

# RP as sociolinguistic object<sup>1</sup>

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## *Introduction*

From these sprightly observations, offered by [Daniel] 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. (Wells 1990b: 8)

In the linguistic literature there are many descriptions of the phonological and phonetic characteristics of Received Pronunciation or RP. There is however one influential sociolinguistic paradigm, the field of descriptive or Labovian sociolinguistics, also known as Language Variation and Change (Chambers, Trudgill and Schilling-Estes 2001), or as Accent Studies (Foulkes and Docherty 1999: 4) where RP tends to be somewhat neglected. The discipline is largely concentrated on the study of non-standard varieties (see e.g. the collection in Foulkes and Docherty 1999), as must befit a modern dialectological discipline essentially concerned with linguistic diversity.

One of the aims of this paper, then, is to advance the case that RP has a place within descriptive sociolinguistics. In addition, by exploring the current and changing status of Received

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Pronunciation in the wider sociolinguistic landscape of Britain, the discussion will highlight several ways in which sociolinguistic and linguistic studies of RP can mutually enrich each other.

First, since it is obviously true that RP speakers are just as much a part of the British speech community as everyone else, the social characteristics and linguistic features displayed by these speakers provide a basis for empirical study (section 2 below). Secondly, an important theoretical distinction between two types of RP, here labelled native-RP and construct-RP will be presented, as it enables us to identify the object of sociolinguistic study more clearly (section 3). Thirdly, the discussion focuses on the status of the RP variety within the British linguistic scene as a whole, which has shifted considerably in recent years. Trudgill (2001:176) for example goes so far as to claim that

In many sections of British society, some of the strongest sanctions are exercised against people who are perceived as being 'posh' and 'snobbish'.

Windsor Lewis also writes that (1985: 255)

“the problem [of accent prejudice] is evaporating. The present younger generation are less and less in sympathy with the attitudes that sustained it.”

These currents of opinion have had a profound effect on the earlier hegemony of the RP accent within England, as witnessed by changes in the BBC's broadcasting practices, for example (Trudgill 2001:176). A case study of attitudinal change in Denmark will be presented here, as an example of future directions that sociolinguistic work could take (sections 4 and 5). Fourthly, phonetic changes such as t-glottalling, l-vocalisation, and various vowel shifts are currently being documented among RP speakers (see e.g. Wells 1990b, 1994, 1997, Trudgill 2001, Fabricius 2000). These changes are often characterised as Estuary English (Rosewarne 1984, 1994, Wells 1998) or as modern RP (Trudgill 2001, Fabricius 2000) and sociological distinctions can help to separate these two concepts (section 5). Finally, the pedagogical

status of RP is a topic of current debate, and sociolinguistic considerations can also make a contribution here (section 6).

### *1. Social class and sociolinguistics*

One of the most influential textbooks in quantitative sociolinguistics, Chambers (1995:37), in discussing the relevance of different social classes to sociolinguistic theorising, states:

The "upper class," consisting of people with inherited wealth and privileges, is so inconsequential – nonexistent outside Europe and Asia and dwindling rapidly there – that it will not be considered here.

Schneider's (1999:51) review of Chambers takes up this point, but argues that, from within the field of sociolinguistics:

we are less well-informed about [upper-class] speech patterns, attitudes, and model character, and although it may be true that for sociolinguistic purposes they are rather irrelevant, that still does not imply non-existence, – for sociolinguistic modelling, a continuum of which one pole just does not exist, would not be very convincing.

I would take Schneider's point as well-made (although I would not entirely agree that the upper class is always 'rather irrelevant' in sociolinguistic terms). Many sociolinguistic surveys of the Labovian type stop at the middle class, and, indeed, as Macaulay (2002: 398) points out, social class has to some extent been sidelined compared to ethnicity, social networks and gender as important sociolinguistic categories. Kroch's (1995) investigation of the upper-class of Philadelphia is almost alone in the literature. This is not to imply that writers of pronunciation dictionaries of RP do not take the speech community into account. That is patently not true: Wells' (1999) internet-based pronunciation survey is an excellent case in point. The modest claim put forward here is simply that quantitative sociolinguistics can (and should) accommodate RP as one of the varieties of English which can be observed sociolinguistically.

## 2. *Native RP versus Construct RP*

In saying, "let's observe RP sociolinguistically", one immediately runs into some barriers. One of them is the fact that BBC recordings of the 1950s sound so archaic. This leads many (especially journalists) to say 'no-one speaks RP anymore'.<sup>2</sup> This, I would maintain, is a categorical way of looking at things, following Chambers' (1995:25) formulation of the ultimately Chomskyan "axiom of categoricity", the idea that all linguistic units are invariant, discrete and qualitative, leading to the idea that we can formulate a description of RP which will tie down that object forever. However, as the development of sociolinguistics and the concept of the variable has shown us, language in a sociolinguistic perspective is variant, continuous, and quantitative; see also Hudson (1996:20-69). RP changes in form and in status, and this is an object of study in itself, and ultimately relevant to, among other areas, foreign language pedagogy (see section 6).

The next barrier to breach is the inherent ambiguity of the term RP itself. Fabricius (2000, 2002) introduces the terms native-RP (or n-RP) and construct-RP (or c-RP) to try to resolve the ambiguity.<sup>3</sup> The former is an object for sociolinguistic observation, derived by examination of speech data from a sample of the community. In line with sociolinguistic practice, the community members are crucially identified using educational and social class backgrounds, in order to avoid the circularity involved in using linguistic criteria. Construct-RP, on the other hand, is an idealised phenomenon involving (perhaps multiplex) notions of correctness and 'norms of pronunciation'. C-RP has been codified many times, with some variability, as can be seen from disagreements between the LPD (Wells 1990, 2000) and the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of the EPD (Roach and Hartmann 1997), see Cruttenden (1997). The term RP as it is usually used encompasses both n-RP and c-RP. If this ambiguity is resolved by using two separate terms, then, alongside the idea that language is

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<sup>2</sup> See for example the press coverage of Harrington et al. (2000). The Guardian furnished their report with a somewhat hysterical byline "Special report: the future of the monarchy".

<sup>3</sup> The naming of this distinction evolved from discussions with John Wells in 1997.

variable, we have the possibility of examining both kinds of RP as sociolinguistic objects. When we talk about 'changes in RP', then, we are talking about two related, but separate, processes: change in n-RP or change in c-RP. The former is change in speech or pronunciation production by successive generations, while the latter represents changes in language norms, in notions of correctness, and even in language attitudes more generally over time. Clearly the two processes of change are related, but must be considered separately. Thus, since native-RP relies essentially on the speech of a group of people, we can observe continuity as well as change over generations of RP speakers' productions. The forces of linguistic change which act on all varieties of a language also apply to n-RP, whether internally-motivated endogenous or contact-induced exogenous changes (Trudgill 1999). Popular or folk-linguistic notions of, and about, correctness or standardness also undergo change, due to societal developments, and these changes belong to the arena of developments in c-RP. In addition, in recognition of the variability of n-RP and c-RP described in detail by Cruttenden (2001) and Wells (1982), perhaps it would be more appropriate to refer to native and construct RPs in the plural.

### *3. Studying changing language attitudes*

While observation of the community of RP speakers will shed light on linguistic changes in progress, changes in language attitudes are usually investigated using techniques and evaluation measures which have been developed and refined since the paradigm led by Howard Giles in the UK in the 1970s (see Giles and Coupland 1991:32-59, Ryan and Giles 1982, Giles et al. 1990). The evaluations which commonly applied to RP speakers in the research carried out in the 1970s and 1980s can be characterised as a combination of high status and low sociability. This traditional division was between Competence or Status on the one hand (characterised in such traits as being *gifted, ambitious, efficient, independent* and Sociability or Solidarity on the other (characterised in terms of being *pleasant, trustworthy, interesting, straightforward*). This was the contrast employed in research car-

ried out on the distinctions between standard and non-standard varieties. Kristiansen (2001), however, discusses research carried out in a regional centre in Denmark (Næstved, a town located on the island of Zealand, some eighty km from the capital Copenhagen) He investigated adolescent attitudinal reactions to a variety of Copenhagen accents, ranging in social status from High status ('posh') through two Moderate accents (Moderate high and Moderate low) to a distinct Low Copenhagen (working class) voice. The results indicate that the adolescent reactions did not use the traditional Status/Solidarity distinction, but rather a cross-cutting distinction which combines the traits in different ways. This division Kristiansen characterises as Superiority (being seen as *gifted, ambitious, pleasant, trustworthy*) versus Dynamism (being seen as *efficient, independent, interesting, straightforward*). That these should be the relevant distinctive parameters became particularly apparent after a repeat of the initial data collection in 1989, conducted by Kristiansen nine years later in 1998. The following diagram shows the average scores allocated to the different voices in different years, where the lowest scores are the most positive. The numbers refer to the different Copenhagen speech samples as follows: 5= HIGH, 2= MODERATE HIGH, 6 = MODERATE LOW, 3=LOW.

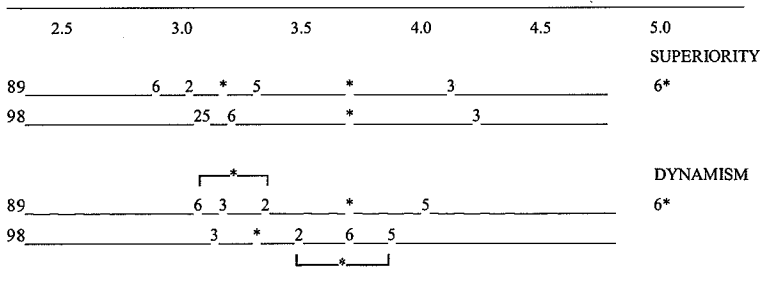


Figure 6 from Kristiansen (2001:21). Speaker evaluations, 1989 and 1998, Superiority and Dynamism. (Ns =56 and 61); \*= $p < 0.05$ ; 1= positive, 7= negative.

The important developments here can be seen, firstly, in the changes in evaluations according to superiority, where the highest status voice, 5, from 1989 to 1998 comes to be included in the

group having the highest status, alongside the two moderate voices. The Low Copenhagen voice is still downgraded in terms of superiority. However, on the other dimension, the change from 1989 to 1998 involves an isolation of the Low Copenhagen voice as the most positively rated voice of Dynamism. On this basis, Kristiansen argues that (2001:18)

The Competence versus Sociability (or Status versus Solidarity) distinction has been derived from research into people's attitudes towards standard versus non-standard speech. So if this distinction is of no importance to young Naestveders as they relate to differently accented 'low' and 'high' Copenhagen speech, *it is simply because the whole range of Copenhagen speech variation is standard Danish to them* [emphasis added].

Furthermore, these results are interpreted as indicating a split in the notion of 'standard', so that appropriateness and positive evaluation are now being linked to specific contexts. Kristiansen claims that Danish adolescents are responding to changes in society, such that two standards can be seen to be operating. Kristiansen characterises the split thus (2001: 21f):

On the one hand, we have the public domain of education and business, and on the other the public domain of the modern spoken media. There is quite a difference between these domains in the kind of social status and prestige they offer. I do believe that the representation of 'excellence' in terms of Superiority is a time-honoured creation of the school and the business world. This is where 'excellence' means to be *gifted, ambitious, nice, and trustworthy*. ...the representation of 'excellence' in terms of Dynamism, on the other hand, is a relatively new creation of the media world...where making a great career means being fast-talking, relaxed and confident. In the world of studio hosts, 'excellence' means to be *efficient, independent, interesting and straightforward*.

As Kristiansen points out, this media world in Denmark is dominated by Low Copenhagen voices. The idea of the media as a channel for new areas of acceptance for different (and previously stigmatised) varieties of a language certainly strikes a chord with the situation in Britain where an expanded media landscape has proven to be open to many types of British regional accents, and especially London-flavoured ones, both on the BBC and commercial channels. Perhaps we can find empirical evidence for John Morrish's claim in the *Independent on Sunday*, (22 March 1999):

Once, people aspired to be posh: it was the voice of the people in power – in the law, in the City, in the Establishment. Now there are plenty of people who would be ashamed to speak like that. A posh voice is seen as naff and unfashionable.

It remains to be seen whether younger generations do indeed judge RP and regional accents differently from previous generations in the 1970s, and whether new combinations of characteristics prove to be salient, as in the Danish context.

#### 4. *Current linguistic and attitudinal changes*

As far as changes in native RPs are concerned, Wells (1982:106) predicted the direction and impetus of this change when he wrote "Mainstream RP is now the subject of imminent invasion by trends spreading from working-class urban speech, particularly that of London". The linguistic changes currently evident in the English speech community, and in younger RP speakers, include: t-glottalling (Fabricius 2000, 2002), happY-tensing (Fabricius 2001b), l-vocalisation (Torgersen 1997), r-fronting/labialisation (Foulkes and Docherty 2000), and fronting and unrounding of FOOT and GOOSE vowels (Torgersen 1997). For further overviews, see also Wells (1994, 1997) and Foulkes and Docherty (1999). There is presently a large amount of ongoing work focussed on the characteristics and trajectories of these changes within different social class groups in England and the rest of the UK, and as this paper suggests, the upper middle class and upper class are also rele-



vant social groups in this context. This brings us to the discussion of the term Estuary English and how it differs from RP. To avoid circularity in identifying EE (and RP speakers) we take a social class identification as basic, in accordance with the discussion of native-RP above. Trudgill (2001) represents the sociolinguistic consensus, that Estuary English is essentially a lower-middle class accent, not an upper middle class or upper-class accent. The present sociolinguistic consensus, as expressed by Trudgill (2001:178), is that:

the label actually refers to the lower middle-class accents of the Home Counties which surround London: Essex and Kent, which do border on the Thames Estuary, but also parts or all of Surrey, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Hertfordshire

In other words, the social and educational backgrounds of EE speakers will be significantly different from the upper-middle class and upper-class individuals who are the modern generation of RP speakers. Despite increased social mobility in Britain since World War II, Britain remains a class-differentiated society (argued forcefully in Adonis and Pollard 1997).

As regards changes in construct-RPs, these can be investigated from many angles. An overarching theme to pursue in this regard would be the linguistic effects of the societal-wide movement from modernity to late modernity (Giddens 1994), a movement which Coupland (2000: 632) describes thus:

Traditional social structures of class, sex and age-based distinction are weakening, and it is largely those structures that fostered hegemonic ideologies of language 'standardness'.

Coupland hastens to add that this does not entail that "linguistic prescriptivism and prejudice will 'naturally' recede" (2000:633), but, in his opinion, the Standard English ideology of institutions such as schools and universities may find itself in competition with a vastly widened media landscape where "we will see new patterns of standardisation, new elites, and new forms of stigmatisation" (ibid).

Coupland sees this weakening as part of a larger set of "welcome centrifugal tendencies" (2000: 633) which will open society up, increasing the possibility that a wider range of styles and varieties of speech will become acceptable in old and new domains of influence and prestige, and perhaps, in the process, deconstruct the notion of 'acceptability', so that it becomes diffuse. This should certainly be part of a future research agenda as far as RP is concerned.

These centrifugal processes can be seen at work at a micro-level in the following examples. The first consists of two spontaneous comments from an interview recorded in 1998, which give some instances of normative behaviour and a clash between generations as to notions of correctness or appropriateness:

I: um did your mother and father ever talk about um  
the way that you spoke as a child

R: yes... not so much me as the other two [younger siblings] cause the other two used to glottally stop all the time so they'd go 'wha'[wɒʔ] and my mother'd go 'what' [wɒt'] like this

In this excerpt, the interviewee reports on and demonstrates her mother's correction of the glottalled pronunciation of 'what', presenting her mother as using the ejective [tʰ] (interestingly, not aspirated [t<sup>h</sup>]) as the normative model. The mother is of course here following the societal condemnation of glottalled /t/ which has been much reported in the media in Britain (Foulkes and Docherty 1999: 11). However, the interviewee then reports on her own reactions to aspects of her mother's pronunciation, which she feels is overly 'posh' and too reminiscent of 1950s BBC pronunciation:

R: there's sort of a slight backlash going on at the moment my mother says 'yer' she says like he's twenty-three years [jɜ:z] old and it's like "No, mother, 'year'" [jɪə]

I: so you're correcting her

R: trying to sort of slightly bring this back down to not quite so much like 50's BBC television presenters sort of Morecambe (...)

Note that the interviewer's comment "so you're correcting her" isn't accepted by the speaker as a gloss of what the daughter is doing here. Rather, the process is characterised as "bringing this back down", from a place which is in some sense too 'high', and thus, I would venture, too 'posh', or too 'snobby'. This type of anecdotal evidence, elicited in interview situations where the focus is on language attitudes, can give valuable micro-level insights into changes in norms and normative behaviour.

Another type of anecdotal evidence which concerns the sociolinguistic place of RP is to be found on a more society-wide level. This consists of the kind of journalism on linguistic topics which crops up regularly in the media. While such journalists' grasp of linguistics can vary widely, this does not mean that such articles should necessarily be dismissed out of hand by professional linguists. As texts they can be quite revealing of mainstream (and minority) attitudes to language, and thus useful as indicators of the flow of public opinion. I shall discuss just one example here: a feature article by India Knight in the *Sunday Times*, 11 November 2001, available online on the Estuary English page at <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/educres.htm>. Knight's essay was spurred by the Glaswegian Speaker of the House of Commons, Michael Martin's sacking of his secretary, Charlotte Every, 38, on the grounds that her accent 'got on his nerves'. Ms Every, as a speaker of RP, was characterised as speaking like a 'Sloane Ranger' (the 1980's term for what could be characterised as *advanced RP* in Gimson's terms).

On the basis of this, Knight claims that "political correctness has sprung to the rescue of every single kind of accent", except her own, that people will "laugh like drains at the absurdity of public school voices", while regional accents are defended, she claims, on the grounds that "it's terribly important to maintain this kind of regional linguistic diversity". This 'inverted snobbery', according to Knight, has led (advanced) RP speakers to adopt a habit of

"drop[ping] the accent a notch or three" in certain circumstances, mainly because "speaking properly is more trouble than it's worth". She then lists a series of assumptions which are made when people hear an RP accent:

you are immediately viewed with hostile suspicion, the implication being you are probably some ghastly plummy nob, your very existence confirming the fact that there are still people who sneer down their long, well-bred noses at the plebs. You are also viewed with defensiveness (despite what we're constantly being told about classless societies, the vast majority of people in Britain are desperately chippy) and with mistrust (see Nasty Nick in Big Brother: private education makes you too clever by half, and also sneaky).

These character traits, cleverness, snobbishness, lack of social skills and untrustworthiness, are immediately reminiscent of typical responses to RP accents in language attitude studies in the 1970s and 1980s (section 4 above). For India Knight, these reactions are "mronic in their predictability", with the result that:

we Sloane-speakers have become a fraudulent, beleaguered minority, pretending to be something we are not every time we open our mouths...To the rest of the world, though, we are the proud(ish) possessors of the only accent in Britain that is still an albatross.

India Knight, however, is not the only RP speaker to feel put upon in this way. Boris Johnson, an Old Etonian and one-time editor of the Spectator, now a Conservative MP, claimed in 1999 that he had been sacked as a presenter on BBC Radio 4's "The Week in Westminster" because of his accent, which he claimed the radio station deemed to be too 'plummy'. BBC Radio 4 denied that accent had been the factor involved, but the author of the report of this on the BBC website<sup>4</sup> nonetheless consulted Gregory de Polnay, head of

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<sup>4</sup> See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk/newsid\\_468000/468895.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk/newsid_468000/468895.stm)

voice at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, who offered suggestions as to how to make Boris Johnson's voice more acceptable for radio. These suggestions are framed as a fact box on the side of the page headed "Top tips to become less 'plummy'". Ludicrous as this type of 'pseudo-phonetics' is to linguists,<sup>5</sup> it would not be possible as a piece of journalistic writing unless being 'too plummy' as a concept somehow struck a chord in the public consciousness. That this type of advice should at all be deemed necessary and newsworthy surely indicates a different attitudinal 'place' for such accents nowadays, far removed from the deference accorded to BBC pronunciation of the 1950s and 1960s (for discussion of the Boris Johnson case, see also Freitag and Christiansen, 2001.)<sup>6</sup>

### 5. Pedagogical considerations

As mentioned in the introduction, one motivation for looking at RP sociolinguistically is also pedagogical. In Denmark, where I work, English is currently taught to children in schools from the age of 10 (the present government has a policy of lowering this to age 9). Children as young as five or six hear enough English pop lyrics to be interested in trying to imitate them as they sing the latest hits. Most Danish children acquire considerable English during their school careers.<sup>7</sup> By the time Danish university students of English are in their early twenties, they have had many years of exposure to English in several varieties, through many media such as films, cable TV, and the internet, as well as through personal contact, for example while travelling, studying or working

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<sup>5</sup> These 'top tips' include the little gem: 'Get your breathing right' -- as though what's wrong with advanced RP speakers is that they simply go around breathing wrongly!

<sup>6</sup> A similar reaction was evident in the Guardian's report of Harrington et al. (2000) acoustic phonetic research on the Queen's Christmas Speeches; see "The Queen's English of today: My 'usband and I" by Tim Radford and the same edition's leader comment at <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/estuary/home>

<sup>7</sup> There are exceptions to this picture, however, as Preisler (1999) shows, in the case of the circa 20% of the Danish population that he classes as 'English have-nots' (*de engelsksvage*). The majority of this group are aged between 50-75; but approximately 10% of them are under 45 years of age.

abroad. Their task in a university language programme, as I see it, is twofold. First, they have to systematise and develop this experience, and thereby attain a competence in English which is internationally useful as a means of communication. Secondly, they become linguists themselves, able to work with linguistic concepts, since their professional life in future careers as language teachers or language consultants will require the ability to reflect on language usage and explain it to others.

For foreign language pedagogy then, one can ask, is there a case for choosing one specific variety as a model, and if so, on what criteria should the choice be made? For many years the (implicitly British) 'standard' answer was the only one; this is not so any longer. Alongside the proliferation of publications on national standard varieties (such as Australian English) we see now the emergence of concepts such as 'common core English', and EIL, 'English as an international language' (Modiano 1999a, b) which have come to the fore (see also the discussion in Preisler 1995), as well as a *lingua franca* core phonology for English (Jenkins 2000). The ever-relevant question can be framed as "what model of English serves the interests of our students best?"; the phrase 'our students' is crucial here, since I would argue that teachers in each different institutional setting need to take this question seriously. For the sociolinguistically-oriented approach I am advocating here, I would claim that it would be valuable and interesting for advanced EFL students to learn about the real-world diversity that is "out there" (see also Modiano's (1999b) advocacy of descriptive approaches to EIL). This would mean including in the syllabus not only examples of formal phonological, morphological, and syntactic variation, which is interesting as a reflection of the multiplicity of Englishes in the world. It would also mean including diversity in notions of standardness and correctness, as well as the concept of language attitudes in general, specifically the ongoing attitudinal shifts that affect different varieties in different speech communities.

We then face the problem that the global nature of English can make this a huge and daunting subject area for foreign students of English to grasp in the few short years of their degree. Their main task, after all, is to establish a competence in English which suits their life situation. This specific 'relevance to life situation' criterion

means that different answers to the question can be found in different countries and institutional settings (I see this as related to Modiano's concept of *accountability*; see Modiano 1999a:26). For Danish students, their professional future in Denmark will largely involve using English in contexts that demand competence in an internationally comprehensible variety. As Preisler (1995) argues, a variety which has the status of standard probably suits their purposes best. Because competence in a language also encompasses cultural competence, the socio-cultural aspects of the standard variety can be (and, I would argue, should be) brought into the syllabus as well.

In the case of pronunciation teaching, one approach to teaching the explicit RP model is to treat this accent as a sociologically and ethnographically contingent phenomenon. RP arose and became a standard accent under a particular set of circumstances in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Mugglestone 1995 for a very good historical survey), and it has been moving and changing ever since. It remains a part of the sociolinguistic entity that is the British speech community, and its position in that community is undergoing interesting changes at the moment, both in terms of the forms of RP and in terms of its place in the speech community, as has been discussed earlier in this paper.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to make a case for the ongoing relevance of RP (both native and construct RP) to sociolinguistic investigations of ongoing variation and change in British English, and to various allied disciplines, including language attitudes study and foreign language pedagogy. Having made the case for 'RP as sociolinguistic object', one can note that language attitudes methodology especially remains a fruitful one for future researchers to take up. Recent examples of this type of research within the UK include a large scale project investigating adult and young people's 'responses' to Welsh and younger RP voices in Wales (see Garrett, Coupland and Williams forthcoming and the references therein). Haenni (1999) is a study of a sample of British residents' levels of recognition of and attitudes towards Estuary English. Wales (2000) examines the

North/South divide in England. Chia and Brown (2002) is a discussion of Singaporean reactions to Estuary English. Identifying the voice or voices of dynamism in a changed (and changing) society and media landscape is a project which can give tantalising insights into potential future developments on the linguistic front.

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