

The Varieties of English Pronunciation Used by Slovak University Students

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Abstract

This paper concerns the two main varieties of English pronunciation: BBC pronunciation and GA pronunciation. After a theoretical introduction and a description of major differences between the two accents, the study examines which variety of pronunciation Slovak university students of English use in their spontaneous monologues. The subjects were recorded, and subsequently, on the basis of a subjective analysis, they were categorized according to whether the speakers use the BBC accent, the GA accent or a mixture of both. Thus it is revealed which type of pronunciation is prevalent among prospective professional users of the English language.

Keywords: pronunciation variety, BBC pronunciation, GA pronunciation, accent, mixture

1. Introduction

The matter of pronunciation varieties has been of considerable interest to linguists and scholars, as there exist many factors which influence how foreign language learners speak. Learners' pronunciation typically tends to approach either BBC pronunciation or General American. However, in the majority of cases L2 learners use a mixture of the two varieties. To complicate matters, pronunciation can be regarded as an area which is often neglected, and thus aiming to use one accent only becomes a secondary objective when it comes to speaking.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Pronunciation varieties

There exist many English pronunciation varieties in the world – including London, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, South African, etc. However, there are two accents which learners of English desire to attain more than the abovementioned: BBC pronunciation and General American.

2.1.1 BBC pronunciation

BBC pronunciation is a variety of standard British pronunciation that has traditionally been regarded as a prestigious accent, demonstrating very little or no regional variation. For a long period of time, this variety of pronunciation was referred to as Received Pronunciation (abbreviated to RP). Older terms were Oxford English, the Queen's or King's English, and the Public School Standard (Cruttenden 79, Kavka, 7, Kavka 60, Svoboda – Hrehovčik 118). However, Roach (3) indicates that the term RP may be misleading and old-fashioned, as the word “received” relates to something accepted or approved and thus other accents could possibly be viewed as undesirable. Moreover, Crystal claims that substantial regional variations can be observed in contemporary BBC English. This accent is therefore losing its prestige, and the younger generations appear to regard accents which are regionally marked as more fitting (404).

Typically, BBC pronunciation is recommended to L2 learners because many English language lecturers and teachers attempt to use this type of pronunciation. Interestingly, only 5% of the population of the British Isles actually use BBC pronunciation, and most of them are from or reside in the south-east part of England, or belong to the middle or upper class and have completed higher education (Gut 52). In connection with this, Crystal states that “RP is in no sense linguistically superior or inferior to other accents: but it is the accent (more accurately: a set of accents) which tends to be associated with the better-educated parts of society, and is the one most often cited as a norm for the description of British English, or in teaching that dialect to foreigners” (404). Nevertheless, it appears that BBC pronunciation remains the variety of pronunciation which L2 learners aim to acquire; this is the accent mostly used in English language textbooks. Moreover, Pavlík (221) names the following reasons for teaching BBC pronunciation:

1. People from Britain regard this accent as the one which is most correct;
2. The BBC accent is used by broadcasters and newsreaders on radio and TV;
3. It is the accent which is most often presented in books on the phonetics and phonology of the English language;
4. Dictionaries use the BBC accent for the transcription of words and pronunciations;
5. Course-books and textbooks use and regard this accent as a basis for proper and correct English pronunciation;
6. The BBC accent is easily intelligible in every English-speaking country and may be considered to be a model of proper pronunciation in those countries.

A number of reasons can thus be stated in favour of teaching the BBC accent. On the other hand, it appears that this accent is losing its dominance among users of English, because regional variations have recently appeared within it (Crystal, 404). Therefore, it is obvious

that the BBC accent has been subject to change over time, and it will be interesting to observe what status will be attached to it in the (not too distant) future.

As far as teaching pronunciation is concerned, Scrivener indicates that RP pronunciation might not be the best option, because students learning English will most likely communicate with other non-native speakers and will rarely (if ever) need to communicate with an English native speaker who uses the BBC accent (273). Moreover, it would not perhaps be fair to demand a genuine BBC or GA accent from L2 learners, as this appears to be virtually impossible. Typically, English courses in the Slovak education system use British textbooks which concentrate on the BBC accent. However, the GA accent is prevalent in the entertainment industry (movies, TV series, reality shows, music etc.).

Another factor which should be taken into consideration is the fact that at lower secondary school levels in Slovakia, pupils start to learn another foreign language in the 6th grade (Bírová – Eliášová 76). Therefore, the pupils need to tackle two types of foreign language pronunciation at an early age, and perhaps they do not pay much attention to achieving a flawless accent of a certain type within the foreign languages they are studying.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the vast majority of learners use a mixture of the two accents. Furthermore, L2 learners of English can communicate effectively and successfully without having native-like pronunciation. Thus, the goal of their pronunciation learning ought to be attaining clear, comprehensible pronunciation with no distracting L1 accent, producing language which is easily intelligible to both native and non-native speakers of English.

2.1.2 General American (GA)

GA is considered the standard pronunciation variety of American English. In comparison to BBC pronunciation, which is used by a rather small minority of British people, General American is the pronunciation of the majority of people in the USA, excluding the north-east and the states in south-east. It is also used by many broadcasters and presenters; it is therefore also known as Network English or the Network Standard (Crystal 2007). In connection with this, Richards and Schmidt claim that “As represented in textbooks for learners of American English and the pronunciations most often given in American English dictionaries, “General American” was originally modelled after Midwestern dialects, but the concept is not rigidly defined, and speakers from many other parts of the US also claim to speak general or standard American English” (241). Roach, Hartman and Setter (2003) claim that it is essential to point out that there is no single social or regional dialect that is regarded as an American standard. Even people who are professionally trained and whose voices are used in the media (radio, TV, films, etc.) demonstrate regionally mixed features. Nevertheless, it appears that General American, as varied as it may appear, could be considered a dialect which is relatively homogeneous and which mirrors the development of American dialects.

2.2 Differences between BBC pronunciation and GA

Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (450) state that there exist a number of recognizable differences between Standard British pronunciation and Standard North American

pronunciation. Cauldwell (159-173) also highlights the pronunciation variations. The specific differences can be categorized as differences in:

1. Phonemic inventories;
2. Allophonic variations;
3. Pronouncing common words;
4. Word stress;
5. Sentence stress;
6. Intonation;
7. Overall sound and voice quality.

The first two differences involve mainly variations in vowels, diphthongs and consonants. In the lists below, the first type of pronunciation is BBC and the second is GA.

2.2.1 Essential variations in vowels

- The vowel [ɒ] is replaced in GA with [ɑ:] or [ɔ:], as in *dog* [dɒg] – [dɔ:g] or [dɑ:g];
- In a number of words in which BBC has [ɑ:], GA has [æ], as in *class* [klɑ:s] – [klæs];
- The vowel [ɔ:] is usually more open and less rounded in GA. Moreover, it typically results in [ɑ:], as in *thought* [θɔ:t] – [θɑ:t];
- There is often no difference between [ɪ] and [e] in GA, as in *rabbit* ['ræbɪt] – ['ræbət];
- There is often no difference between [u] and [ə] in GA, as in *deputy* ['depjuti] and ['depjəti].

2.2.2 Essential variations in diphthongs

- The diphthongs [ɪə], [eə], [ʊə] are pronounced as [ɪr], [er], [ʊr] in GA, as in *weird* [wɪəd] – [wɪrd], *share* [ʃeə] – [ʃer], *lure* [lʊə] – [lʊr];
- The diphthong [əʊ] in a BBC accent is pronounced as [oʊ] in a GA accent, as in *open* ['əʊpən] – ['oʊpən];
- The diphthong [aɪ] in a BBC accent is often pronounced as [ə] in a GA accent, as in *organisation* [ˌɔ:ɡənəɪ'zeɪʃn] – [ˌɔ:rgənə'zeɪʃn].

2.2.3 Essential variations in consonants

- Variation in pronouncing [r] is the most significant difference between the two accents. In BBC pronunciation, it only occurs before vowels. However, it is pronounced in each position in GA, as in *mark* [mɑ:k] – [mɑ:rk]. Moreover, GA is a rhotic accent, and Štekauer states that the articulation of [r] is very close to that of the American short mixed vowel (23). Another aspect which appears to be confusing for L2 learners is the different realization of this consonant. Roach claims that “The important thing about the articulation of [r] is that the tip of the tongue

approaches the alveolar area in approximately the way it would for a [t] or [d], but never actually makes contact with any part of the roof of the mouth” (49). The consonant [r] sounds markedly different in Slovak or Czech in comparison to BBC or GA [r].

Interestingly, children who are not able to pronounce the Slovak [r] usually replace this sound with [l] since this phoneme shares some common features with [r]. However, British people (both children and adults) who have problems with pronouncing [r] often substitute this sound for [w] (some Slovak children do this, but this is never done by Slovak adults), because the acoustic similarity between English [r] and [w] is stronger than the similarity between Slovak [r] and [w] (Bázlik – Miškovičová 74).

- The consonant [t] sounds nearly like [d] in a GA accent. The symbol for this sound is [t̪] as in *atom* ['ætəm] – ['æt̪əm];
- Unstressed syllables [ntɪ] in BBC pronunciation are often pronounced as [ni] in GA, as in *twenty* ['twenti] – ['tweni];
- Speakers of GA do not typically pronounce [j] after [t], [d], [n] as in *student* ['stju:dnt] – ['stu:dnt];
- [ʃ] is often pronounced as [ʒ] in GA, as in *excursion* [ɪk'skɜ:ʃn] – [ɪk'skɜ:rʒn].
- Speakers of GA tend to pronounce the suffix *-ile* as [əl] or [l], as in *mobile* ['məʊbaɪl] – ['moʊbl];

Speakers of GA incline to replace the weak vowel in the suffixes *-ary*, *-ery*, *-ory* with a strong vowel, as in *mandatory* ['mændətəri] – ['mændətɔ:ri] (Celce-Murcia – Brinton – Goodwin 450-453; Bázlik – Miškovičová 144-145).

2.2.4 Essential variations in word stress

- Some words employ a different word stress, as in *vaccine* ['væksɪ:n] and [væk'si:n];
- Some compound words have a different stress pattern, as in *ice cream* [ˌaɪs'kri:m] – ['aɪskri:m].

2.2.5 Variations in sentence stress

- Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (457) state that little research has been conducted on sentence stress differences between the BBC accent and the GA accent. It is said that users of BBC pronunciation sometimes place light stress on the fronted auxiliary verb, whereas the speakers of GA do not. However, it is necessary to carry out further research in this field (Shakhbagova, Celce-Murcia – Brinton – Goodwin).

2.2.6 Variations in intonation patterns

- A typical example can be found within yes/no questions. BBC pronunciation low rise is polite, whereas a high rise indicates disbelief. As far as GA is concerned, the high rise is polite, and it is the extra high rise which signals disbelief. Moreover, the BBC low rise sounds patronizing or ingratiating to users of GA. On the other

hand, GA high rise sounds somewhat casual to British people. Comparing intonation patterns between the BBC accent and the GA accent is obviously another area where more research needs to be conducted, as little information is available in this field (Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin, Cruttenden).

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research problem

A total of 30 subjects were recorded using a computer and a microphone. The subjects were required to deliver a two-minute spontaneous monologue on a topic of their choice. It seemed reasonable to assume that the subjects would use an ample amount of the features described in section 2.2, enabling it to be determined what accent their speech approaches. The choice of different topics was thus not expected to disturb the evaluation process. Afterwards, a subjective auditory analysis was performed (by the author) to determine whether the subjects are closer on the “pronunciation continuum” to BBC pronunciation, GA pronunciation, or whether they stand somewhere between the 2 accents.

3.2 Research sample

The subjects were first-year university students of a teacher training degree in English Language and Literature at a university in Slovakia. It is vital to mention that before creating the recordings, the students had already completed their phonetic training, which involved both segmental and suprasegmental features of English pronunciation. The phonetic training concentrated on BBC pronunciation, since the majority of universities in Slovakia use *English Phonetics and Phonology – a Practical Course* by Peter Roach. Moreover, BBC accent textbooks are typically used at lower and upper secondary levels of the education system. Thus, it would be reasonable to expect that more subjects will use the pronunciation which is closer to the BBC accent than the GA accent. However, the fact that pronunciation teaching is neglected at lower secondary and upper secondary school levels, along with the subjects’ exposure to the US entertainment industry (movies, TV series, games, music etc.), ought to be taken into account.

3.2 Research criteria

The subjects were divided into five pronunciation variety categories; five primary criteria were established before conducting the auditory analysis. Each subject was assigned one of the following accents:

1. Strong BBC accent;
2. More or less BBC accent;
3. Mixture of the 2 accents;
4. More or less GA accent;
5. Strong GA accent.

It is vital to mention that the 5 accents are rather understood as a continuum, and that one needs to be careful in stating that a person uses a BBC accent or a GA accent. Attaining native-like pronunciation is a goal only few L2 learners are able to achieve and, as has already been mentioned, only a very small number of English speakers do actually have a BBC accent.

4. Research results

The results of the auditory analysis are presented in Table 1 below.

Subject	Strong BBC accent	More or less BBC accent	Mixture of both accents	More or less GA accent	Strong GA accent
1.			•		
2.				•	
3.				•	
4.		•			
5.					•
6.				•	
7.			•		
8.			•		
9.	•				
10.		•			
11.		•			
12.		•			
13.		•			
14.		•			
15.			•		
16.		•			
17.				•	
18.			•		
19.		•			
20.			•		
21.			•		
22.		•			
23.	•				
24.			•		
25.			•		

26.			•		
27.		•			
28.					•
29.					•
30.			•		
Total:	2	10	11	4	3

Table 1 Pronunciation varieties of the subjects

Figure 1 shows the accents of the respondents expressed as a percentage.

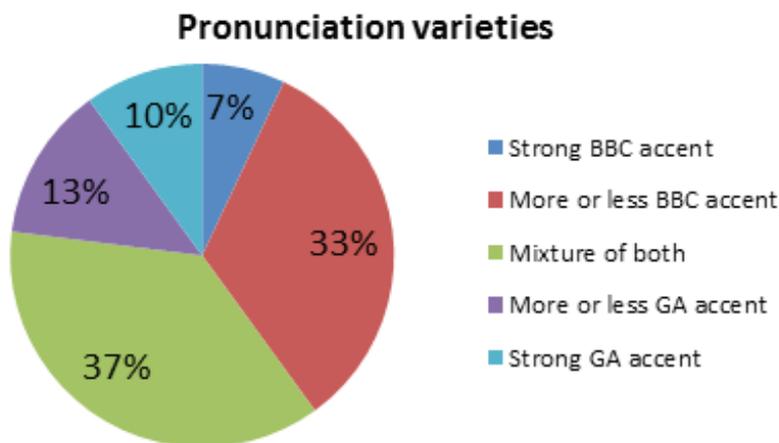


Figure 1 Pronunciation varieties of the subjects expressed as a percentage

4.1 Research results interpretation

The data in Table 1 and Figure 1 show the research findings. There are only 2 subjects whose pronunciation can be regarded as a strong BBC accent and only 3 subjects whose pronunciation can be considered a strong GA accent. More or less BBC pronunciation is recognized within 10 subjects, and a more or less GA accent is identified within 4 subjects. Finally, 11 subjects shared features of both pronunciations.

Despite the fact that the subjects had completed their phonetic training focusing on BBC pronunciation, and despite having been taught from BBC accent textbooks at their lower and upper secondary school levels, only 12 of them (40%) have either a strong BBC accent or a more or less BBC accent. This could be regarded as an interesting finding, as one might have expected BBC pronunciation to prevail over a GA accent and a mixture of

the two accents, especially after the subjects had been using BBC pronunciation textbooks for so many years.

A mixture of pronunciation varieties was identified 11 times. These subjects displayed characteristics of both accents during their utterances. This created a strong impression that their pronunciation did not merely belong to one of the two accents.

The vast majority of segmental features in section 2.2 were employed by the subjects. The most significant difference was recognized in terms of pronouncing [r], followed by vowel and diphthong differences, and other consonantal differences. Finally, suprasegmental differences were also detected. However, as far as suprasegmental features are concerned, not all of them were found. Essential variations in word stress and variations in intonational patterns would perhaps be used more in longer utterances and in conversations rather than in monologues. Nevertheless, this does not appear to have significantly influenced the evaluation process, as the distribution of both segmental and suprasegmental features was more or less equal in all the subjects. Therefore, the author had a sufficient amount of the features at his disposal in order to determine the subjects' accent.

There exist many contributing factors which may have influenced the research results. First, it would be interesting to find out the amount of time devoted to pronunciation teaching at the subjects' lower secondary and upper secondary school levels, as pronunciation often seems to be neglected there. Another aspect is concerned with exposure – how much they listen to authentic pronunciation. The entertainment industry of the USA is immensely strong in terms of films, TV shows, and music. Therefore, being exposed to North American pronunciation is increasingly widespread. Attending extra language classes (for example at language schools), along with subjects' personal attitude towards pronunciation, may be regarded as important variables too. Naturally, there are also other factors which influenced the research, and such aspects need to be taken into consideration.

5. Conclusion

BBC pronunciation is obviously the accent which is the most prevalent in the English language teaching environment within Slovakia. It seems, however, that its status has been lowered recently, and this therefore poses the question of whether this is the accent that L2 learners ought to be taught. Furthermore, only few people actually use this accent in Britain itself. On the other hand, the GA accent is used by the majority of Americans, and the enormous influence of films and music plays a role when it comes to English pronunciation. Therefore, it appears that GA is the accent that L2 learners of English are most likely to encounter. The study reveals that 37% of the subjects used a mixture of the two accents despite the fact that they had completed a BBC pronunciation course before the recordings were created. It can therefore be concluded that the majority of subjects do not adhere to one accent only, but share the features of both pronunciation varieties. Naturally, the question is how much disturbance is caused by this phenomenon and whether it is absolutely necessary to use one variety only. It is also vital to take other factors, which could have influenced the research results, into account.

Undoubtedly, further research, concentrating on the differences concerning particular segmental and suprasegmental features, needs to be conducted. Another possibility would

be to use a larger sample of students, from more universities in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Finally, the issue of using textbooks which explicitly train BBC pronunciation at each level of education ought to be discussed more thoroughly too.

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