British Accents and their Associated Status

By Jaana Bose, Thomas Hornschuh and Julia Pratzler
Table of Contents

• History of British Accents
• Prestige
  • Prestige Study
• Classification of Accents
• Overt & Covert Prestige
• The Accommodation Model
  • Accommodation by Accent
• Examples & Case Studies
  • RP
  • Scottish English
  • Scouse
• Bibliography & Further Reading
History of British Accents

• Pronunciation differences reflect the layers of society
• Differences in regional pronunciation
• Pronunciation of the south-east (London) acquired social prestige, reinforced by the speech of the court
• → finally fixed as the speech of the upper classes
Prestige

• Definition: the level of credit or respect with which one is regarded by others
• Pronunciation as characteristic of a social stratum

→ Marker of position in society
Study: Generalized accent prestige continuum (Giles, 1970)

RP
Affected RP
North American and French
German
South Welsh
Irish
Italian
Northern English
Somerset
Cockney and Indian
Birmingham
• Many studies show:
  → RP: the most prestigious accent, a “status symbol”
• Accents vary in prestige as they approximate to it more or less
• “rewards” for speakers who use speech closer to standard norms:
  → greater status
  → rated highly in terms of competence
Classification of accents
(Wilkinson, 1965)

Three levels of “accent prestige” in Britain

• First class accents:
  - RP
  - forms of Scottish and Irish

• Second class accents:
  - British regional accents

• Third class accents:
  - accents of certain large industrial towns
Overt & Covert Prestige (Petyt, 1980)

• Overt Prestige
  – Accent regarded as being a marker of high status by a large number of people

• Covert Prestige
  – “hidden“ prestige
  – Self-evaluation of recorded speech sample
  – Under-reporting → mostly male test subjects
  – Accent has high status in certain sub-cultures
The Accommodation Model
(Giles & Powesland, 1975)

• If speakers accommodates their language, ideas and mannerisms to their partners’ style, the speaker may be valued more favourably

• This is also true of accents
Fig. 2. The accent repertoire.
I. The Convergence paradigm

ACROLECT
  — Receiver's accent
  — Sender's idiolect
BASILECT

ACROLECT
  — Sender's idiolect
  — Receiver's accent
BASILECT

Upward Convergence

II. The Divergence paradigm

ACROLECT
  — Receiver's accent
BASILECT

ACROLECT
  — Sender's idiolect
BASILECT

Upward Divergence

Fig. 3. Directions of accent mobility.
RP
(Received Pronunciation)
Origins & Facts

• RP developed from the London court language → regarded as the most prestigious accent

• Was and still is spoken at (expensive) boarding schools (aka “public schools”)

• But: no longer indicator for good education (since many well-educated people do not use it)

• Also known as “BBC English” or “The Queen‘s English”
Origins & Facts

• RP is a social, not a geographical accent

• Only approx. 3% of the inhabitants of England speak a variety of RP “natively”

• About 10% use RP (as many as 25% use near-RP)

• People who want to be regarded as having a high social status try to change their accent to RP (e.g. Margaret Thatcher)
Traits associated with Accents?  
(Cheyne, 1970)

• **RP perceived as indicator of:**
  - Self-confidence
  - Intelligence
  - Ambition
  - Leadership
  - Prestige and wealth
  - Good looks & height
  - Occupational status
  - Cleanliness

  → By English and Scottish listeners

• **Scottish perceived as indicator of:**
  - Friendliness
  - Sense of humour
  - Generosity
  - Goodnaturedness
  - Likeability
  - Nervousness

  → By Scottish listeners
Scottish English
Scottish English

• ≠ Scots (i.e. the traditional dialects of Scotland)

• Focus on Scottish English in Edinburgh
First Class Accent

• Good prestige
  – Stereotypical association
  – Scottish nationalism
  – Self-confidence of the speaker

→ Overt prestige
Study by Euan Reid in Edinburgh (1976)

- Informants: School children in Edinburgh (11 years old)

- Systematic reaction to different social contexts
Study by Euan Reid in Edinburgh

- Similar results in studies with adults

- Class and social context affect Scotland and England
Scouse
Scouse

- Working class variety in Liverpool (Merseyside)
- “Third class” accent
- Covert prestige
Study on the West Wirral (1980)
How does Scouse effect the language on the Wirral?

- Informants: Liverpool, Cheshire and RP varieties
- high prestige of Cheshire accent
- Important factors: age and sex
Study on the West Wirral (1980)

• Tendency:
  – towards Scouse and RP, away from Cheshire

  → linguistic assimilation

• Covert Prestige
Conclusion

- Development of regional accents is complex

- Endogenous and exogenous changes

- The class structure still plays an important role but other social factors are equally important.
Thank you for your attention!
Bibliography & Further Reading


- http://news.bbc.co.uk

- http://web.ku.edu/idea/ - Audio Samples

- http://www.youtube.com/ - Audio Samples