

## ACROLECT AND HYPERLECT: REVISITING ENGLISH RP

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**Abstract:** *Determining the accent that we use is a notoriously vexing problem for a number of reasons. This paper focuses on one of the most well-known accents in England, Received Pronunciation. Among the complicating factors which invite us to re-examine the concept of RP are the uses to which it is put, taking into consideration the fact that British English is a language learned by an increasing number of foreign speakers, the evolution of language itself and of society, as well as the Americanization in grammar but also in pronunciation. The main purpose of this study is to review some of the most important theories regarding the evolution of RP, while briefly mentioning the vowels and consonants of present-day RP.*

**Keywords:** Received Pronunciation, marked RP, unmarked RP, acrolect, hyperlect, paralect, accent, England.

### 1. A brief history of RP

Received Pronunciation (RP) is the accent that professor Henry Higgins taught to Eliza Doolittle, and he did so with a then new science known as *phonetics*. Later on, when the BBC made its debut radio broadcast in November 1922, ten years after the publication of George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, it was the first time that a voice spoke to the nation in RP. However, the history of RP dates back to the early dawns of the nineteenth century. The first person credited with the mentioning of the term "Received Pronunciation" is Alexander Ellis. In his seminal paper *On Early English Pronunciation*, he posits that:

in the present day we may [...] recognise a received pronunciation all over the country, not widely differing in any particular locality, and admiring a certain degree of variety. It may be especially considered as the educated pronunciation of the metropolis, of the court, the pulpit and the bar.

(Ellis, 1869: 23)

Despite the fact that Ellis is usually mentioned as the first person who used the concept of RP, there are mentions that date back to the eighteenth century. Walker (1792: 12) talks of a "corrupt, but received pronunciation [of the letter 'a'] in the words *any, many, catch, Thames*, where *a* sounds like short *e*, as if written *enny, menny, ketch, Themes*.' However, Walker used the term

“received” to refer to one sound while Ellis’s idea of “received” extends to a variety<sup>1</sup>. In both cases, the notion of “received” means acceptable in polite society (Ježek, 2022: 38).

RP is described as a non-localizable accent, meaning that it is not linked to a specific geographical location. It is a concept that was “born” in Britain and subsequently developed solely through reference to conditions existing in Britain despite the fact that the accent can be spoken by anyone throughout the English-speaking world. If an accent is different from RP, then it is considered to be ‘broad’ and of a lower status.

Language as a social class marker is indigenous in society (Fisher, 1996: 146). In England, it goes back centuries, maybe even to the Norman conquest. When the Normans invaded England in 1066, French became the language of the court and commerce, and “English was a domestic patois” (Fisher, 1996: 146), and it remained so for almost four hundred years. When Henry V became king in 1413, written English replaced French as the language used in official documents, but French still enjoyed high status in aristocratic circles. As years passed, French disappeared from the court and government, and social distinctions started being made in the pronunciation of English.

Until the eighteenth century everyone in England spoke a local dialect and pronunciation was deemed an inherited trait (Fisher, 1996: 147). The birth of RP, nonetheless, is closely connected to the prominence of public-school education (schools such as Eton, Harrow, Winchester and Westminster, followed by education at prestigious universities such as Cambridge or Oxford). Crystal (2005: 469) writes that the accent that students acquired during their teenage years “rapidly spread through the career structure which such an education opened up – in the civil and diplomatic service (especially abroad, as the Empire expanded) and the Anglican Church.”

Public schools were often boarding schools and this meant that the boys’ links with their home were severed. This enabled the professors to rid every one of their regional accents and impose RP. Honey (1991: 25) provides an eloquent example of a parent who sent his son to Eton saying that “it is the object of the father, as a rule, to withdraw his son from local associations, and to take him as far as possible from the sons of his neighbours and dependants.” Honey further adds that the process of learning the new accent was automatic

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Jones in *An English Pronouncing Dictionary* described the *model accent* as follows: “that most usually heard in everyday speech in the families of Southern English persons whose men-folk have been educated at the great public boarding-schools. This pronunciation is also used by a considerable proportion of those who do not come from the South of England, but who have been educated at these schools. The pronunciation may also be heard, to an extent which is considerable though difficult to specify, from persons of education in the South of England who have not been educated at these schools. It is probably accurate to say that a majority of those members of London society who have had a university education, use either pronunciation or a pronunciation not differing very greatly from it.” (1917: viii)

and unconscious and “new boys with local accents were simply shamed out of them by the pressure of the school’s public opinion” (1991: 27). This view is also shared by Milroy, but he believes that tutors and the educational authorities had a decisive role in this process. Milroy (2001: 21) argues that “a minority accent so uniform throughout the country could have been inculcated and maintained in any other way than consciously and deliberately.” Public school graduates would occupy the highest positions in the British society.

The first *de facto* Prime Minister of Great Britain, Robert Walpole, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Oxford, attended Eton College. Winston Churchill attended Harrow, while Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, who followed Churchill in office, attended Eton college. More recently, David Cameron and Boris Johnson, who served as Prime Ministers of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, also attended Eton college. The current British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, attended Winchester College. The main point is that the vast majority of PMs that Great Britain has had attended public schools and speak in flawless RP.

The advent of mass communication and culture brought by the twentieth century initially acted in favour of RP (Lindsey, 2019: 3). Since the first radio broadcast by the BBC in the early 1920s, RP dominated BBC radio for more than fifty years. That is why RP is also known as ‘BBC English.’ The population living in Britain were exposed to RP on a daily basis and it was free of charge. This led to some people modifying their speech towards it. Some thought that the steady spread of RP might result in the loss of certain regional and social accents.

Not everybody living in England speaks in RP. It must be stated that RP only refers to an accent of England, in the sense that it is English, not British (Upton, 2015: 253). This is important because the other countries that form the British Isles (i.e., Scotland, Wales and Ireland) have, apart from regional variations of pronunciations, variants that can be deemed as standards. Estimates vary regarding the use of RP in England. Wells (1982: 118) considers that around 10% of the population uses RP, while, more recently, Romaine (2000: 20) puts the figure at 5%. However, there is no official percentage of RP speakers living in England, and these percentages are simple guesstimates.

Language changes, which means that pronunciation changes as well. This means that RP can change as well. In recent years, RP speakers have been frowned upon by other non-RP speakers. Trudgill (2000: 22) writes that “RP speakers are perceived, as soon as they start speaking, as haughty and unfriendly by non-RP speakers unless and until they are able to demonstrate the contrary.” This stigmatization of upper-class speech together with the fact that more and more positions of influence are being occupied by people with common backgrounds means that RP can no longer, or should no longer be defined in connection to the social elite (Lindsey, 2019: 4). There have been

considerable efforts to preserve the term RP for the modern standard by redefining it. However, despite such efforts, in people’s minds, the label RP is linked with the past and the upper classes<sup>2</sup>.

Gimson (1980) distinguishes several types of RP:

- (i) *Conservative RP*, which is used by the older generation and, traditionally, by certain professions or social groups;
- (ii) *General RP*, most commonly in use and typified by the pronunciation adopted by the BBC;
- (iii) *Advanced RP*, usually used by young people of exclusive social groups – mostly of the upper classes, but also, for prestige value, in certain professional circles.

Wells (1992: 279) divides RP into *mainstream RP*, *U-RP*, *adoptive RP* and *Near-RP*. U-RP, which stands for upper-crust RP, is associated by Wells with dowager duchesses, upper-class army officers, elderly Oxbridge dons, or even jolly-hockey-sticks schoolmistress at an expensive private girls’ school. The second type, adoptive RP, is spoken by adults who did not speak RP as children, but who are forced in a way to “adopt” it due to a change in the person’s social circumstances. The last type of RP that Wells (1992: 285) discusses is *quasi-RP*, which is the product of speech training.

In what follows, let us turn our attention to the description of RP today, with a focus on vowels and consonants and their pronunciation.

## 2. Today’s RP: a description of vowels and consonants

Upton (2004: 218) writes that the RP model which confronts both native speakers and learners is a matter of sounds, that is the phonetic realization of the phonemes of RP imposes the variety. Let us consider Table 1, which comprises modern unmarked vowel transcription for Received Pronunciation, with present-day transcriptions of traditional alternatives.

**Table 1.** Modern unmarked vowel transcription for RP, with present-day transcriptions of traditional alternatives (from Upton, 2015: 255)

Keyword	RP	Trad-RP	Note
KIT	ɪ		
DRESS	ɛ	e	Trad-RP symbol kept conventionally

<sup>2</sup> In recent years, British TV series like *Downton Abbey* and *Belgravia* have enjoyed success due to their portrayal of British life at the beginning of the twentieth century, in Edwardian society. In *Downton Abbey*, for instance, we can identify several accents, starting with RP (used by the Crawley family) and ending with Scottish (used by Mrs. Hughes, the housekeeper).

TRAP	a	æ	Trad-RP symbol kept conventionally
LOT	ɒ		
STRUT	ʌ		
FOOT	ʊ		
BATH	ɑ:~a	ɑ:	Short vowel in northern RP
CLOTH	ɒ	ɒ~ɔ:	Long vowel only in the most rarified trad RP
NURSE	ə:	ɜ:	Symbol difference only
FLEECE	i:		
FACE	eɪ		
PALM	ɑ:		
THOUGHT	ɔ:		
GOAT	əʊ	əʊ~oo	Trad-RP [oo] variant might be resurgent
GOOSE	u:		
PRICE	aɪ	aɪ	Difference largely symbolic
CHOICE	ɔɪ		
MOUTH	aʊ		
NEAR	ɪə		
SQUARE	ɛ:	ɛə~eə	Some off-gliding, rarely full diphthong
START	ɑ:		
NORTH	ɔ:		
FORCE	ɔ:		
CURE	ʊə~ɔ:	ʊə	RP monophthong increasing
happY	i	ɪ	[ɪ] very conservative only
lettER	ə		
commA	ə		

The following discussion is based on Upton (2015: 254-255). Let us concentrate on the differences between RP and trad-RP (representing more traditionally conservative systems of RP).

DRESS: This RP vowel was at or near half-close, [e] being the natural phonetic choice. Nowadays, the vowel seems to be lowered to a point or near half-open, where [ɛ] appears to be the more accurate choice of symbol. In The Oxford

English Dictionary (OED) and the Cambridge English Dictionary (CED) dress is transcribed phonetically with an [e].

TRAP: In this case, the RP vowel has lowered. In the OED and CED the word is transcribed with the [æ] sound.

BATH: Many speakers in Midland and Northern England agree with the southerners in all RP pronunciations except this, where [a] is quite frequently used instead. In the OED and CED the sound is rendered as [ɑ:].

CLOTH: It seems that the [ɔ:] is considered to be recessive and old-fashioned by the vast majority of native British English speakers.

NURSE: The mid-central position is indicated for NURSE and this symbol is simply used to differentiate it from the unstressed commaA vowel. The OED and CED list [ɜ:] as the standard pronunciation.

GOAT: Nowadays there is a consensus that the onset of RP GOAT is considered to be [ə], also listed in the OED and CED.

PRICE: In this particular case, the use of [a] for onset appears to be problematic, since if it is considered to suggest low-front articulation, then it results in pronunciation of a very traditional diphthong. In the OED and CED it is pronounced as the diphthong [aɪ].

SQUARE: In the OED and CED it is transcribed as diphthongal [eə], but RP SQUARE seems to be in fact a monophthong.

CURE: Today CURE is monophthongal [ɜ:], instead of [ʊə], even though OED and CED list the pronunciation [ʊə] as standard. Upton believes that this pronunciation will fade away in the near future and it will be replaced by [ɜ:] for RP.

happy: The short lax vowel is still retained by a few older speakers and is strongly recessive as an RP feature. In the OED and CED it is rendered as [ɪ].

Let us now turn our attention to consonants and see the text frequencies of consonants in RP, as presented below in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Text frequencies of consonants in RP*  
(Source: Cruttenden, 1994: 196)

	%		%
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n	7.58	b	1.97
t	6.42	f	1.79
d	5.14	p	1.78
s	4.81	h	1.46
l	3.66	ŋ	1.15
ð	3.56	g	1.05
r	3.51	ʃ	0.96
m	3.22	j	0.88
k	3.09	dʒ	0.60
w	2.81	tʃ	0.41
z	2.46	θ	0.37
v	2.00	ʒ	0.10

Total all consonants: 60.78%

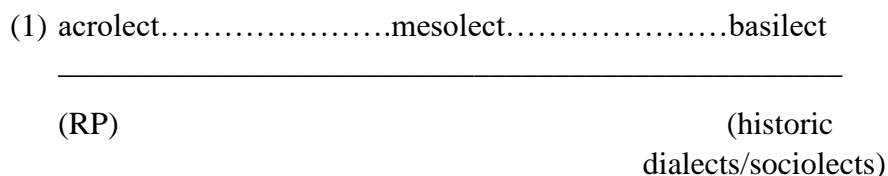
Standard British English is non-rhotic. Beal (2010: 15-16) highlights the fact that in the nineteenth century, non-rhotic pronunciations were condemned, but things changed towards the beginning of the twentieth century. A contribution to this change was Daniel Jones's *Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary*<sup>3</sup> in 1917. It might be argued, therefore, that the spread of non-rhoticity can be seen as a change from below, occurring first in non-standard London English and spreading northwards and being used in high social circles. The rhotic pronunciation became non-standard in English in the early twentieth century until present day. Upton (2015: 256) notes that even though RP is non-rhotic, both 'linking r' (e.g. here and there /hɪər n ðɛ:/ as well as 'intrusive r' (e.g. drawing ['drɔ:ɹɪŋ]) are considered normal, despite the fact that their avoidance is a significant feature of trad-RP.

According to Beal (2010: 18), in several varieties within England, RP included, yod-dropping can be found in words such as *chew*, *rude* and *suit* (/su:t/), and it starts to occur in the noun *news* ([nu:z]). Yod-dropping, Beal (2010: 18) argues, occurs also after /n/, /t/ and /d/ in words like *new*, *tune*, *due*. Upton (2015: 256) states that in informal speech, yod coalescence is expected. This means that /sj/ in a word like *assume* can become /ʃ/, /zj/ becomes /z/ in *resume*, /tj/ can go to /tʃ/ in *Tuesday* and /dj/ to /dʒ/ in *due*.

<sup>3</sup> In the *Introduction* to his dictionary, Jones wrote that "RP means merely 'widely understood pronunciation,' and that I do not hold it up as a standard which everyone is recommended to adopt' (1917: xvi). He further adds that "the fact that RP and approximations to it are easily understood almost everywhere in the English-speaking world does not mean that RP is used by a majority of English-speaking people. On the contrary, it is used by a rather small minority" (1917: xvi). Jones acknowledges the fact that RP does not represent the English used by the vast majority of people living in England and that it should not be seen as the norm or the pronunciation that people should adopt. RP is not intrinsically better or more beautiful than other form of pronunciation.

### 3. Acrolect and hyperlect: nuances of RP

Some linguists believe that it is useful to use, when discussing varieties of language and accents, the terminology proposed by Stewart (1965) and Bickerton (1971) regarding the creole continuum, to display approximate positions along a line which represent the standard (acrolect), the intermediate (mesolect) and extreme non-standard (basilect). For the pronunciation of British English, we would have the following situation:



(Source: Honey, 1985: 247)

Honey (1985: 247) acknowledges that in this case the concepts acrolect and basilect are “theoretical constructs”. In order to be useful, the notion of acrolect, which stands for a notional standard, must accommodate, in the case of British English, the fact of different types of RP. However, this might raise a number of problems in terms of terminology. Gimson’s (1980) classification of RP into *conservative*, *general* and *advanced*, as aforementioned, seems to be the most accurate one. Honey (1985), on the other hand, deems it necessary to draw a distinction between what he calls *marked* and *unmarked* RP, where *unmarked* RP refers to the mainstream form, and *markings* are “linguistic signals of certain forms of social privilege or pretension” (Gimson, 1985: 248). To put it bluntly, *unmarked* RP is ‘talking proper’ whereas *marked* RP is ‘talking posh’.

Honey (1985: 252) introduces the concept of *hyperlect*, in an attempt to distinguish the different types of RP. *Hyperlect* refers to the speech of speakers who have been born into privileged families where such a variety of marked RP accent is used, or were educated in officer-training establishments or universities in which these forms are traditional. A third concept that Honey mentions is *paralect*, meaning *nearly* or *approximate* (from the Greek particle *para-*). This would mean that *acrolect* depicts Wells’s (1992) mainstream RP, *hyperlect* describes the U-RP and *paralect* refers to Near-RP.

Despite these differences in terminology, we can agree that RP should be redefined as it is the only concept that exists for an entire spectrum of non-localised varieties. There is variation within RP and it is interesting to see how this accent will adapt to the future.



#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to review some of the most important theories regarding Received Pronunciation. We have seen how this class accent has come into being, and the pivotal role played by public schools in shaping this type of pronunciation. The vowel and consonant systems of RP today have been presented and briefly commented upon. The last section has highlighted some of the concepts used to identify different “types” of RP and the potential problems that they might raise.

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