THE COCKNEYFICATION OF R.P.?

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1. **Introduction**. A century ago Daniel Jones, the great describer and codifier of the Received Pronunciation of English (RP), was ten years old. He was born in 1881, so by 1891 we may assume that his own pronunciation (on which he doubtless based his description) was fixed in its essentials. Insofar as teachers of English Phonetics or English as a Foreign Language base their teaching on Jones's classic works (1917, 1918), they are operating with a model that is now a hundred years out of date. In practice, of course, those who are in contact with current English as now spoken have modified Jones's model, consciously or unconsciously, in this or that detail. A number of recent articles have attempted to list the phonetic changes that have taken place in RP since Jones's day (Ramsaran, 1990b; Wells, 1990b). Recognition that changes have occurred is attested by the often-heard assertion that `no-one speaks RP any more'. While this is true in the sense that no-one speaks Jonesian RP, it is only to be expected in view of the facts (i) that Jones's generation are by now all dead and (ii) that languages change. It is more helpful, and in my view more accurate, to say that RP is still alive as ever, but that it has undergone various changes.

This paper discusses several of these recent and current sound changes in RP, asking how far they can be attributed to the influence of non-standard accents (including in particular Cockney, the working-class speech of London).
The continued existence of RP (and indeed of what I have elsewhere termed `near-RP'--Wells, 1982: 279, 297-301) may be inferred from the observation that various popular pronunciation features of English English remain clearly outside RP and have been firmly resisted by it. Examples include h-dropping, g-dropping, certain realizations of /æ/, and certain vowel weakening phenomena. I discuss them in turn; there are more extensive treatments in Wells (1982: 253-256, 262, 291-2, 227).

2. **Characteristics of popular accents, resisted by RP**

2.1 **H-dropping** is the failure to pronounce [h] in positions where RP-speakers would pronounce it: thus [ˈæmə] for [ˈhæmə] *hammer*, [ɛdʒ] for [hɛdʒ] *hedge*, [biˈaɪnd] for [bɪˈhaɪnd] *behind*, [aɪ ˈæv] for [aɪ ˈhæv] *I have*. We are not concerned here with the loss of historical /h/ in words spelt *wh-*, e.g. [wɒt] *what*, [weə] *where*; nor with the omission of /h/ in the weak-forms of function words, as [ˈtel ɪm] *tell him*. In connection with the last-mentioned, however, it is worth noting that the apparent current trend towards pronouncing [h] in many weak-forms, thus [ˈtel hɪm] may well be due to a middle-class hypercorrective reaction against non-standard h-dropping.

2.2 **G-dropping** is the pronunciation of the *-ing* ending with an alveolar rather than a velar nasal, thus [ˈwɔːkɪn] for [ˈwɔːkɪŋ] *walking*, [ˈriːdn̩] for [ˈriːdɪŋ] *reading*. The name refers to

the spelling device sometimes used to signal this pronunciation, thus *walkin', readin'*. Again we may detect a bourgeois reaction against this lower-class usage in the squeezing out of g-dropping from its former prevalence in aristocratic speech (*huntin', shootin' and fishin'*).

2.3 The mainstream RP **realization of /æ/** in *that man* has changed in the course of this century, as has often been noted. The tendency towards an opener quality may be seen as a reaction against the Cockney [ɛ] type, leading to an /ʌ/-like [a] which just happens to resemble variants long associated with provincial accents (northern, Welsh, Scottish).

2.4 Non-standard accents commonly **weaken** *you* to /jə/. But in RP this form is generally avoided, at least in prominent positions such as utterance-final. Thus Cockney has [ˈsəi jə] *see you*, often with *you* having a very open, /ʌ/-like final vowel (sometimes shown in spelling as *yer* or *ya*). RP, on the other hand, has [ˈsiː ju], where [u] stands for a vowel that may be somewhat shorter than that of the strong-form /juː/, but in quality is certainly no more central than the [ʊ] of *good*. The same applies to *your* and *you're*, where RP generally retains /jɔː/ (or the older /jʊə/), eschewing the vulgar /jə/. Once again we note the disappearance of the old U-RP /jə/. A similar tendency, though perhaps not so marked, is to be observed in the weak syllables of words such as *ambulance, educate, manufacture*, where RP continues to prefer [ʊ] over the popular [ə].

The popular weakening to [ə] of the final vowel in *window, pillow*, and similar words, is similarly resisted by RP, where these items end in unstressed [əʊ]. *Pillow* and *pillar* may be homophonous in Cockney, but not in RP.

3. **Changes accepted into RP**. Let us now turn our attention to some of the recent developments and ongoing tendencies in RP. We shall consider in turn the decline of weak /ɪ/, glottalling, l-vocalization, intrusive /r/, yod coalescence, and lexical changes.

3.1 **Decline of weak [ɪ]**. The vowel [ɪ] is becoming less frequent in weak syllables. Where Jones said [ˌvɪzɪˈbɪlɪtɪ] *visibility*, we now mostly say [ˌvɪzəˈbɪləti]. Traditional RP [ɪ] is yielding ground on the one hand to [i], in final and prevocalic positions, and on the other hand, in preconsonantal positions, to [ə]. By [i] I refer to the /ɪ ~ iː/ neutralization that may eventuate as [ɪ], as [iː], or as something intermediate or inconsistently fluctuating, as finally in [ˈhæpi] *happy*, [ˈkɒfi] *coffee* (final), and prevocalically in [ˈveəriəs] *various*, [ˈreɪdieɪt] *radiate* (Windsor Lewis 1990; Wells 1990a: 476). The opposite trend of development, preconsonantal [ə] for traditional [ɪ], is found particularly in the endings *-less, -ness, -ily, -ity* and adjectival *-ate*, and to some extent also in *-ed, -es, -et, -ace*. As late as 1967 Jones's EPD continued to state that [-ləsnəs] in *carelessness* 'cannot properly be regarded as coming within the limits of what should be included in this Dictionary' (1967: xxxi). In his 1977 revision of EPD, however, Gimson characterizes the trend towards [ə] as 'firmly established' and 'an acceptable variant' (1977: xvi). By 1990 in my LPD I judged it the principal variant, relegating the traditional [-lɪsnɪs] to second place.

Although the trend towards final/prevocalic [i] might well be attributed to the influence of Cockney, the same cannot be said of the trend towards preconsonantal [ə]. In Cockney, indeed, [ɪ] is still often to be heard in the endings in question. For the source of this [ə] we can

look rather to provincial England, particularly the north and east (including Essex, just outside London), and perhaps even more to North America, Australia, and Ireland. The older [ɪ] should perhaps realistically have counted as one of the oddities of RP as seen from the perspective of World English.

3.2 **Glottalling** is the switch from an alveolar to a glottal articulation of /t/, whereby [t] > [ʔ] in a range of syllable-final environments. This is by now very firmly established in casual RP before obstruents (*football* [ˈfʊʔbɔːl], *it's quite good* [ɪʔs kwaɪʔ gʊd]) and is increasingly heard before other consonants (*atmosphere* [ˈæʔməsfɪə], *partly* [ˈpɑːʔli], *Gatwick* [ˈgæʔwɪk]). Among younger RP-speakers it can even be heard finally before vowels (*pick it up* [pɪk ɪʔ ʌp]) or in absolute final position (*Let's start!* [leʔs stɑːʔ]). Intervocalically within a word, it remains firmly excluded from RP (cf. Cockney *city* [ˈsɪʔi]). Nevertheless, the increased use of glottal stops within RP may reasonably be attributed to influence from Cockney and other working-class urban speech. What started as a vulgarism is becoming respectable.

3.3 **L vocalization** is the development whereby the `dark' allophone of /l/, [ɫ], loses its alveolar lateral nature and becomes a vowel of the [o] or [ʊ] type. L vocalization is accordingly restricted to the environments appropriate for [ɫ], namely preconsonantal and word-final (except where the following word begins with a vowel). Examples are [mɪok] *milk*, [ˈmɪdo] *middle*. As Gimson points out (1980: 203), there are plenty of RP-speakers who use it in labial environments, as [maɪˈseof] *myself*, [ˈteɪboz] *tables*. I am beginning to wonder whether my earlier judgment (Wells 1982: 295) that "on the whole ... L Vocalization must be considered only Near-RP or non-RP" is now in need of revision.

Cockney clearly has much more l-vocalization than does RP, and uses it in environments where it is more noticeable. In particular, Cockney uses it where RP would have a laterally released alveolar plosive, as *little, middle*, and across certain word boundaries where RP would usually have the 'clear' allophone, as *for example if*....

3.4 That **intrusive r** is very prevalent in RP is evident to any objective observer. It involves the insertion of an r-sound at the end of a word ending in a non-high vowel (usually one of /ə, ɪə, ɑː, ɔː/) where the next word begins with a vowel, as in *put a comma*[r] *in, the idea*[r] *of it, Leamington Spa*[r] *and Warwick, I saw*[r] *it happen*. It represents the generalization of the non-rhotic linking-r principle ([ˈbetə] *better*, but [ˌbetər ˈɒf] *better off*) to cases that are phonetically analogous but historically (and hence orthographically) different. Rather than the earlier rule deleting [r] except before vowels, both RP and Cockney now have a rule inserting [r] across a hiatus involving a mid or open vowel in the left-hand environment. (A striking instance recently heard from the British Prime Minister, John Major, was *the Fontainebleu abatement* with [-blɜːr ə-].) R-intrusion can also operate within a word before a suffix, as *magenta*[r]*ish, Kafka*[r]*esque, withdraw*[r]*al, saw*[r]*ing*.

In spite of its prevalence in RP (and other non-rhotic accents), intrusive r does remain to some extent the object of overt stigmatization. It is clear that one reason for its being more frequently heard latterly is that the merger of the former /ɔə/ with /ɔː/ has caused it to spread to environments from which it was previously excluded. While RP *manner* and *manor* have been homophonous with *manna* for some two hundred years, *sore* and *soar* have become

phonetically identical with *saw* only in the present century. Hence the analogy for r-intrusion after /ɔː/ has arisen only quite recently, which explains two things: first, why there are many RP speakers who intrude after /ə/ but not after /ɔː/, and secondly, why intrusive [r] in *withdrawal* or *sawing* seems to trigger complaints from today's purists more readily than [r] in *sonata in G*.

There is a similar explanation for the fact that intrusive r is more frequent in running speech in Cockney than in RP. We have already noted the greater use of schwa in weak forms, which means that *see you in a week* is a context for potential intrusive r in Cockney ([...jər ɪn...]) but not in RP ([...ju ɪn...]). So also with *pull the window up* (Cockney [...dər ʌp], RP [...dəʊ ʌp]). Furthermore, the broad Cockney vowel corresponding to RP /aʊ/ in *mouth* is phonetically [æə], with *cow* and *cower* as potential homophones, leading to intrusive r in phrases such as *how*[r] *it happened*. (Socially intermediate London speech has [æʊ], with no r-intrusion; the types of intrusive r mentioned in this paragraph are all absent from RP.)

3.5 Observers have noted an increased tendency towards the **coalescence** of yod (the semivowel /j/) with a preceding alveolar plosive, so that tj → tʃ, dj → dʒ. We can distinguish a number of distinct environments.

(a) Involving the clitic *you* or *your*, as [ˈwɒtʃu ˈwɒnt] *what you want*, [ˈpʊtʃɔː] *put your (things down)*, [ˈwʊdʒu ˈmaɪnd] *would you mind*, yod coalescence (coalescent assimilation) is well-established in casual RP. It is avoided in careful or mannered style, and is sometimes looked on as a Cockneyism. Where /t/ is involved, it faces a rival in glottalling (3.2 above), as [ˈwɒʔju] *what you...*: in the course of time one development or the other must presumably win out. Other cross-word-boundary sequences are less likely to exhibit coalescence: *Soviet Union, hundred yards*.

(b) Within a word, involving an unstressed vowel in the right-hand environment, RP is drifting towards categorical coalescence. In some words it has long been the norm (*picture, soldier*), while in others its use in RP is more recent and subject to stylistic variation. Jones (EPD 12th edition, 1963) recognizes both possibilities in *actual* and *gradual*, but only /tj/ in *perpetual*, only /dj/ in *graduate*; these are now careful pronunciations, with everyday RP variants involving /tʃ, dʒ/. In *statue* and *virtue* he admits only /tj/, but in LPD I give /tʃ/ as first choice.

(c) Within a stressed syllable *(tune, duke)*, coalescence is still on the whole perceived as non-RP. Nevertheless, traditional RP [tjuːn, djuːk] face strong popular competition in [tʃuːn, dʒuːk]; in near-RP, the first syllable of *Tuesday* may well be like *choose* and the last syllable of *reduce* just like *juice*. It seems likely that here, too, coalescence may penetrate RP within a few decades. Strangely enough, Cockney usage is divided between yod coalescence and East Anglian-style yod dropping ([tuːn, duːk]: Wells 1982: 330-1).

3.6 **Lexical changes** are those that affect specific items of vocabulary rather than all (or most) words meeting a particular phonetic structural description. The opinion poll findings reported in LPD for British English often reveal preferences differing from those of earlier generations. Thus penultimate-stressed *con*ˈ*troversy* is taking over from initial-stressed ˈ*controversy*, penultimate stress being preferred by 56% of the LPD poll panel and no doubt a much higher proportion of the general public, though probably a smaller proportion of RP speakers. For

contribute, 27% of the panel claimed to prefer initial stress, a pattern not admitted by Jones even as a variant. For *suit*, the poll showed, /su:t/ is now preferred over Jones's /sju:t/ by a margin of 72% to 28%; for *nephew*, /ˈnefju:/ now beats the traditional /ˈnevju:/ by 79% to 21%. In *accomplish*, the variant with /ʌ/ was preferred over that with Jones's /ɒ/ by an overwhelming 92% to 8%. It is difficult to demonstrate any specifically Cockney input in changing preferences such as these. There are, however, a few cases where a variant long familiar from Cockney has recently achieved greater respectability: thus *either* /ˈi:ðə/ (preferred by nearly one-third of the youngest age-group among the LPD respondents) and *secretary* /ˈsekrətəri/ (a word not included in the LPD poll).

4. **Defining RP**

In a discussion such as this it is important not to lose sight of the fact that accents, and more generally varieties of a language, are not objective entities so much as mental constructs. As such, their definition and circumscription are open to considerable debate. Are RP and Cockney best seen sociolinguistically, as areas in a multidimensional space--intersections of their speakers' socio-economic class, sex, and age, perhaps with contextual style? Or should we define them in a way that corresponds to Platonic notions in our collective unconscious, with RP as the ideal beautiful accent to which we all aspire but which none of us ever quite attain, and Cockney as the epitome as all that is stigmatized in the speech of the capital city? Or would we do best to accept a functional definition, with RP as no more than the codified version of English pronunciation that we teach to EFL learners as an acceptable norm?

Depending on which of these approaches we adopt, we may arrive at different decisions regarding which phonological characteristics fall within or outside RP.

The **/hw/** pronunciation of words spelt with *wh-*, thus /hwen/ *when*, is part of perhaps most speakers' ideal of `good' pronunciation; but it is not part of the actual usage of most real-life RP speakers. The **smoothing** of diphthongs in words such as *fire, going* — thus [faə, gəɪŋ] — is certainly part of RP as defined sociolinguistically, though clearly not demanded in Platonic good speech. The same is true of **intrusive r**, discussed above. By Daniel Jones's codification, none of them forms part of EFL-RP, although arguably learners ought to have at least passive familiarity with the latter two.

Platonic RP might be eternal and unchanging. But my preference is for a sociolinguistic definition of RP, which entails recognizing the possibility of change. And some of the changes, it seems clear, can reasonably be attributed to influence from Cockney — often overtly despised, but covertly imitated.

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EPD = Jones 1917 etc

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