

References:

- Stockwell, P. (2002). *Sociolinguistics: A resource book for students*. London: Routledge.  
Section A (pp. 3-6) & Section B (pp.27-29)  
Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell.  
- Pages 46-47

## Accent

- **What is an accent?**

- In linguistics, an **accent** is a manner of pronunciation of a language.
- Accents should not be confused with **dialects** which are varieties of language differing in vocabulary and syntax as well as pronunciation.

- **Can anybody speak without an accent?**

Apart from sign language, it is as impossible to speak without an accent as it is to speak without making any sound. So, there is no such thing as “unaccented” English.

- **Why is it so important to sociolinguists?**

- Because of the significance people attach to different accents.
  - The crucial factor for sociolinguistics is that accent variation tends not to happen just randomly, but in relation to observable social patterns.
  - Accent can often tell us where someone comes from, their age, gender, level of education, social class, wealth, how well-traveled they are, and whether they are emotionally attached to their home town, job or political party.
- There are different evaluations of the different accents.
  - Evaluations arise from social factors not linguistic ones.
  - Matsuda (1991, p. 1361) says it is really an issue of power: 'When ... parties are in a relationship of domination and subordination we tend to say that the dominant is normal, and the subordinate is different from normal. And so it is with accent .... People in power are perceived as speaking normal, unaccented English. Any speech that is different from that constructed norm is called an accent.'

- **How do we describe accents?**

We can use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA):

- consonants (including glides and liquids)
- vowels (monophthongs and diphthongs)
- notational marks (diacritics)

Each sound is identified by its symbol and a key word. The key word is given in ordinary spelling and in broad transcription. The key words have been chosen for their relative stability from one variety of English to another.

- Such phonetic details can help people pinpoint the differences between accents.
- Accent variation is often most noticeably carried in the vocalic elements of pronunciation, and in the glides (/j/, /w/) and liquids (/r/, /l/) that are sort of 'semi-vowels'.

**For example:**

- A speaker who says [fa:rm] rather than [fa:m] is likely to be American or Irish rather than English. Their accent is said to be **rhotic** if they pronounce this sort of 'non-prevocalic /r/' (/r/ when it is not before a vowel, as in 'farm' or 'car').
- Americans and most Irish people have a 'retroflex' /r/. By contrast, if they 'tap' the 'r' (by flicking the tip of their tongue against the ridge behind their front teeth), the vowel quality is likely to change slightly and they are likely to introduce a vowel between the 'r' and 'm' to make the last two letters syllabic: [fæɾəm]. This is more likely to be a Scottish speaker, or someone influenced by Scots, such as speakers in Ulster.

**Received Pronunciation (RP)** (Wardhaugh, 2006, pp. 46-47)

- One good example of a social accent is known as Received Pronunciation (RP). (It means the accent allows one to be received in the 'better' parts of society!)
- RP is a form of pronunciation of the English language (specifically British English) which has been long perceived as uniquely prestigious amongst British accents.
- Other names for this accent are: *the Queen's English*, *Oxford English* and *BBC English*.
- RP is an accent; a social one rather than a regional one.

- This accent is used by perhaps 3% of those who live in England.
- This accent is fairly recent. It became established as prestigious in the late nineteenth century and was not even given its current label until the 1920s
- In the United Kingdom, it is usually associated with higher social or educational backgrounds, with the BBC and the professions, and is most commonly taught to students learning English as a foreign language.
- It is worth mentioning that RP is changing; nowadays there is Cockneyfied RP, Estuary English, etc.
- In North America its equivalent is referred to as *General American* or more recently as *Network English* (the accent associated with announcers on major television networks).
- Some languages have no equivalent to RP. German is spoken in a variety of accents, none of which is deemed any better than any other. However, educated regional varieties are preferred rather than some exclusive upper-class accent that has no clear relationship to personal achievement.

**A Small Undergraduate Study: Section B** (Stockwell, 2002, pp. 27-30)

- The case study is partly a replication study of original work in informants' subjective evaluations of accent.
- **Sarah Wood** researched original work done by Giles and Powesland (1975) and others which used a method of data elicitation known as the **matched-guise** technique.
- The matched-guise technique involves playing a recording of the same speaker imitating a variety of different accents, and then asking listeners to rate each 'speaker' on a range of different dimensions (their sense of the attractiveness of the speaker, how communicative they were, what their social status seems to be, etc.).
- In this way, a pattern of common stereotypical associations in attitude to accents is built up.
- The original studies used:
  - a range of British accents (northern, southern, rural, urban and RP)
  - some foreign-accented English (American, Italian, Indian, German, French, and so on)
  - informants from south Wales and the southwest of England.
- Sarah Wood was concerned with discovering the current situation.

- She replicated Giles's (1970) study but made a few adjustments to improve the analysis including the following:
  - She restricted the recordings to 8 native British accents (RP, west London, Norwich, north-east England, Nottingham, Cheshire, Burnley, and Sheffield)
  - She used genuine native speakers of these accents in the recordings.
  - All speakers read a passage which was specially written to contain many accent-variant features. (see Stockwell, 2002, pp. 69, section C2.1)
  - All speakers and informants were female students in their early 20s, to control for gender, age and some class variation
  - The informants included 2 northern speakers, 2 southern speakers, and a Midlands speaker.
- Sarah ensured an easy comparability of data by setting a written, multiple-choice questionnaire. (see Stockwell, 2002, pp. 28-29)

#### **Giles and Powesland (1975) findings:**

- For many people, standard accents (such as RP) were more likely to be considered as belonging to prestigious, aesthetically pleasing and intelligible articulate speakers.
- The 'broadest' accents and those associated with urban and industrial areas were considered to be used by low-status speakers and were regarded as unattractive.
- Rural accents were considered aesthetically pleasing, but subordinate to RP on the dimensions of social status and intelligibility.

#### **Sarah Wood's Findings:**

- The 'southern' accents (RP, west London and Norwich) attracted the highest and most prestigious overall ratings in most categories, across all informants.
- Though the RP speaker was judged more intelligent than the others, they were judged equal in social status, and the RP accent was judged as being less pleasing.
- The northern accents came out worst in the prestige judgments, with the urban accents more stigmatised than the rural ones.
- It is interesting that there was largely an agreement across informants, which suggests that **language loyalty** was a small factor in this study (though the northern informants did rate the northern accents slightly higher).

- Judgments tended to parallel each other across the dimensions: so an accent tended to be judged consistently either prestigious or stigmatised across all the questions.
- Sarah also conjectured that the status of RP was changing so that it was becoming seen as ‘too posh’ and thus untrustworthy.

There are all sorts of connections to be made from Sarah’s study:

- Replication studies are a very useful means of investigating **language change** (in this case, change in attitude to accents.)
- Sarah’s study could lead into a discussion of the prestige and stigmatization of accents and dialects in general. When people are aware of their own accent and its prestige value, they often adjust it:
  - either towards a more standardised form (this is **hypercorrection** if it is overdone)
  - or towards a more stigmatised form (if they want to sound ‘less posh’, this is **covert prestige**).
- Sarah’s study offers a refinement of sociolinguistics methodology along the lines of using *naturalistic* elicitation procedure to generate *naturalistic* and reliable data.

### Dialect

- **What are dialects?**
  - They are the word choices, syntactic ordering and all the other grammatical choices speakers could make which are more or less **mutually intelligible** to other speakers of the language.
  - The term is sometimes used when there is a strong tradition of writing in the local variety (but this is not the case with all dialects [*patios*]).
  - Dialects are usually spoken by a group united by geography or social status (*Regional dialects* and *Social dialects*)
- **What distinguishes them from each other?**
  - Phonological differences
  - Lexical differences (e.g. faucet/tap – lift/elevator)
  - Syntactic differences (e.g. US-He should have *gotten* to school on time. vs. UK - He should have *got* to school on time.)

- **Are there kinds of dialects?**

**Social dialects:** are the most dominant or prestige dialects that are used within a country such as the Standard American English (SAE) which many Americans speak and divergences from this norm are labeled “Philadelphia dialect” “Chicago dialect” “African American dialect”

**Regional dialects:** Regional variation is the easiest way to observe variety in language. As you travel throughout a wide geographical area in which language is spoken you are almost certain to notice differences in pronunciation, in choices and forms of words, and in syntax.

- There is also what is known as **dialect continuum**. It is when you move from one area to another and there are not very many borders between dialect areas (e.g. moving from south of France to north Italy).
- A dialect continuum is a network of dialects in which geographically adjacent dialects are mutually comprehensible, but with comprehensibility steadily decreasing as distance between the dialects increases.
- Dialects do not suddenly change from area to area.
- Accents and dialects that are geographically close to one another tend to be similar in form; gradually varying the further you travel away from them.
- We can thus talk of **dialect chains** rather than discrete dialects.
- This applies even across national boundaries: the dialects of northern Germany are closer in form to bordering Netherlands than to Bavarian, though the latter is usually counted as the same German language and the former is the foreign language Dutch.
- Political allegiances have a lot to do with this attitude.
- The most prestigious dialect in Britain is UK Standard English (UKSE), originally a southern dialect of English which has become the form used in most print media, law and education. It can, of course, be pronounced in any accent. For example, 'It's very dirty' can be pronounced in RP ([ɪts vɛrɪ dɜ:ti]), or in a northern British accent ([ɪʔs vɛrɪ dɛ:ti]) but the same sense can be expressed in several dialects: UKSE (as above); Yorkshire ('Tha's right mucky'); or Teesside ('It's hacky'), and so on.
- Though, in principle, any dialect can appear in any accent, in practice some accents tend to accompany certain dialects.
- RP almost never appears in anything but UK Standard English, though UKSE is usually pronounced in most accents.

- Scouse dialect always appears in a Liverpool accent - Tyneside dialect in a Geordie accent - West Midlands dialect in a Birmingham or a Black Country accent
- Accent and dialect are so connected in common perception, that the word for the accent (Cockney) and the dialect (Cockney) are often the same.
- Different groups even have different words for other groups: thus 'Brummies' in Birmingham notice the different accent in Coventry of the 'Yam-Yams' (derived from the pronunciation of 'I am .. .').
- Traditionally, 'dialectologists' were able to study different areas of accent and dialect use fairly easily, drawing lines on the map (**isoglosses**) to separate one form and speech community from another.
- This is much more difficult in an urban setting, where migration and industrialization tend to mix up family origins.