

British Accents and their Associated Status

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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 accommodate their language, ideas and mannerisms to their partners' style, the speaker may be valued more favourably
- This is also true of accents

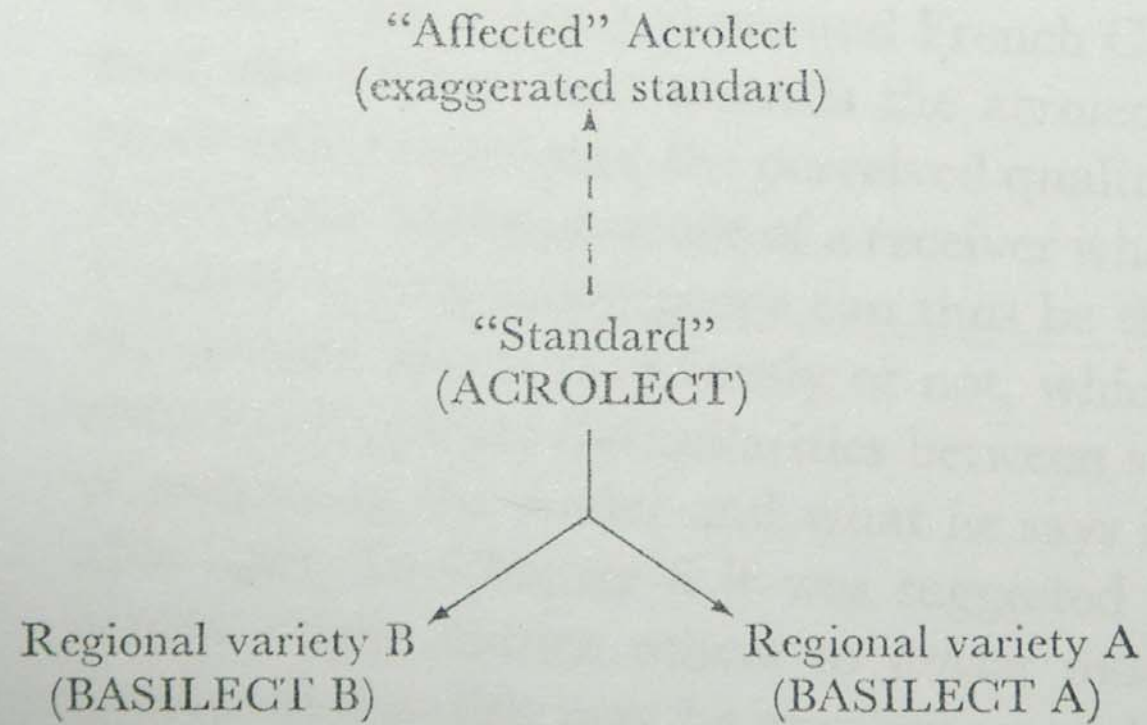
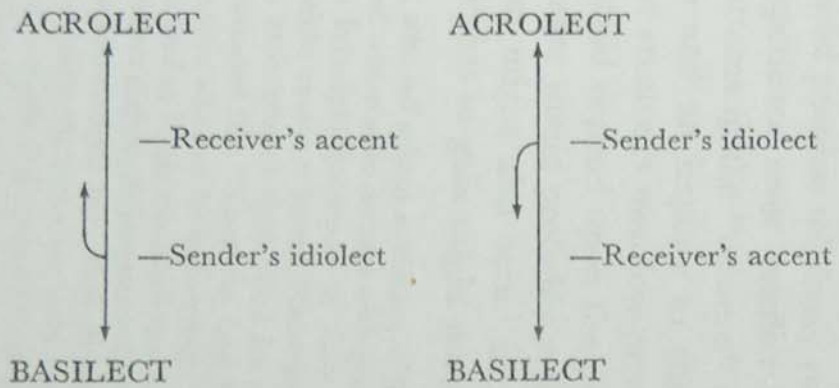


Fig. 2. The accent repertoire.

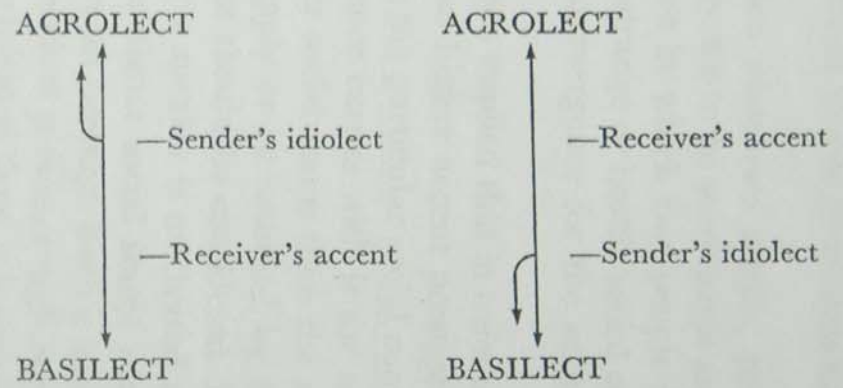
I. *The Convergence paradigm*



Upward Convergence

Downward Convergence

II. *The Divergence paradigm*



Upward Divergence

Downward 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

→ By English listeners

- 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

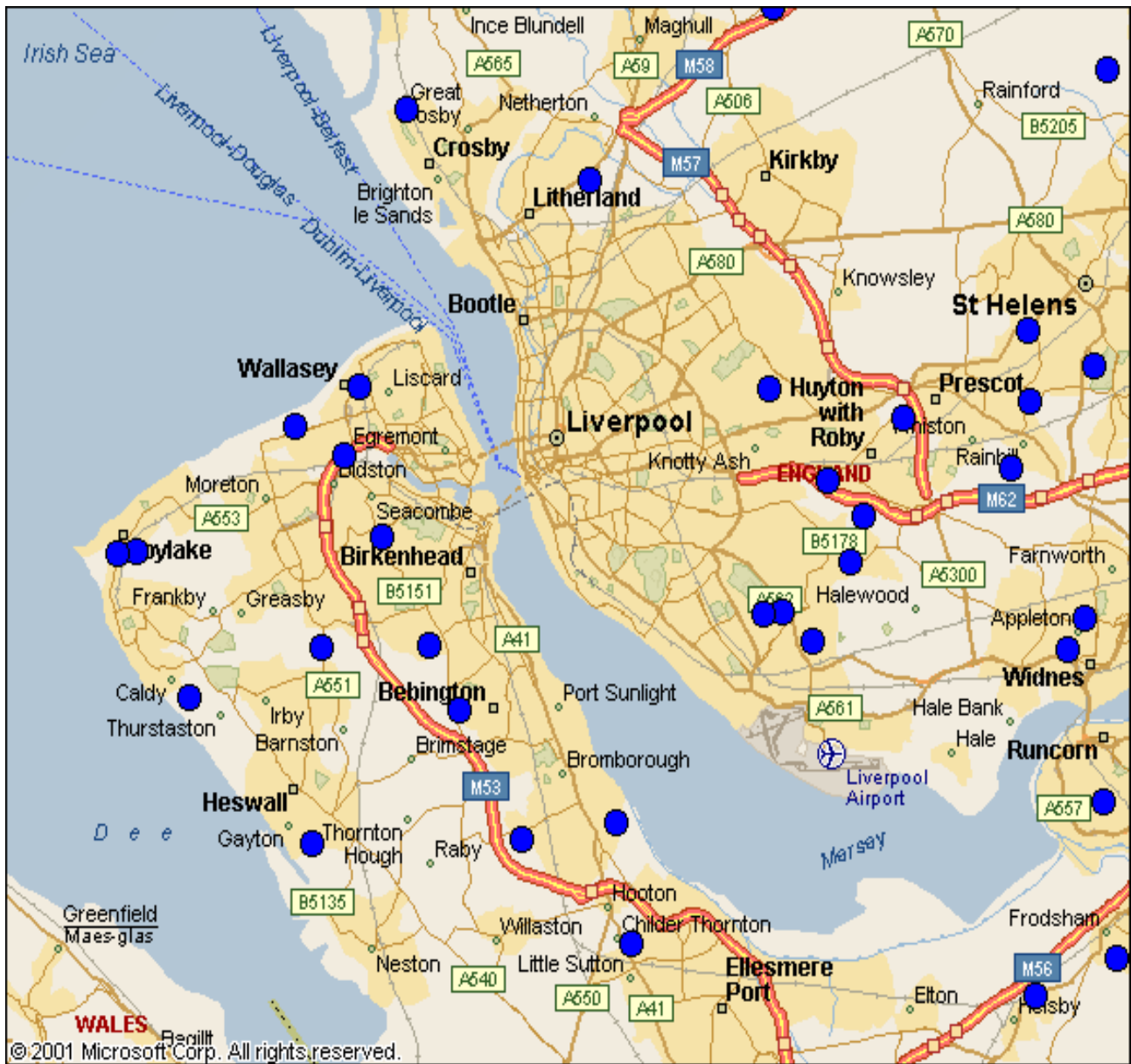
- Similar results in studies with adults
- Class and social context affect Scotland and England



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!

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