Sociophonology of Received Pronunciation

Miroslav Ježek

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that's it

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the sound of your own voice...

I'm gonna be free ...

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Native and Non-Native Environments

Miroslav Ježek

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1 INTRODUCTION

The present publication aims to offer an analysis of varieties of Received Pronunciation (RP): the prestige accent in England and, to a lesser extent, in the other parts of the UK. RP is an accent that keeps changing just like other accents do. Even such a stable unit as the Royal Family, arguably the most prominent users of RP, change their realisations of particular sounds (cf. Upton 2000b: 44). For several reasons these changes are often not reflected in transcription models of the accent. Among other things, this publication discusses recent innovations in RP and the degree of their acceptability as RP sounds reflected in the model, too. Since English is the most common second language (Crystal 2005: 420), this work also tries to identify the roles this accent fulfils both in the native as well as the non-native environments.

While there are several substantial differences in the understanding of RP, the source of inspiration remains the same: a year-long stay abroad at Leeds University (2006–7), where I had the opportunity to work with Clive Upton (now Emeritus Professor), whose RP model is presented and, to a certain degree, tested here. Upton's model, which has been restricted to the native market so far, is in some important details markedly different from the other models (as details Chapter 3). Equally important was the chance to listen to the enormous variety of accents and, crucially, to realise that RP in the form presented outside the native world seems to be rather rare, and that it is not a necessity to speak RP if a person wants to defend their status in the academic world.

It has already been mentioned that RP is subject to constant change. Yet the model present in ELT publications has displayed very little change since the establishment of RP more than a hundred years ago. The model thus needs to be dusted in order to offer a more accurate picture of the accent. It is hoped that

this work will contribute towards achieving this: it will raise awareness of the variability existing even in such a standardised accent as RP and it will update the model ridding it of certain variants that carry negative connotations in native ears.

As far as sociolinguistic research is concerned, for an academic based in the Czech Republic RP presents the unquestionable advantage of being the accent with which Czech English language professionals are in daily contact. It is, naturally, an accent of utmost importance to non-native learners of English as well. There are also practical advantages linked with this accent: any research dealing with regional accents and local communities would require a stay abroad along with a detailed acquaintance with the community and the social stratification of its members.

1.1 Varieties of RP

The term 'Received Pronunciation' has been in existence for almost a hundred years. Since it is the single most important term that runs throughout this work, close attention must be paid to a most complex task of defining what the label 'RP' actually represents.

While there are linguists who still trust the label and use it with various modifications, there are also linguists who have decided to drop it in favour of a new one, which in their opinion reflects the reality more adequately.

Trad-RP

The first variety of RP is seen as old-fashioned, outdated, posh, and redolent of privileged upbringing. Various labels attached to this variety are: 'trad-RP' (Upton 2008: 239–40), 'U-RP' (Wells 1982: 279), 'Refined RP' (Cruttenden 1994: 80), 'marked RP' (Honey 1991: 38), and 'conservative RP' (Gimson 1980:77). Unsurprisingly, Upton's 'trad' is shortened 'traditional'. Wells's 'U-RP' refers to the upper classes that this variety is typically associated with. Cruttenden finds his own label very fitting because it has 'positive overtones for some people and negative overtones for others' (1994: 80). Honey's 'marked RP' means that 'this accent is associated not so much with and "educated" voice as with a "cultured" voice'; the voice 'seems to assert a claim to a special degree of social privilege' (1991: 38–9). It seems clear that the number of speakers that use this accent is declining.

RP

A more modern and relaxed variety of RP also has a number of adjectives attached to it, although Upton refuses to use any adjective and calls this variety just 'RP' since it can 'legitimately lay claim to the RP label without qualification' (Upton 2000a: 76). Others insist on a qualifying adjective and call this accent: 'mainstream RP' (Wells 1982: 279), 'unmarked RP' (Honey 1991: 38), and 'General RP' (Gimson 1980: 77, Cruttenden 1994: 80). Honey claims that his 'unmarked RP suggests a fairly high degree of educatedness, although the social class of its speaker need not be very exalted' (1991: 38). It is supposed that this explanation holds true for all the labels in this group.

Near-RP

This variety is identical with the RP norms in all but one or two aspects. These might be regional or social. Wells calls this variety 'Near-RP'; it 'refers to any accent which, while not falling within the definition of RP, nevertheless includes very little in the way of regionalisms which would enable the provenance of the speaker to be localised within England'. Wells adds that this voice 'will be perceived as [...] "educated", "well-spoken", "middle-class" ' (1982: 297). Cruttenden (1994: 80–1) calls this accent 'Regional RP'. While the definition offered by Wells allows for certain regional variables to be part of this accent, it omits other variables that are essentially social rather than regional (e.g. the glottal stop, as is argued in 3.2.2.1). Finally, Gimson (1980: 77) calls this accent 'Advanced RP': an accent of upper-class young speakers that permit more variability.

On top of the three varieties above, there are several singular varieties that linguists distinguish. Firstly, there is 'Adoptive RP' (Wells 1982: 283–4), which is 'a variety of RP spoken by adults who did not speak RP as children'. As the accent was acquired later in life, it meticulously avoids a number of features that modern RP allows (e.g. intrusive /r/ and the glottal stop in certain environments). Secondly, Wells also distinguishes 'quasi-RP': it is an accent that corresponds with 'Adoptive RP', but 'certain allophones are selected for their supposed clarity or carefulness rather than for their appropriateness to RP' (1982: 285). In my view, this label refers to a rather slavish attempt to imitate RP.

An interesting and an original take on the varieties of RP can be found in Fabricius (2000: 29–30), who makes the distinction between c[onstructed]-RP and n[ative] RP. The former is an abstract model that people come across in various teaching materials while n-RP is the variety they naturally adopt as an accent-in-use.

Labels with no mention of RP

There are some linguists who refuse to use the abbreviation 'RP' and they have adopted a different label instead to avoid any negative connotations that RP may carry. Roach et al. (2011: v) adopts the label 'BBC English' since it is 'the pronunciation of professional speakers employed by the BBC as newsreaders and announcers on BBC1 and BBC2 television, the World Service and BBC Radio 3 and 4'. While the link with the BBC and RP may seem considerably strong (cf. Hannisdal 2007), the label, however, may turn out to be rather inappropriate now that the BBC employs many speakers with regional features in their accents (Wells 2008: xix).

Most interestingly, Cruttenden in his latest edition of *Gimson's Pronunciation of English* has decided to drop the label 'RP' altogether in favour of 'GB', which stands for 'General British'. He explains such a radical change as follows:

> [d]espite the fact that I and other phoneticians have sought to describe changes in RP to make it a modern and more flexible standard, many, particularly in the media, have persisted in presenting an image of RP as outdated and becoming even more than ever the speech only of the "posh" few in the south-east of England. For this reason I have dropped the name RP and now consider myself to be describing General British or GB. (2014: xvi-xvii)

For a full discussion of why GB seems more appropriate than RP, see Cruttenden (2014: 80–2). While he admittedly has a point, there are reasons to think that his abandonment of RP is somewhat infelicitous. Firstly, 'GB' generally connotes above all Great Britain, of course. Secondly, there are many speakers in Scotland, who are British, but their model accent is far removed from what is found south of the border. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that McMahon (2002: 69) uses the label SSBE (Southern Standard British English), thereby making the point that 'GB' is far too inclusive.

Further, Cruttenden (2014: 81) also distinguishes 'CGB' (Conspicuous General British) and 'RGB' (Regional General British): the former roughly corresponds with traditional RP, while the latter is Near-RP (as discussed above). Since RGB 'reflects regional rather than class variation [...] we should talk of RGBs in the plural' (2014: 81).

Yet another label is found in Mees and Collins (2013: 3–4), who, strangely enough, do retain 'RP' when they speak of 'Traditional Received Pronunciation', but they come up with 'NRP' (standing for 'non-regional pronunciation') for its modern and more relaxed variety. This label (NRP) is clever, but as much because it makes use of 'RP' as for any other reason. The advantages of breaking

the axiom of non-localisability of RP are discussed elsewhere (4.2.1.7); it suffices to say here that a label that drops 'RP' in such a confusing way as this 'NRP' is not likely to ever acquire enough support to catch on among academics.

Having considered all of the possibilities, I have decided to stick with the label 'RP' and only add descriptive adjectives where necessary. I use 'modern' to refer to the mainstream variety of the prestige accent and 'traditional' to refer to the variety redolent of social class and privileged upbringing. As Upton (personal communication) puts it, it is acceptable to 'stick with good old "RP" and try to educate people in the fact that, as a living accent, it changes, and [it] doesn't have to be stuck in the past or be relevant of class.'

The other labels have been rejected for the following reasons. First, SSBE is far too regional (exclusive) and it does not say anything about the other parts of the country. Surely, there is a prestige accent in the other regions as well. Second, GB is too inclusive and it strongly evokes Great Britain rather than General British. Third, the BBC accent is especially unsuitable in the non-native environment since it creates the myth that the BBC employs RP speakers only. Moreover, it implies that the BBC is active in the establishment of the accent (it is 'their' accent), but the media hardly ever perform the role of trend-setters—they very often merely follow trends set elsewhere (cf. Bell 1984). Last, NRP is unacceptable since it retains the old label RP although the two words stand for something completely different. I deem it very confusing.

1.2 Thesis Outline

Chapter 2 provides a detailed account of the history of prestige accents including RP in England. It offers a solid diachronic foundation that enables a more accurate synchronic perspective. Crucially, it shows that RP has always demonstrated a surprising amount of variability, despite attempts to deny or even stop it.

Chapter 3 draws on the previous chapter insofar as it deals with prestige accents from a purely theoretical perspective: it introduces the key linguistic notions that determine, accompany and influence the processes of standardisation and prescription. These notions are then applied directly to RP.

In Chapter 4 is discussed the phonology of RP; where applicable, different variants of a particular phoneme are presented. Moreover, a number of socially stratified phenomena are discussed in connection with particular phonemes even though they do not belong to RP (e.g. /h/-dropping). Being social, these phenomena are closely related to the issues of prestige, thereby providing further insight into the matters of standardisation, prescription and popular attitudes towards linguistic forms with social values.

Chapter 5 introduces the practical study, providing details about the methodology (the website and the questionnaire placed thereon) as well as the key aspects of the survey: samples, respondents, and selected variables.

Chapter 6 reports and interprets the results of the survey with the focus placed upon the key aspects mentioned in Chapter 4 (above). It also details gathered data and how it is assessed and evaluated.

Chapter 7 compares the latest editions of three existing pronunciation dictionaries: *Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation for Current English* (Upton et al. 2003), *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (3rd ed., Wells 2008), and *Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary* (18th ed., Roach et al. 2011). It is examined to what extent the three dictionaries reflect modern changes and innovations in RP (especially the studied variables).

Finally, conclusions are drawn in relation to the research hypotheses put forward in the Introduction (below).

1.3 Research Hypotheses

The practical part of this publication aims to confirm or refute the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1

In view of RP, it is expected that there are several differences between CZ and EN sets of respondents.

The first one regards the notion of RP and how it is mentally constructed; i.e. which (socio)linguistic categories influence the decision-making process whether a particular accent is RP or not (though the question can hardly be approached in terms of binary opposites; as details 5.4.2.1).

Secondly, it is hypothesised that EN respondents should prove to allow more variability in RP than CZ respondents, which should be reflected in higher overall RP scores they award. There are two reasons that support this hypothesis: EN respondents have easier access to modern transcriptions of RP in OUP publications and they naturally have a much closer and more intense contact with the linguistic environment surrounding RP.

Furthermore, it is expected that there are substantial differences between S EN and N EN respondents. Only such differences can justify the inclusion of short BATH as an RP sound (e.g. Upton et al. 2003).

Hypothesis 2

Although the updated model of RP is discussed in its entirety, five variables have been selected for closer inspection. It is hypothesised that they can be considered RP in both environments (i.e. CZ and EN) since English linguists seem to agree that they belong to RP and Czech learners as non-native learners generally accept the model created in England.

Hypothesis 3

It is expected that the model of RP presented by Upton turns out to be beneficial to non-native learners since Upton et al. (2003: xii) claims that it is universal, i.e. beneficial to both native and non-native users.

Nevertheless, two of the five variables under investigation (the glottal stop and FOOT/GOOSE fronting) are not included in Upton's model. Should they be added to it providing they meet little resistance from the respondents? Further, are there, metaphorically speaking, any more changes and innovations behind the RP door waiting for it to open?

2 THE RISE OF A STANDARD

Accent and dialect differences have always existed; they are likely to be intrinsic characteristics of any live language. One of the first instances where such differences are mentioned can be found in the Bible, and nothing less than a human life is at stake:

> And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand. (Judges 12: 5–6, King James version)

Forty two thousand people lost their lives since they were not able to pronounce one single sound; namely the initial letter in the word 'shibboleth'. The Ephraimites gave themselves away by not being able to utter /ʃ/. Their dialect lacked this sound and they only came up with /s/. In the course of time this story enriched the English lexicon with the word 'shibboleth', still in use to indicate a word (or a custom) that distinguishes one group of people from another.

2.1 Old English

Old English dialect differences are described in considerable detail for example in Baugh and Cable (2012) and Crystal (2005). The latter identifies four Old English dialects: Kentish, Northumbrian, Mercian, and West Saxon (2005: 34). These

enjoyed various amounts of prestige throughout the period, which is testified by the origin of the documents that have survived till the present day. For instance the majority of texts in Northumbrian date back to the 8th century, i.e. before the Vikings plundered this region and destroyed the well-known monasteries in Jarrow, Iona, and Lindisfarne. Similarly, the West Saxon dialect is represented mainly by texts from the period of King Alfred the Great (871–899) and later—the years when this kingdom was in the ascendancy. What evidence, however, is there of accent differences and potential standards of pronunciation?

Naturally, the period in question did not have any standardised spelling, which would appear a few centuries later with the advent of printing. What people living in this period used was some kind of a phonetic spelling system where 'an Old English word would be spelled on the basis of how it sounded to the writer, who would instinctively follow his own pronunciation and assign the closest letters he could find' (Crystal 2005: 41). Thus there were no fewer than three spellings for the modern word 'merry' (Crystal 2005: 37): *merry* (open-close front vowel, south-east of England), *myrry* (close front vowel with heavy lip-rounding, London), and *murry* (back vowel with heavy lip-rounding, south-west of England).

Evidence for asserting the existence of a pronunciation standard in the Old English period is only indirect. It is based on the uniformitarian principle, as defined by Labov (1972: 275): 'the forces operating to produce linguistic change today are of the same kind and order of magnitude as those which operated in the past five or ten thousand years'. Hence we may presume that the dialects from those areas which happened to be dominant in a given period carried about them some amount of social prestige, much as those which happen to be prominent today tend to be popularly looked upon as more prestigious than others. Further, since the overwhelming majority of writings that have survived to this day come from scribes/monks, one can also suppose that the hierarchy of monasteries (or even the hierarchy of scribes within one monastery) dictated which forms were taken as those worth following. Because of the aforementioned phonetic spelling system, it is not unlikely that these written forms then should have made an impact on the pronunciation as well.

2.2 Middle English

The Middle English period is characterised by the dominance of French, which established itself as the dominant language after the Norman Conquest in 1066. It took no less than three and a half centuries before the English monarch could communicate with ease in the English language: it was Henry V, who reigned from 1413 to 1422 (Churchill 2005 [1956]: 404).

The dominant presence of French brought about something very unusual: all varieties of English at that time were viewed as mere dialects, and they were equally undesirable in the upper echelons of the society. Mugglestone (1995: 8) maintains that 'all dialects in Middle English assumed an equality they were never after to attain'. Dialect differences are famously present in a very well-known tale from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, namely the *Reeve's Tale*. This tale depicts two Cambridge men called Alleyn and John, who speak in a pronounced northern accent. They are very clever and finally outwit Simkin, the miller, who speaks in a southern accent. Interestingly enough, the tale reverses the usual presumptions (albeit formed later on) about these two dialects: speakers of a northern accent are the more sophisticated ones.

The situation was, however, to change and the first writers on orthography and orthoepy knew exactly where the fashionable and prestigious forms were. Before attention is turned to them, it is worth pointing out that the 14th century provides one of the earliest records of the North-South divide. While the students and the miller from the tale apparently had no problem understanding each other, there is *Polychronicon*, a book by a monk called Ranulph Higden, where one can find that 'all the speech of the Northumbrians, and especially at York, is so harsh, piercing, and grating, and formless, that we Southern men can hardly understand such speech' (modern translation, qtd. in Crystal 2005: 216). Higden offers a shrewd observation as to the origin of the difference between the North and the South: he believes the dialect in the North is a product of the considerable distance from the King and his court as well as of the fact that all the noble cities and profitable harbours happen to be in the South.

Indeed, the growing dominance of London as the major cultural, political, and economic centre coupled with the two existing universities in Oxford and Cambridge made the South East a particularly influential region. Setting the standard was imminent and the need grew even bigger with the invention of printing.

Although the first book (William Caxton's *The Recuyell of The Historyes of Troy*) was published in 1476, it took many decades before the effects of printing on the development of a standard variety became visible. It is now hard to imagine the situation in which Caxton found himself when setting up his printing business in London—a hotchpotch of spelling forms from various regions of England and foreign countries as well, large inconsistencies even within a single scribe, and obviously no body of authority to turn to for linguistic advice. To make matters worse, Caxton happened to live in an extremely turbulent era in terms of language change and variation: the period of the Great Vowel Shift (a basic description of the phenomenon can be found in Wells 1982: 184–8). As we know from recent sociolinguistic research (Chambers and Trudgill: 1998: 163–4) language change proceeds at a different pace at various stages and takes time before it enters the entire lexicon of one individual, let alone a group of speakers. It is also

clear that some geographical areas must have been the innovators while in other areas the Great Vowel Shift has not been completed even after more than five hundred years (the existence of *town* pronounced as [tu:n] in Newcastle, cf. *Toon Army* as a label for Newcastle United FC supporters). Yet Caxton and his successors did succeed in setting a spelling standard. Crucially though for the present thesis, by doing so they paved the way to a growing unease about the spoken varieties of English. I fully concur with Crystal who maintains that

> only after English was written down in a standardized form, and began to be taught in schools, did observers start to reflect about it, study it, and express their worries over how best to pronounce it, at which point the notion of a standard took on a spoken dimension. (2005: 225)

2.3 Early Modern English

Most of the writers who dealt with pronunciation matters in this era were largely concerned with them as a by-product of their major interest: they wanted to reform the spelling system. A case in point is John Hart, whose most influential book is *Orthographie* (1569). It advocates a radically new spelling system based on a one-to-one relationship between the sounds and the symbols that represent them. He classifies the sounds of English, describes their manner and place of articulation and describes London as the home of the best accent. The same opinion can be found in George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesie*, in which the author defines the locus of the best pronunciation as follows: 'ye shall take the usuall speech of the Court and that of London and the shires lying about London within lx myles' (1589: 121, qtd. in Beal 2004a: 169). Puttenham also adds a social dimension to his description of the noblest accent: it is present in the speech of 'men civill and graciously behavoured and bred' (1589: 121, qtd. in Beal 2004a: 169). Neither Hart nor Puttenham actually recommended particular sounds to be adopted since they presumed that by mere mingling with those who possessed them one would acquire the desired mode of speech. Therefore, they did not blame those from provinces for speaking the way they did as their regional speech was not a mark of their inferiority or ignorance; provincials simply happened to live far from London and its environs.

The 17th century is characterised by continuous interest in English pronunciation. The prevailing opinion maintained that the best pronunciation was to be found in the capital and among those who were educated (Oxford and Cambridge universities, e.g. in Coles 1674, qtd. in Mugglestone 1995: 14). While the emerging standard was perceptible, in the 17th century it was in no way as mercilessly and viciously propagated as it would be in the following ones. Occasionally

though, one can see a creeping sentiment of the things to come. Owen Price, the schoolmaster, insists in his work called *The Vocal Organ* (1665) that he 'has not been guided by our vulgar pronunciation, but that of London and our Universities, where the language is purely spoken' (qtd. in Mugglestone 1995: 14). The problematic notion is, of course, the word 'vulgar'—so often used up until now to condemn nonstandard variants and their users alike. Likewise, Dobson (1957: 309) pays attention to the works of Christopher Cooper, who in his treatise called *The English Teacher* (1687) labels certain forms as 'barbarous', and claims that speakers should avoid them. However, Sheldon (1938: 198) notes that Cooper's 'barbarous' variants are not associated with any region or class. Beal (2004a: 170) insists that 'no 17th century grammarian advises his reader to avoid this or that pronunciation because it is heard only among the lower classes. It is clear that the feeling had not yet grown up that pronunciation was a class shibboleth'.

The 17th century still describes (rather than prescribes) a localised variety of spoken English. The 18th century seeks 'instead to *codify* a non-localized supra-regional standard, and thus to displace the linguistic diversities of accent that currently pertained' (my italics, Mugglestone 1995: 16).

2.4 Modern English: the 18th century

The 18th century brought about numerous changes in the society, most of which were connected with the Industrial Revolution causing 'decisive reorganisation of the society' (Williams 1976: 61). Perkin (1969: 176) claims that one of 'the most profound and far reaching consequences of the Industrial Revolution [was] the birth of a new class society'. Since language is inseparable from its users, it hardly comes as a surprise that the 18th century also altered dramatically the way the English viewed their own language.

The market for good pronunciation was created in the course of the 18th century for several reasons. The main one is undoubtedly 'the suddenly well-to-do bourgeois [who] were trying to rise above their stations' (Sheldon 1938: 201). Beal (2008a: 23) expresses a similar view when she talks of 'a socially-aspiring middle-class, who suffered from [...] linguistic insecurity [and] created a demand for explicit guides to "correct" usage in both grammar and pronunciation'; elsewhere (2004a: 170), she also lists other factors that helped to promote the idea: the rise of provincial towns and cities (especially in the North of England, Scotland, and Ireland), the consequences of the Act of Union (1707), and the expansion of education.

In 1712 Jonathan Swift sends a letter to the leader of the then government. The letter is called *A proposal for correcting, improving and ascertaining the English tongue* and presents arguably the first outburst of criticism of such outspokenness.

> My LORD; I do here, in the Name of all the Learned and Polite Persons of the Nation, complain to your LORDSHIP, as *First Minister*, that our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; that the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities; and, that in many Instances, it offends against every Part of Grammar. (qtd. in Bolton 1966: 108)

Swift's torrent of abuse deals with grammar in particular and the rest of the text reveals that 'imperfect' pronunciation did not trouble him at all. Fixing the spoken word was still a thing of the future. The linguists of the first half of the 18th century were, however, not totally ignorant of speech 'imperfections' of their time. James Greenwood, the grammarian and schoolmaster, admits it would be useful to have a pronunciation standard along with a grammatical one. However, he also shrewdly observes the complexity of the task: 'I cannot dissemble my unwillingness to say anything at all on this head [orthoepy]; first, because of the irregular and wrong Pronunciation of the Letters and Words, which if one should go about to mend, would be a business of great Labour and Trouble, as well as Fruitless and Unsuccessful' (1711, qtd. in Mugglestone 1995: 22).

Samuel Johnson, the famous lexicographer, also dealt with the matters of pronunciation when preparing his masterpiece *A Dictionary of the English Language*. In 1747 he published *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, in which he promised to provide a work 'by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated'. In the *Dictionary* itself, published eight years later, pronunciation is nevertheless largely neglected because, as Johnson humbly admits in the Preface, 'sounds are too volatile and subtile for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength' (qtd. in Bolton 1966: 152).

Thomas Sheridan, a student of Swift's, wonders in the preface to his *General Dictionary of the English Language* 'whether many important advantages would not be accrue both to the present age, and to prosperity, if the English language were ascertained, and reduced to a fixed and permanent standard' (1780:B1). Earlier, he observed that 'almost every country in England has its peculiar dialect' and insisted that 'one [...] preference, this is the court dialect, as the court is the source of fashions of all kinds. All the other dialects, are sure marks, either of a provincial, rustic, pedantic or mechanical education, and therefore have some degree of disgrace annexed to them' (1761: 29–30, qtd. in Beal 2004a: 172). The major difference between Sheridan (and his contemporaries) and orthoepists of the previous century was clearly the fact that the latter were 'content to locate the "best" speech, [whilst Sheridan] deliberately set out to define and "fix" an explicit standard' (Beal 2004a: 171). The framing ideology for Sheridan was that of social ambition as the dominant social force (Mugglestone 1995: 19). William

Johnston, in his *Pronouncing and Spelling Dictionary*, offers help to those 'many who labour under the disadvantages of a wrong pronunciation [and who] are so sensible of these things, as to have earnest desires to acquire a right one' (1764: v, qtd in Mugglestone 1995: 39).

While people in the 17th century had to overcome only geographical barriers, orthoepists in the 18th century erected social barriers as well, even though their proclaimed aim was exactly the opposite (as shown below). To speak a regional accent in the 17th century was a matter of misfortune; in the next century it would become a matter of abhorrence. Gone were the sentiments about 'too volatile' sounds and 'lashing the wind'. The main task Sheridan's era faced was to suppress all variability within what they perceived to be the standard accent: '[n] o evil so great can befall any language, as a perpetual fluctuation both in point of spelling and pronouncing' (Sheridan 1786: v, qtd. in Mugglestone 1995: 24). Sheridan explains what his objective is by claiming he wants to

> fix such a standard of pronunciation, by means of visible marks, that it may be in the power of every one, to acquire an accurate manner of uttering every word in the English tongue, by applying to that standard. In order to do this, the author of this scheme proposes to publish a Dictionary, in which the true pronunciation, of all the words in our tongue, shall be pointed out by visible and accurate marks. (1761: 29–30, qtd. in Mugglestone 1995: 33)

2.4.1 Pronouncing Dictionaries: Sheridan and Walker

The most common way of publishing advice on 'proper' pronunciation was a pronouncing dictionary. Sheridan's was the first comprehensive one, but by far the most successful one (reprinted over 100 times by 1904; Beal 2004a: 129) was *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* by John Walker, which was first published in 1791. Such was the impact that

> by the end of the nineteenth century, John Walker [...] had almost become a household name, so that manuals of etiquette could refer to those obsessed with linguistic propriety as trying to "out-Walker Walker". [...] He had in effect become one of the icons of the age, commonly referred to as "Elocution Walker", just as Johnson had come to be labelled "Dictionary Johnson" in the public mind. (Mugglestone 1995: 41)

Walker introduced a different concept of the prestige accent. As has been noted above, orthoepists of the previous two centuries attempted to merely locate the 'best' accent, their counterparts towards the end of the 18th century endeavoured to fix it, and this was to be achieved by means of providing a non-

localisable model of speech. It was an important step towards the establishment of RP. Orthoepists like Walker were undoubtedly buoyed by the success prescriptive grammarians had achieved. Double negatives and double comparatives were 'gradually eliminated from [...] the public discourses over the whole country, though their use could and did continue in the localized norms of speech' (Mugglestone 1995: 26). Likewise, the national standard of spelling had emerged, which suppressed the enormous variability that had existed before. The likes of Walker and Sheridan faced an uphill struggle, though, when they set out to codify the spoken word in a similar way. Not that they did not realise how much more difficult their task was. For instance, Walker (1791: vi) concedes that 'a degree of versatility seems involved in the very nature of language', but it did not make their determination wither away; on the contrary, they only took it as an impetus to intensify their effort.

Mugglestone (1995:26) stresses the fact that the natural state of humans (including pronunciation, of course) was evidently not good enough for the 18th century. Nature needed to be reformed by art and reason because, as Alexander Bicknell insists in his book called *Grammatical Wreath,* 'nature leaves us in a rude and uncultivated form [and] it is our business to polish and refine ourselves. Nature gives the organs, it is ours to acquire the skilful performance upon them' (1796; qtd. in Mugglestone 1995: 26). This appeal for linguistic refinement is in many ways similar to the one in operation today (cf. Beal 2008a); there was, however, an added dimension to it in the 18th century. It was not in the interest of only individuals to refine their pronunciation. It was an issue of national honour. English orthoepists of the period in all likelihood casted envious glances over the English Channel to L'Académie Française—an institution that had been in operation for about 150 years and whose job was to purify the French language and to prevent any impurities from entering it. In spite of the fact that the calls for establishing such an institution in England fell on deaf ears, the state of profound anxiety over their 'correct' pronunciation seems to have remained with the English ever since.

A ready answer to the question why it was Walker's *Dictionary* that enjoyed such an unprecedented amount of fame and recognition is that it filled the void in the market in a much better way than the others: it was easy-to-use, comprehensive, authoritative, and, above all, Walker turned out to possess some prophetic skills when it came to rival variants. Most of the variants he chose out of two (or even more) competing ones were those which eventually prevailed. Despite the *Dictionary* being so popular, I would attribute this achievement to Walker's good nose for innovations rather than to the success of the *Dictionary* already in circulation. Beal (2004a: 132) voices the same opinion when she dismisses Ellis's (1869: 624) complaint about the fact that Walker described and prescribed the accent of a society he did not belong to, thereby being insufficiently acquainted with its

speech. She, in fact, directly links Walker's success with the fact that he was 'on the fringe of "polite" society and loosely connected to the networks of the powerful and influential [...] which made him, according to social network theory, most likely to be an innovator' (cf. Milroy 1987).

Walker's *Dictionary* has been discussed ever since the early days of philology as an academic discipline. The bone of contention is the reliability of the information in the dictionary. Some linguists maintain that the prescriptive nature of the work prevented the author from observing the real state of things around him. Holmberg (1964: 10) makes a general claim about orthoepists of the 18th century: 'they were sometimes more anxious to teach what they believed was correct than to record the pronunciation they actually heard or used'. Ellis, the first dialectologist, expresses the same opinion: he talks of Walker and Sheridan as 'those word-pedlars, those letter-drivers, those stiff-necked pedantic philosophical, miserably informed, and therefore supremely certain, self-confident and self-conceited orthographers' (1869: vol. I, 155). On the other hand, there are linguists (such as Wyld, 1936: 183) who believe that Walker 'must be placed with the most reliable and informing writers of his class'. Beal explains that pronouncing dictionaries (and Walker's *Dictionary* is a case in point) provide valuable insight into at least one variety of English, namely the 'proto-RP' (1999: 60). Furthermore, Beal reconciles the opposing views expressed by Ellis and Wyld by pointing out their different focuses; she observes that

> Ellis [...] was interested in dialects so it is understandable that he would react to Walker's representation of a prestigious standard and, to a certain extent, the fossilization of this eighteenth-century standard in later reprints [whereas] Wyld was interested in the development of Standard and Modified Standard pronunciation, and so would be interested in the socio-linguistic information provided by Walker. (Beal 2004a: 129–30)

The pronouncing dictionaries were largely successful. Despite their relatively high price—Altick (1957: 51) claims that it was over a pound at the beginning of the nineteenth century—they enjoyed a wide circulation, most notably in the educational system of that time, for which it was a welcome means of instilling the pronunciation standard into pupils. The biggest objection raised against the dictionaries was concerned with their size and how impractical they were to use as reference books. Boswell ([1791] 2011: vol. II, 161) sums up the argument by quoting Samuel Johnson, who admitted that Sheridan's dictionary was a fine piece of work but 'you cannot always carry it about with you: and, when you want the word, you have not the Dictionary'. The orthoepists, however, did not conceive of their dictionaries as primarily works of reference. They recommended that they be used as textbooks which require daily practice. Johnston (1746: 41, qtd. in Mugglestone 1995: 39) gives clear instructions as to how people should

use his dictionary: '[t]hree quarters of an hour, employed in pronouncing words in this distinct manner, in the order in which they occur, would be a sufficient exercise at a time [...] and this exercise repeated two or three times in a day, as affairs will permit, for a month together, will carry you several times through the book, and give you a general knowledge and practice of a right pronunciation'. The best method was daily practice rather than occasional reference when in doubt. What is interesting in connection with the next century (and the next subchapter) is the call for smaller and less expensive editions of the dictionaries. Russel (1801: 13, qtd. in Mugglestone 1995: 37) wanted an edition which would 'be portable with convenience' and, above all, affordably priced even for those 'who cannot, without inconvenience, spare a guinea'. An upsurge in cheap 'penny manuals' in the nineteenth century is a direct answer to Russel's demand.

The pronouncing dictionaries were not the only way Sheridan and Walker helped disseminate 'proper' pronunciation, though. They were both very active in giving lectures throughout Britain, and the number of people they attracted was certainly not low. Watkins (1817: 79, qtd. in Mugglestone 1995: 44) informs us that 'upwards of six hundred subscribers, at a guinea each, besides occasional visitors' regularly attended Sheridan's lectures.

From today's perspective, the whole prescriptive enterprise of the 18th century (and later periods) is strikingly paradoxical: 'it was social harmony rather than social hegemony [that people thought would] emerge as a consequence of prescriptive endeavour, [with the] "ill consequences" of accent difference being removed [and] with the adoption of a new and, in particular, a neutral standard for all.' (Mugglestone 1995: 31). Sheridan believed he was a missionary bringing new equality in speech and his ultimate goal was to unite the entire nation. Not much time was needed to reveal how ill-advised this way of thinking about accents was.

Furthermore, it may seem hard to believe to people today that such large numbers of people should have given up their own reason and should blindly have followed the rules set out by a few individuals (Johnson, Sheridan, Walker). There is hardly any more suitable piece of evidence to illustrate the extremity of some people's defeatism (when faced with the task of finding the 'best' variants) than Lord Chesterfield's letter to *The World* magazine in 1754:

> I give my vote for Mr Johnson to fill that great and arduous post. And I hereby declare that I make a total surrender of all my rights and privileges in the English language, as a freeborn British subject, to the said Mr Johnson, during the term of his dictatorship. Nay more, I will not only obey him, like an old Roman, as my dictator, but, like a modern Roman, I will implicitly believe in him as my pope, and hold him to be infallible. (1754, qtd. in Crystal 2005: 413)