regional features. This is still, to a large extent, the case, and probably part of the reason why RP has retained much of its prestige.

The rise of RP as a non-regional prestige variety can be seen as the continuation of a long tradition, namely the spread of London features to other parts of the country (see 2 above). In present-day Britain, with the breaking down of old class barriers this trend seems to be moving faster than ever before. Because of the traditional attraction of the capital and 'the recent trend for people of working-class or lower-middle class origins to set the fashion in many areas' (Wells 1982: 118), it is primarily features of lower-class London speech which are spreading socially and geographically, and also making their way into RP. Reports of changes in RP attribute many of the 'new' features to the diffusion of London speech (e.g. Wells 1997, Taylor 1998). Wells (1994) talks of the 'Cockneyfication' of RP, and lists a number of features accepted into modern RP. Other

writers predict the death of RP and the rise of a new standard form based on the accents of London and the surrounding areas – so-called ‘Estuary English’, which has been characterised as ‘a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation’ (Rosewarne 1994: 3).

There are in other words two opposing ways of analysing the ongoing linguistic trends: on the one hand, RP is viewed as a distinct variety which is in a constant process of change and modification partly through influence from other accents. The second view focusses on RP as a social phenomenon, and sees the decline of its exclusive social position as proof that RP is being phased out and replaced by a broader popularly based accent (a view supported by e.g. Milroy 2001a and Rosewarne 1994). RP as traditionally described is of course in decline, but to say that the accent is disappearing and being replaced is, I would maintain, to view RP as static, invariant and unchangeable.

What is then to be made of the recent reported changes ‘from below’? The idea that features which originate from the London area are making their way into RP is not problematic if RP is defined as a non-localisable accent: when features which were once regional become so widespread that they lose their exclusive local identity, they may eventually become part of RP (this is after all what happened to many of the traditional RP features). It is then not inconceivable that the future RP will be very similar to today’s London accent.

If we delimit RP as a non-localisable accent, the most important criterion for the inclusion of a new feature in RP must therefore be whether the feature is localisable or not. This implies, according to Trudgill (2001: 7), ‘that there will be features that for a period of time, while a change is taking place, may have an indeterminate status’. One way of verifying that a feature is non-regional, is if potential RP speakers from different geographical regions show the same results with respect to a specific pronunciation feature. The feature in question must then be considered a widespread and non-localisable characteristic and thus part of RP. This provides a means



by which the descriptions of RP can be kept updated and in accordance with current usage.

A definition based on non-localisability is also in line with the RP tradition. RP has always acquired widespread forms that originally were part of local accents. After the Second World War, with increasing social relaxation and a rising pride in local accents, the linguistic range of RP widened even more. Gimson (1980: 302) writes of a 'wider-based RP' with the 'admission into the permitted speech forms of certain variants until recently regarded as regional'. Many of the regionally-based post-War trends are now widely accepted as part of modern RP (cf. Wotschke 1996: 222–23). Non-localisability is however not an absolute value, and there will be disagreement as to how widespread a linguistic feature must be in order to be regarded as non-regional. The phonological boundaries of RP will therefore always be somewhat fuzzy in order to allow for the entrance of new features.

It can be argued that there are pronunciation features which are geographically widespread but which are still not considered part of RP. Wells (1994: 199) mentions H-dropping ('*ouse* for *house*) and G-dropping (*walkin'* for *walking*) as features characteristic of popular accents in several regions of Britain, but resisted by RP. This may be seen as an argument against the definition of RP as non-localisable. For all practical purposes, however, these features are not problematic, as they are only found with speakers who otherwise have regionally marked accents, and thus already are excluded from RP.

#### 4 Conclusion

Recent social developments in Britain have made it increasingly difficult to define RP. The narrow description of RP as the property of a single social class is no longer valid. At the same time, current phonological changes have led to a need to update the descriptions of RP. The question then arises of which criterion will best serve as a basis for defining the accent. The only feature which has remained stable in RP seems to be its lack of regional affiliation, and this can be used as a way of delimiting the accent. Non-localisability provides

a criterion which is flexible in that it allows for changes in RP, and explains much of the variation found in the accent. It secures a continuation of the RP tradition, and it can be tested objectively. All the aspects of RP discussed above are of course relevant to RP and will have to be included in a complete description of the accent. Non-localisability can however serve as the sole criterion for delimiting the accent, and is thus suitable in a working definition of RP.

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