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DISCRIMINATING POWER OF SOUNDS GOING THROUGH HISTORICAL CHANGE IN
THE GLOBAL WORLD: A NEUTRAL ACCENT

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ABSTRACT

In a world where approximately a billion people speak English and where the non native speakers outnumber native speakers by a ratio of 3-1, is it really possible to have a common accent for speakers of English? Since accents are not absolute but relative depending on the perception of the listener, each of us speaks with an accent.

However, many learners of English as a second language have unintelligible speech patterns with respect to their listeners that may interfere with furthering their education, profession and social interactions. Job market surveys also show that 8 out of 10 people with a different accent than their compatriots have faced prejudice and discrimination because of the way they sound. It is believed that neutral accents are more productive for ambitious people. Our question is, what is a neutral accent?

The proliferation of “accent reduction” services may be seen as a sign that there is a need to find a neutral accent that can be more easily understood. It should help the learner to speak in a way that does not distract the listener and develops the skill to monitor one’s own speech as required. It is pertinent to ponder over the importance and necessity of first learning correct pronunciation in order to help students acquire the same. Received Pronunciation (RP) is the gold standard in spoken English and therefore the best result may be achieved by instilling RP and allowing it to blend with the learner’s own accent.

Keywords: perception, discrimination, received pronunciation, prejudice, neutral accent, accent reduction.

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INTRODUCTION

English has official or special status in at least seventy five countries with a total population of over two billion. It is spoken as a first language by around 375 million and as a second language by around 375 million speakers in the world. Speakers of English as a second language probably outnumber those who speak

it as a first language and around 750 million people are believed to speak English as a foreign language. English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, sport, international competitions, pop music and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world's scientists read in English, three quarters of the world's mail is written in English, eighty per cent of the world's electronically stored information is in English and out of the estimated 200 million users of the Internet, some thirty-six per cent communicate in English. At any one time there are 130,000 students learning English and other skills through the medium of English in British Council teaching centers worldwide.

Is it really possible to establish and promote a neutral accent?

In these circumstances there is also much room for misunderstanding between people from different regions as the way one word is pronounced in one accent will sound like a different word in another accent.

A 'neutral accent' can be defined as a way of speaking (tone, intonation, etc.) where people from any geographical location is able to understand you. A neutral accent is one that is grammatically correct, but has no regional characteristics.

Accents and dialects vary widely even across the United Kingdom; as such, a single "British accent" does not exist, but someone could be said to have an English, Welsh, or Scottish accent although these all have several different sub-types. There is considerable variation within the accents of English across England. Within London itself there are differences between Cockney, North London and South London accents among others. Even within these broad categories there are considerable differences in inflection and pronunciation.

Received Pronunciation

Received Pronunciation (RP) is the standard accent of Standard English in England, with a relationship to regional accents similar to the relationship in other European languages between their standard varieties and their regional forms. RP is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "the standard accent of English as spoken in the south of England", although it can be heard from native speakers throughout England and Wales. Peter Trudgill estimated in 1974 that 3% of British people were RP speakers. Although there is nothing intrinsic about RP that marks it as superior to any other variety, sociolinguistic factors have given Received Pronunciation particular prestige in parts of Britain. It has thus been the accent of those with power, money and influence since the early to middle of the 20th century, though it has more recently been criticized as a symbol of undeserved privilege. However, since the 1960s, a greater permissiveness towards allowing regional English varieties has taken hold in education and the media in Britain; in some contexts conservative RP is now perceived negatively.

It is important not to confuse the notion of Received Pronunciation, as a standard accent, with the standard variety of the English language used in England that is given names such as "Standard English", "the Queen's English", "Oxford English" or "BBC English". The study of RP is concerned exclusively with pronunciation, while study of the standard language is also concerned with matters such as grammar, vocabulary and style.

Oxford English

The introduction of the term Received Pronunciation is usually credited to Daniel Jones. In the first edition of the English Pronouncing Dictionary (1917) he named the accent "Public School Pronunciation", but for the second edition in 1926 he wrote "In what follows I call it Received Pronunciation (abbreviation RP), for want of a better term." The word received conveys its original meaning of accepted or approved – as in "received wisdom". The reference to this pronunciation as Oxford English is because it was traditionally the common speech of Oxford University; the production of dictionaries gave Oxford University prestige in matters of language. The extended versions of the Oxford English Dictionary give Received Pronunciation guidelines for each word.

RP is an accent (a form of pronunciation) and a register, rather than a dialect. It may show a great deal about the social and educational background of a person who uses English.

Some linguists have used the term RP but expressed reservations about its suitability. The Cambridge-published English Pronouncing Dictionary (aimed at those learning English as a foreign language) uses the term "BBC Pronunciation" on the basis that the name "Received Pronunciation" is "archaic" and that BBC news-presenters no longer suggest high social class and privilege to their listeners. The phonetician Jack Windsor Lewis used the term "General British" [to parallel "General American"] in his 1970s publications of A Concise Pronouncing Dictionary of American and British English. Beverley Collins and Inger Mees use the phrase "Non-Regional Pronunciation" for what is often otherwise called RP, and reserve the phrase "Received Pronunciation" for the "upper-class speech of the twentieth century".

General RP is often considered neutral regarding age, occupation, or lifestyle of the speaker; The modern style of RP is an accent often taught to non-native speakers learning British English. Non-RP Britons abroad may modify their pronunciation to something closer to Received Pronunciation in order to be better understood by people unfamiliar with the diversity of British accents.

Regional Accent

Traditionally, Received Pronunciation was the "everyday speech in the families of Southern English persons whose men-folk had been educated at the great public boarding-schools" and which conveyed no information about that speaker's region of origin prior to attending the school.

It is the business of educated people to speak so that no-one may be able to tell in what county their childhood was passed.

A. Burrell, Recitation. A Handbook for Teachers in Public Elementary School, 1891.

Although admired in some circles, RP is disliked in others. It is common in parts of Britain to regard it as a south-eastern English accent rather than a non-regional one and as a symbol of the south-east's political power in Britain. It is shunned by some with left-wing political views, who may be proud of having an accent more typical of the working-classes.

A neutral accent is a matter of pronunciation and a sampling of it cannot tell us which part of a country the speaker comes from. We may even call it a prestige accent such as received pronunciation (RP). Prestige is a social concept, whereby some people have a high standing in the eyes of others, whether this is derived from social class, material success, political strength, popular acclaim or educational background. The English accent that these people use tends to become the standard within their community. When the prestige attached to a neutral accent is recognized by the members of the English teaching community, it'll motivate them to recommend it as a desirable educational target. It is a variety which is used as the norm of communication by the world's leading institutions such as government law courts and media.

Most people talk in an accent which is regional or an admixture between neutral and regional and labels such as BBC English or The Queen's English is used for what is perceived to be pure standard English. We may say that a neutral accent is a minority variety which carries most prestige and is widely understood.

The Language of the Globe

When a language develops a world-wide presence, the variety and diversity in its uses seems inevitable. The speed with which English has spread geographically or to so many speakers is unprecedented.

The two chief issues-internationalism and identity- raise an immediate problem because they conflict with each other. In the former case, a nation looks out from itself at the world as a whole and tries to refine its needs in relation to that world. In the latter case a nation looks within itself at the structure of its society and the psychology of its people and tries to define its needs in relation to its sense of national identity.

Internationalism implies intelligibility-if the reason for any nation to promote English is to give it access to what the broader English speaking world has to offer, then it is crucial for its people to be able to understand the English of that world and to be understood in their turn. In short internationalism demands an agreed standard in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation and conventions of language.

How a neutral accent might be developed?

This will depend on how the tension between these two principles is resolved. At the moment a neutral accent cannot be generalized to a world context in a straightforward way. If we read newspapers and

listen to the newscasters around the English speaking world, we will quickly develop the impression that there is a world standard English acting as a strongly unifying force among the vast range of variations which exist. However, a totally uniform, regionally neutral and unarguably prestigious variety does not yet exist worldwide. Each country where English is a first language is aware of its linguistic identity and is anxious to preserve it from the influence of others. New-Zealanders do not want to be Australians. Canadians do not want to be Americans. Most countries can be grouped into those which follow American English and those which follow British English and those (e.g. Canada) where there is a mixture of influences.

One of the most noticeable features of this divided usage is spelling. In certain domains such as computing and medicine U.S. spellings are becoming increasingly widespread. Although a neutral accent is widely understood, it is not widely produced. Only a minority of people within a country (e.g. radio and television newscasters) actually use it.

Accents in U.K. are still a sensitive issue. In her book "Talking Proper": The Rise Of Accent As Social Symbol, Lynda Mugglestone has meticulously researched the history of accent as a social symbol. According to her it is only at the end of the 18th Century that accent became a major social issue. This quote from P's and Q's: Grammatical Hints for the Million, (1855) is worth a mention "A knowledge and practice of the rules of English language are absolutely essential to respectability and a comfortable passage through decent life." Until the mid 18th century, it was no disgrace for people to speak with a provincial accent. But within 50 years, notions such as an "educated" or "public-school" or "Oxford" accent had become nothing less than a national obsession. Technically impossible notions such as "talking without an accent", became universally accepted stereotypes. The educated accent, called "received pronunciation" by the end of the 19th century was identified by several specific features that the uneducated accent would lack, such as the presence of initial h and the pronunciation of letter r.

The orthoepists felt that they were doing the nation a real service by stressing the importance of an educated accent. John Walker, whose pronouncing dictionary of 1809 went through over 100 editions, was in no doubt that, as most people in the country lacked advantages that a "good" accent provides, it was his duty to guide them towards this ideal, so that more people could become equal and have access to fresh opportunities.

The role of English within the complex multilingual society

Does it matter? New times may indeed call for new words and new ways of saying them. A sociologist may point out that a regional accent lets people demonstrate that they belong somewhere. However members of a profession or "sector" from finance to foreign aid, show that they can walk the walk by talking the talk. Until independence, English was the language of the British government, and was spoken by a powerful but small minority of the Indian population. While it would have been convenient for the newly-formed Indian government to carry on in the same language as the British colonizers, this was not without a myriad of accompanying problems, most of which surrounded the identity of India as a collective whole and as a newly formed nation state (T. Chand 1944). For example, in 1946, M.K. Gandhi, a pivotal figure in India's fight for independence, inextricably discourages a future role for English in India with '[i]t is my belief that English education has bankrupted our minds...and has left us unprepared for courageous citizenship' (Prabhu & Rao 2003: 368, cited in Vaish 2008: 93).

In 1950, India's Constitution established Hindi as the national language and English as the official language for the upcoming 15 years, until 1965. However, in the 1950's there were linguistic riots in non-Hindi speaking regions such as Tamil Nadu. In light of this opposition, the Indian government recognized that the issue of national identity and linguistic and ethnic diversity would not be solved with Hindi evolving as the sole national language. This realization resulted in the 1963 Official Languages Act and a 1968 constitutional amendment which declared English and Hindi co-official languages—that is, languages for government activities (Sailaja 2009). Federally, India now has no national language, however each state—many of which were delineated based on linguistic boundaries—has their own 'national' and official language combinations (Vaish 2008).

As a result of British colonial rule until Indian independence in 1947, English was an official language of India and is widely used in both spoken and literary contexts. The rapid growth of India's economy towards the end of the 20th century led to large-scale population migration between regions of the Indian subcontinent and the establishment of English as a common lingua franca between those speaking diverse mother tongues.

With the exception of the relatively small Anglo-Indian community and some families of full Indian ethnicity where English is the primary language spoken in the home, speakers of English in the Indian subcontinent learn it as a second language in school. In cities this is typically at English medium schools, but in smaller towns and villages instruction for most subjects is in the local language, with English language taught as a modular subject. Science and technical education is mostly undertaken in English and, as a result, most university graduates in these sectors are fairly proficient in English.

The role of English within the complex multilingual society of India is far from straightforward: it is used across the country, by speakers with various degrees of proficiency; the grammar and phraseology may mimic that of the speaker's first language. While Indian speakers of English use idioms peculiar to their homeland, often literal translations of words and phrases from their native languages, this is far less common in proficient speakers, and the grammar itself tends to be quite close to that of Standard English.

New World Calls for New Ways

Now that English has acquired an international dimension, its dialectal variations such as American English, Australian English, New-Zealand English, Indian English and South African English present a global stage for people to interact, which fact initiates an inevitable process for a neutral accent. English has been successfully defended as a lingua franca in a veritable tower of Babel and more recently on grounds of globalization. Its erstwhile opponents from the cow-belt have stopped clamoring for its ouster and the call for "angrezi hatao" has now passed into history.

Popular cultural historian, Ramchandra Guha celebrates the growth of English in India and goes to the extent of saying that "The decline of West Bengal as a centre of science and scholarship is not unconnected to the equally misguided decision to ban English teaching in the state run schools of the province."

There seems to be a pathetic scramble for English medium schools, a fact that has been poignantly fictionalized by Rupa Bajwa's novel "The Saree Shop". It tells of Ramchanda, a sales assistant in Sevak Saree Shop in Amritsar, who is obsessed less with the business of selling sarees than with learning English. In India the poorest citizens also aim to send their child to expensive English medium schools. Government Schools are perceived as worthless because they use the local language as the medium of instruction. In Karnataka many government schools have begun to teach through the medium of English to enable students to compete with their counterparts in English schools. As a part of recommendations of the Sarojini Mahishi Committee, the Odisha Government has announced that English medium public schools will be set up in 3 tribal districts in the State.

The topic of accent is tender because officially accent does not matter, while privately it does. When George Bernard Shaw wrote "Pygmalion" (1912) it was uncontentious to believe that some ways of speaking were better than others. In the 1890's, George Gissing, a writer with strong working class sympathies, took it for granted that a working class accent undermined all attempts at self improvement. In his novel "New Grub Street", Mrs. Yule's movement upwards in society is doomed because of her accent which was that of the London Poor. Linguist John Honey, author of "Does Accent Matter", has said "The subject is virtually taboo in our schools." Officially we should not think that one particular accent, Received Pronunciation (RP) or how BBC newsreaders are trained to speak, is any "better" than others. Traditionally ambitious grammar school pupils in England would try to escape their localities and their regional accents. Most famous of them was Mrs. Thatcher who took elocution lessons and speech training to neutralize her accent.

English is the Lingua Franca

Indeed English has become the lingua franca of Business and Politics from Berlin to Bangkok. According to David Graddol, (The Future of English?), The British Council, the use of English as a global lingua franca requires intelligibility and the setting and maintaining of standards.

The basic criteria of communication or accent is that one should understand what the other person is saying and vice versa. Communication is a crucial part of globalization. This globalization has created revolution in entrepreneurship and outsourcing. The need for speaking in a neutral accent has been growing today because the customers and the clients have to interact in a universal language in a globally acceptable style and accent.

Idiomatic forms derived from Indian literary and vernacular language have become assimilated into Indian English in differing ways according to the native language of speakers. Nevertheless, there remains general homogeneity in phonetics, vocabulary, and phraseology between variants of the Indian English dialect.

Indian accents vary greatly. Some Indians speak English with an accent very close to a Standard British (Received Pronunciation) accent (though not the same); others lean toward a more 'vernacular', native-tinted, accent for their English speech.

The regional accents of English speakers show great variation even across the areas where English is spoken as a first language.

World Englishes.

World Englishes are emerging localized or indigenized varieties of English, especially varieties that have developed in nations colonized by United Kingdom or influenced by the United States. World Englishes consist of varieties of English used in diverse sociolinguistic contexts globally, and how sociolinguistic histories, multicultural backgrounds and contexts of function influence the use of colonial English in different regions of the world.

The issue of World Englishes was first raised in 1978 to examine concepts of regional Englishes globally. Pragmatic factors such as appropriateness, comprehensibility and interpretability justified the use of English as an international and intra-national language. In 1988, at a Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, the International Committee of the Study of World Englishes (ICWE) was formed. There is now an academic journal devoted to the study of this topic, titled World Englishes.

Currently, there are approximately 75 territories where English is spoken either as a first language (L1) or as an unofficial or institutionalized second language (L2) in fields such as government, law and education. It is difficult to establish the total number of Englishes in the world, as new varieties of English are constantly being developed and discovered.

Accent trainers, analyzing the speech of first language non-native speakers of English from all over the world and helping them to modify their speech patterns to increase their ability to be understood. It is interesting to note how a neutral accent is important in cross-cultural communication in general and how it extends far beyond accent to every facet of our lives.

The spread of English around the world is often discussed in terms of three distinct groups of users, where English is used respectively as:

1. A native language (ENL); the primary language of the majority population of a country, such as in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.
2. A second language (ESL); an additional language for intranational as well as international communication in communities that are multilingual, such as in India, Nigeria, and Singapore.
3. A foreign language (EFL); used almost exclusively for international communication, such as in Japan and Germany.

Most of these Englishes developed as a result of colonial imposition of the language in various parts of the world.

Two scenarios have been advanced about English's future status as the major world language: it will ultimately fragment into a large number of mutually unintelligible varieties, or it will converge so that differences across groups of speakers are largely eliminated.

Conclusion

David Crystal cites Internet data: "When the internet started it was of course 100 percent English because of where it came from, but since the 1990s that status has started to fall away. By 1995, it was down to about 80 per cent present of English on the internet, and the current figures for 2001 are that it is hovering somewhere between 60 percent and 70 percent, with a significant drop likely over the next four or five years. 2015 census says it is just 50 percent now."

The other potential shift in the linguistic center of gravity is that English could lose its international role altogether, or, at best, come to share it with a number of equals. Although this would not happen mainly as a result of native-speaker resistance to the spread of non-native speaker Englishes and the consequent abandoning of English by large numbers of non-native speakers, the latter could undoubtedly play a part.

As evidence that English may eventually give way to another language (or languages) as the world's lingua franca, On the other hand, there are at least 1500 languages present on the internet now and that figure is likely to increase. Nevertheless Crystal predicts that English will remain the dominant presence. Neutral Accent is nothing but globally understandable and comprehensible English.

English accents change a lot within India. Every region has its own way of pronouncing the letters and words. Sometimes it becomes difficult for a native speaker to perceive all these differences, thus making the colloquial form of Indian English bit hard to understand.

This is where neutralizing the accent comes into play. One learns to speak not the American or the British English, but the right way to speak the English language. Effort alone will help shed all the typical pronunciations and learn to speak English that is neutral and easily understandable.

The system of sound contrasts in a language is constantly in flux. Linguistic variation leads to change as new realizations of existing contrasts become established, as old contrasts are subject to merger, and as new contrasts are formed. At any point in time, certain sounds are changing while others appear more stable. It is a known fact that within a given homogeneous speech community, those sounds which are undergoing diachronic change are more likely to exhibit individual variation than sounds which are relatively stable. It is likely that certain speakers within the group will differ in terms of their realizations of variables which are undergoing change.

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