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J.C. WELLS

A Phonetic Update on RP

J.C. Wells, efterträdare till Daniel Jones och A.C. Gimson som professor i fonetik vid University College London, ger här en översikt över RP-uttalets utveckling under de senaste hundra åren. Wells publicerade 1982 *Accents of English 1-3*, det ledande standardverket om engelskans uttal regionalt och socialt, och är ensam ansvarig för den nya *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* som utkom i mars 1990.

Daniel Jones, Britain's best-known phonetician, was born in 1881. His codification of Received Pronunciation as a standard for the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) dates from the end of the first World War: the first edition of *An English Pronouncing Dictionary* was published in 1917, that of *An Outline of English Phonetics* in 1918. Today's secondary school pupils were born in 1970-1980, ninety to a hundred years after Jones. Clearly it cannot be right to insist on their following a pronunciation model that represents the usage of English people born almost a complete century before they were themselves. This article, therefore, is an attempt to summarize the most important phonetic changes that have taken place in RP over the last hundred years, and ways in which the Jones model is no longer fully appropriate. Many of the points, I have no doubt, will already be familiar to EFL teachers in Sweden; but some may come as a surprise.

The RP phoneme inventory of vowels and consonants remains unchanged, except for one development among the diphthongs: namely, the disappearance of /əə/ as a distinct phoneme, through its falling in with /ɔ:/. Thus the possibility which used to exist, of distinguishing between *floor* /flɔə/ and *flaw* /flɔ:/, is no longer available, and in modern RP these words are categorical homophones. So likewise are *pour*—*pore*—*paw*, *lore*—*law*, and *drawer* 'draglåda'—*draw*. (A consequence of this merger is the widespread tendency to use intrusive /r/ not only after /ə/ but also after /ɔ:/, as in *thawing* /^hθɔ:riŋ/). Jones himself readily admitted that 'many speakers ... do not use the diphthong əə at all, but replace it always by ɔ:' (1932: §458); hence I find it disappointing that even such a generally up-to-date work as *Stora engelsk-svenska ordboken* still feels it appropriate to include [əə] in its list of symbols—though it does quite rightly make virtually no use of it in the transcriptions of headwords.

The diphthong /ʊə/, too, has fallen into a decline, though it remains a part of the system inasmuch as *jury*, for instance, still does not rhyme with *story*: /^hdʒʊəri, 'stɔ:ri/. However, many words which once had /ʊə/ are now increasingly pronounced with /ɔ:/ instead. In

a recent survey (described below) I found that for *poor* the pronunciation /pɔ:/ (i.e. identical to *pour*) was preferred over /pʊə/ (i.e. different from *pour*) by a ratio of 4:3. There was a significant correlation with age, since for the oldest group of respondents (born before 1962) the ratio was 1:3, while for the youngest group (born since 1962) it was as high as 4:1. Taking all age-groups together, 57% preferred /pɔ:/. So /pʊə/ is definitely on the way out, as correctly pointed out by Johansson and Rønnerdal (1985: 53); the advice given by Hedberg (1953: 58), "dessa uttal [sc. /pɔ:/] behöver alls icke härmas" is no longer appropriate. Similar ratios probably apply to *sure* (nowadays increasingly /ʃɔ:/, just like *shore*—*Shaw*); for *your* and *you're* I am confident that the preference for /ɔ:/ would be even stronger.

In Jones's young days the usual RP vowel in words such as *off*, *loss*, *cost*, *cloth*, *often*, was long /ɔ:/. Nowadays this pronunciation has all but disappeared: today we use short /ɒ/, so that these words have the same vowel sound as *lot*. W.S. Gilbert's pun on *often* and *orphan* does not work for modern audiences. Jones himself acknowledged this change, in later editions of his works recognizing the predominance of /ɒ/ in such words. In my survey only 4 respondents out of 275 preferred /ɔ:/ in *often*, and they were all aged over 65. Furthermore, /ɔ:/ is now increasingly giving way to /ɒ/ in another group of words, namely those such as *false*, *salt*, where the vowel is followed by /l/ plus a voiceless consonant.

Many readers of this article were no doubt brought up on a system for transcribing the vowels different from the one I am using here, writing *kit*, *lot*, *foot*, *nurse* with the symbols /i, ɔ, u, ə:/ rather than the /i, ɒ, ʊ, ə:/ which have now become standard among phoneticians working on RP. This notation change, introduced by Gimson (1962), then applied in his 14th edition of Jones's *EPD* and subsequently very widely adopted, is a sensible reform inasmuch as it highlights the fact that the difference between *sheep* /ʃi:p/ and *ship* /ʃɪp/, for example, depends much more on vowel quality (colour, timbre) than it does on vowel length; and similarly for *caught* /kɔ:t/ and *cot* /kɒt/, *shoot* /ʃu:t/ and *foot* /fʊt/.

We correspondingly now write the diphthongs /eɪ, əʊ, aɪ, aʊ, oɪ, ɪə, eə, uə/, in place of the earlier /ei, ou, ai.../. Here there is one change which represents more than an altered transcriptional convention. The diphthong in words like *goat*, *nose*, used to be pronounced with a back quality and lip-rounding throughout, so that the notation [ou, ʊv] was acceptable. Nowadays, however, it is pronounced in RP with a first element that is characteristically central and unrounded. That is to say, it starts with an [ə] or [ɜ:] quality. Gimson was therefore right to introduce the new symbolization /əʊ/ reflecting the change.

In words like *November*, *molest* there used to be a special unstressed monophthongal variety of this diphthong, transcribed by Jones as [o], thus [nə'vembə]. With the change in the quality of the stressed diphthong, [o] has become obsolete. We use either [ə] or ordinary [əʊ] in this position: /nə(ʊ)'vembə/. Furthermore, in a word such as *going* /'gəʊɪŋ/, any reduction ('smoothing') of the full vowel sequence now leaves a derived diphthong of the [əɪ] type, rather than the [oɪ] recorded by Jones.

One further development relating to this diphthong deserves mention, although it can well be ignored by EFL learners. This is the increasing use of a special allophone [ɒʊ] when it is followed by /l/, as in *roll*, *shoulder*: [rɒʊt, 'ʃʊʊldə]. Here the first element is back open rounded, like the vowel of *lot* /lɒt/. (For further details, see Wells, 1982: 298, 312-3. I do not use this allophone myself.)

There have been a number of changes in the vowels of unstressed syllables. At the end of words such as *city*, *coffee*, *valley* the traditional RP vowel is short /ɪ/ (the vowel of *bit*). Increasingly, though, speakers now use instead a tenser vowel which they equate with the /i:/ of *beat*. In this word-final unstressed environment there is no real linguistic contrast between these two vowel qualities, and we may accordingly speak of the context-sensitive **neutralization** of the distinction. Some recent works, including *LDOCE* and Roach (1985), have adopted the symbol /i/ to reflect this neutralization, and I have done the same in my *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* which has just been published. The same applies in unstressed position before a vowel, in words such as *radiate* /'reɪdiət/, *various* /'veəriəs/, where a quality nearer to /i:/ than to /ɪ/ is now very widespread in RP. A corresponding neutralization of the back vowels /u:/ and /ʊ/, appropriately written /u/, is found in words such as *situation* /,sɪtʃu'eɪʃn/.

In various unstressed positions before a consonant, /ɪ/ is gradually being supplanted by /ə/. This applies particularly after /r/, as in *warren*, *angrily*, *secret*, *separately*, now usually /'wɒrən, 'æŋgrəli, 'si:kɾət, 'seprətli/; in the ending *-ity*, as *quality*, *sanity*, now usually /'kwɒləti, 'sænəti/; and in the weak endings *-ate*, *-ible*, *-less*, *-ness*, as in *private*, *possible*, *carelessness* /'praɪvət, 'pɒsəbl, 'keələsnəs/. Jones had /ɪ/ in these words, but my advice to today's EFL learners would be to use /ə/. Pronouncing *visibility* as /,vɪzɪ'bɪlɪti/, as Jones did, now has a very old-fashioned ring: most RP speakers in the 1990's say /,vɪzə'bɪləti/. The same change is also increasingly heard in the endings *-ed* (*waited*) and *-es* (*churches*) and in the unstressed prefixes *e-*, *de-*, *re-* (*effect*, *denote*, *remember*), though here it is not so widespread as in the other cases mentioned.

There have also been changes in the typical quality of certain vowels, although we do not reflect them in the phonetic transcription

we use. For example, it is clear that /æ/, as in *trap*, has become rather opener—more similar to Swedish short *a*. The pronunciation in newsreels from the 1930's and 1940's now sounds remarkably old-fashioned in this respect: whenever a phrase such as *that man* comes up, it tends to sound as if it were *thet men*. Another reason for this impression of old-fashionedness seems to be that a different kind of voice quality was then customary among newsreaders, a kind that has now fallen into neglect.

Other vowel qualities that have altered over the last hundred years include /u:/, ʊ/ (less back), /ə:/ (closer, more rounded), and /ʌ/ (fronter).

Among consonants, the most important developments concern the glottal stop (stämbandsklusilen). As well as its traditional occasional use to emphasize an initial vowel, as in *It's awful!* [ɪts 'ʔɔ:fl], the glottal stop is nowadays widely used (a) to **reinforce** /p, t, k, tʃ/ and (b) to **replace** the usual alveolar articulation of /t/, or at least to **mask** the sound of the alveolar release. Both of these new possibilities are restricted to certain syllable-final environments.

Examples of the reinforcing glottal stop, which remains optional, are *April* ['eɪ(ʔ)prəl], *country* ['kʌn(ʔ)tri], *accurate* ['æ(ʔ)kjʊrət], *teacher* ['ti:(ʔ)tʃə]. Examples of the replacing glottal stop are *atmosphere* ['æʔməʃiə], *atlas* ['æʔləs], *football* ['fʊʔbɔ:l], *it's quite good* [ɪʔs 'kwaiʔ 'gʊd], *what's that?* ['wɒʔs 'ðæʔ]. The phonetic environments in which this replacing [ʔ] is used are those where the preceding sound is a vowel, /n/, or /l/, and the following sound is a consonant (particularly a plosive or fricative). In these positions the glottal stop as a replacement for syllable-final /t/ is by now very general, at least in casual RP speech; even before a following zero (pause) or vowel sound it is by no means unusual. (Reinforcement, rather than replacement, is also possible in these environments: thus ['æʔtləs], etc.) Perhaps the day has not yet quite come (nɒʔ jeʔ kwaiʔ kʌm) when we shall need to teach the glottal stop as an obligatory positional allophone of /t/, but it is certainly approaching. There are already plenty of speakers whose **usual** pronunciation of *it is* is [ɪʔ] rather than [ɪt].

The glottal stop is also often used to reinforce or replace [p] before another [p] or [b], as in *soap powder* ['səʊp(ʔ)paʊdə], and [k] before another [k] or [g], as in *bookcase* ['bʊʔ(k)keɪs].

Other important developments among consonants are those affecting the liquids. For /r/, the old option of a tapped [or 'flapped'] r has largely fallen into disuse: in *very sorry*, *three* most RP speakers now use an apico-post-alveolar approximant similar to that used in other positions. (It differs from the typical Swedish /r/, of course, which is either fricative or rolled.) The sequences /tr/ and /dr/,

however, are pronounced as affricates: *train* /treɪn/ sounds fairly similar to *chain* /tʃeɪn/—something that Johansson and Rönnerdal, 1985, surprisingly fail to mention.

In the case of /l/, the difference between clear [l] (before vowels) and dark [ɫ] (elsewhere) is increasing. This is due to the growing tendency to **vocalize** dark /l/, i.e. to pronounce it like a vowel or semi-vowel of the [o, w] type. Although this is still often considered a local-accent feature (and thus typical of Cockney rather than of RP), there are many RP speakers who use it in casual speech, particularly adjacent to labials: thus *myself* [maɪ'seɪf] (alongside the conservative [maɪ'seɪf]), *tables* ['teɪbɔz] (alongside ['teɪbɫz]). Related developments include not only the new allophone of /əʊ/ discussed above but also a tendency to change [i:] to [iʊ] or [iə] before dark /l/, as in *feel*, traditionally /fi:l/ but now often /fiəl/. As a consequence, the traditional distinction between *reel* /ri:l/ and *real* /riəl/ is disappearing. Pairs such as *royal-oil*, *trial-mile*, *towel-foul* also tend nowadays to rhyme perfectly.

All the above-mentioned developments relate to RP phonetics as a whole, and thus affect large numbers of words. There are other changes which concern just single words or single affixes: as, for example, the tendency for *nephew* to be pronounced /'nefju:/ in place of the earlier /'nevju:/ (compare its source, the French *neveu*). Changes of this kind tend to have a high profile and to be the subject of heated *controversy* (now often /kən'trɒvəsi/, in place of the classical /'kɒntrəvə:si, -vəs-/).

In the course of compiling the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* I considered the question how to report authoritatively on matters of this kind. The solution I found was to conduct an opinion poll. I drew up a questionnaire covering some ninety contentious words, and circulated it to a panel of British people interested in speech. I got back 275 usable replies, including those of more than 60 academic phoneticians or linguists, 50 school or college teachers, and 30 BBC announcers. On the basis of this sample, I am able to quote percentage figures of speakers preferring this or that pronunciation, and the figures appear at the relevant entries in the dictionary. Thus for example the /f/ pronunciation of *nephew* turns out to be the preference of 79% of my respondents, with only 21% preferring /v/. This figure rises to 92% in favour of /f/ if we consider only those born since 1948. It is clear that by now all dictionaries of English ought to give priority to /'nefju:/ (even though I myself say /'nevju:/...).

Here are ten other words for which my sample exhibits significant age-grading (i.e. the older respondents' preference is significantly different from that of the younger respondents). In each case the 'older' variant is given first, the 'younger' or newer one second.

Figures indicate the percentage of those expressing an opinion who preferred the variant specified. In these words (though not, of course, in all words I investigated) the newer variant is also by now the majority preference, taking all age-groups together.

<i>suit</i>	/sju:t/	28%	/su:t/	72%
<i>transistor</i>	/- ¹ sɪstə/	37%	/- ¹ zɪstə/	63%
<i>usage</i>	/ ¹ ju:zɪdʒ/	28%	/ ¹ ju:sɪdʒ/	72%
<i>accomplish</i>	/ə ¹ kɒmplɪʃ/	8%	/ə ¹ kʌmplɪʃ/	92%
<i>zebra</i>	/ ¹ zi:brə/	17%	/ ¹ zebrə/	83%
<i>deity</i>	/ ¹ di:ɪti,-əti/	20%	/ ¹ deɪti,-əti/	80%
<i>inherent</i>	/ɪn ¹ hɪərənt/	34%	/ɪn ¹ herənt/	66%
<i>applicable</i>	/ ¹ æplɪkəbl/	23%	/ə ¹ plɪkəbl/	77%
<i>exquisite</i>	/ ¹ ekskwɪzɪt/	31%	/ɪk ¹ skwɪzɪt, ek-/	69%
<i>primarily</i>	/ ¹ praɪməri/	49%	/praɪ ¹ merəli, - ¹ mɛər-, - ¹ mær-/	51%

When his *Phonetic Readings in English* was reissued (1955), Jones added an interesting Preface in which he discusses “changes in pronunciation which have taken place in the course of the last forty years”. As well as the change from /ɔ:/ to /ɒ/ in words such as *cloth* (see above), he mentions the following points:

again, against now usually with /e/ rather than /eɪ/ (in my own survey, 80% preferred /e/);

room with /u:/ rather than /ʊ/ (my survey: 82%);

bank-note now with initial stress (I do not think I have ever heard it said with double stress, which is how it was shown in the first edition of the *Readings*);

hospitable with antepenultimate stress rather than initial stress (my survey: 80%).

He also comments on a decline in the use of linking /r/ and the rarity of /hw/ rather than simple /w/ for words spelt *wh-*.

From these sprightly observations, offered by Jones at the age of 74, recording ways in which his own pronunciation no longer constituted a suitable model, I think we can conclude that were he still alive today, a further 35 years on, he would warmly welcome our attempts to continue the modernization of RP.

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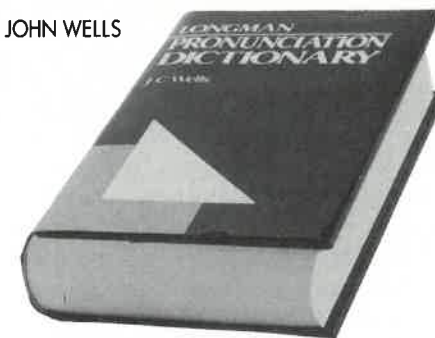
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