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Pronunciation preferences in British English: a new survey

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Abstract

A second poll of BrE pronunciation preferences was carried out in late 1998. It was based on a self-selected sample of nearly 2000 ‘speech-conscious’ respondents, who answered a hundred questions about words of uncertain or controversial pronunciation. The findings allow us to answer questions about lexical incidence and sound changes in progress.

1. Introduction

1.1 *A pronunciation preference survey*

This is a preliminary report on the 1998 LPD Pronunciation Preference Survey. In September and October 1998 some 2000 people, native speakers of British English, answered a questionnaire covering about a hundred items of uncertain or disputed pronunciation. Findings based on their responses are presented below. This survey enables us for the first time to give something more than an impressionistic answer to such questions as

- Does *scone* more usually rhyme with *con* or with *cone*?
- What proportion of British people prefer *schedule* with /sk-/, as do the Americans, rather than with the traditional /ʃ/?
- Which vowel do most people prefer in the suffix *-less*, as in *careless* — /ɪ/ or /ə/?
- Which syllable bears the stress in *princess*?

1.2 *A written questionnaire? You’re joking!*

While it would be unrealistic to attempt a survey of actual pronunciation by asking respondents to report on their own performance using a written questionnaire, this method is acceptable in a survey of pronunciation **preferences**. The author carried out a pioneering survey of this kind in 1988 [1, 2]. The purpose was to investigate British English preferences in a hundred or so items of fluctuating or disputed pronunciation (e.g. *zebra* with /e/ or /i:/). The results not only provided a firmer basis for the ordering of variants in dictionaries, but in the case of items exhibiting strong associations between variant preferred and respondent’s age also furnished evidence of language change in progress. A similar survey for American English has been carried out by Shitara [3].

2. Method

2.1 *Poll design*

This second poll of BrE preferences was carried out in September and October 1998. Reflecting advances in technology, the questionnaire was available not only in printed form but also by e-mail and in interactive form on the Web [4]. It was targeted not at a

random sample of the population (where the response rate would surely be very low) but at a self-selected sample of the **speech-conscious**, those native speakers of British English interested in language and speech, who may therefore be motivated to spend up to an hour completing a questionnaire. Thanks to press and radio publicity given to the survey, some two thousand such respondents completed the questionnaire.

2.2 Recruitment of respondents

The respondents were recruited in several ways:

- by a direct approach to phonetician colleagues and students of phonetics, also to various other contacts;
- through publicity in the press arising from the author's public lecture at the British Association Festival of Science;
- through publicity on the radio arising from the same source
- from casual visitors to the web site of the Dept. of Phonetics and Linguistics, University College London.

Everyone who submitted a completed questionnaire during the survey period (September and October, 1998) and fulfilled the requirement of having spent their childhood (4 to 15 years) in Britain was accepted as a respondent. Of 2,133 completed questionnaires received, 201 were rejected because of failure to meet this requirement, giving a sample size of 1,932.

2.3 Respondents' social characteristics

2.3.1 Bias.

The resultant sample is unrepresentative of the general population of Great Britain in various ways. In particular, we cannot control for the bias towards the speech-conscious. If we had approached a random sample of the whole population, the response rate would surely have been very low. Relying on a self-selected sample at least ensures respondent motivation.

2.3.2 Sex.

More women than men volunteered for the survey: 1141 women (41%), 786 men (59%), 5 no data. However, spot checks suggested that sex differences in responses were not statistically significant. Accordingly it was decided to ignore this sample bias.

2.3.3 Age.

The sample was biased towards older adults. Disregarding five (0.3%) who declined to reveal their age group, 219 (11.4%) of the respondents were aged 25 years or under; i.e. born since 1973; 395 (20.5%) were aged between 26 and 45 years (born 1954-73); 888 (46.1%) were aged between 46 and 65 (1934-53), and 425 (22.0%) were aged over 65 (born up to 1933). To correct this bias, it was decided that in presenting the overall results of the survey the age groups would be weighted 3:2:1:1. This gives approximately equal representation through the age range 10-75.

For example, the preference figures for the final consonant in *booth* were as shown in Table 1 (all percentages rounded to the nearest whole number).

<i>booth</i>	θ		δ		Total
	n	%	n	%	n
Age group					
up to 25	129	59	90	41	219
26-45	123	32	267	68	390
46-65	247	28	631	72	878
66 and up	153	37	261	63	414
Total	652	34	1249	66	1901
Weighted	1033	38	1696	62	2729

Table 1. *The final consonant in booth*

Like many of our results, those for *booth* exhibit a statistically significant relationship between pronunciation preference and age. The figures in the table show that young people are more in favour of /bu:θ/ than are older people. To present the results simply as 34% for /bu:θ/, 66% for /bu:ð/ would reflect the sample bias towards older people. If, however, we weight the age- groups as suggested, we get an age-corrected result of 38% for /bu:θ/, 62% for /bu:ð/.

2.3.4

Regional origin.

Of the 1932 respondents, 946 (49.0%) had spent their childhood in the south of England, 582 (30.1%) in the north of England, 68 (3.5%) in Scotland, and 56 (2.9%) in Wales. The remaining 280 (14.5%) had moved around within Great Britain.

Responses to some of the questionnaire items do exhibit an association with regional origin. Figure 1 displays the preference figures for the vowel in *halt*.

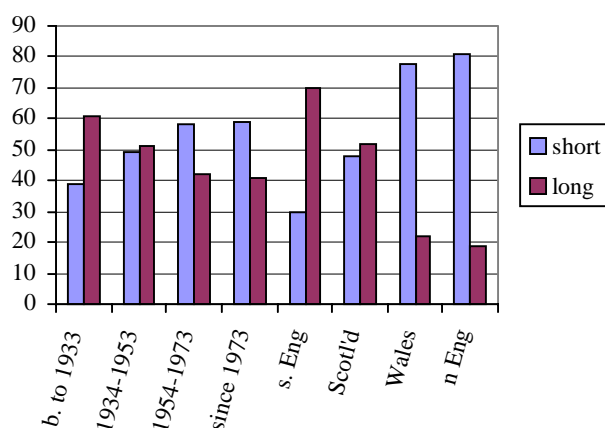


Figure 1. *Preference for /d/ or /ɔ:/ in halt*

Inspection of the chart shows that the option /hɒlt/ (same vowel as in *lot*) is particularly associated with a northern or Welsh regional origin, while the option /hɔːlt/ (same vowel as in *thought*) is particularly associated with a southern regional origin. For respondents with Scottish or mixed regional origins the figures are close to those for Britain overall. There is also an association with age, /hɒlt/ gradually gaining in popularity.

Although people from the north of England are somewhat underrepresented in the sample, it was decided not to attempt to correct for this. (We shall, however, correct for age, changing the raw 50%-50% split into 52% for /ɒ/, 48% for /ɔː/.)

2.4 Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of about a hundred multiple-choice questions in which respondents were asked to say which of two or more pronunciations of a given word or phrase they preferred. It followed the same lines as in the author's earlier survey. A typical question read as follows:

Asia (name of continent) Focus on the -s-.

a /'eɪʃə/ the consonant sound is as in *pressure* AYSH-uh

b /'eɪzə/ the consonant sound is as in *measure* AYZH-uh

Each variant was presented in phonetic transcription, as an explanation of the sound(s) involved, and as a respelling. The respondent was asked to "indicate the pronunciation you prefer. Usually this will also be your own pronunciation".

There were three main sections in the questionnaire, dealing respectively with consonants, vowels, and stress patterns. There were also non-linguistic questions relating to age, sex, nationality, region of origin, and occupation.

The questionnaire included a few of the same items as the 1988 survey, with a view to discovering whether people's preferences have changed since then. But mostly it dealt with new items.

3. Findings

3.1 Talking points

A number of the words investigated are the subject of much popular discussion. People hold strong views about them, though there are other apparently comparably varying words about which they are indifferent. We start with some words of the first type.

3.1.1 Does scone more usually rhyme with John or with Joan?

or even with *June*? British dictionaries have usually preferred /skɒn/, while recognising the existence of /skəʊn/. The Scottish proper name *Scone*, though, is /skuːn/. The polling figures were 65% for /ɒ/, 35% for /əʊ/, the latter gradually rising

in popularity (oldest, 30%; youngest, 38%). Regionally, there was no important difference except that Scots overwhelmingly (99%) prefer the vowel of *John*.

3.1.2 *Where do you keep the car?*

In RP, a **garage** is traditionally called a /'gærɑ:ʒ/ or /'gærɑ:dʒ/; popularly, though, it is a /'gærɪdʒ/. We also know that Americans and West Indians stress the final syllable. In the survey, the proportion of those preferring initial stress plus strong second vowel was 56%, a weak second vowel 39%, and final stress 5%. Where a strong vowel was chosen, somewhat more respondents favoured a final affricate than a fricative. There were strong associations with age and regional origin, /'gærɪdʒ/ being particularly favoured by the young (66%) and the non-English (Scots 65%, Welsh 51%), and particularly disfavoured by the old (13%). See Fig. 2.

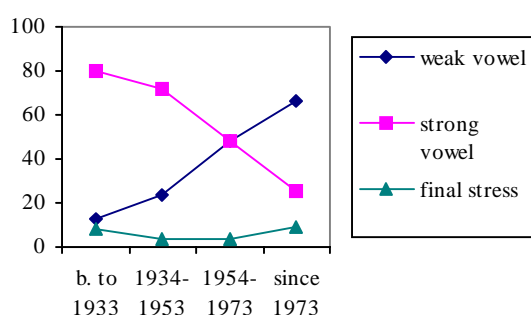


Figure 2. Preferences in garage

3.1.3 *The second month.*

There are two uncertainties in **February**: the identity of the consonant that follows the /b/, and the vowel, if any, between /u/ and /ri/. For the first, the survey shows a steady rise in the popularity of /j/ and decline in /r/. For the second, it shows a sudden upswing in the popularity of /e/ among the young, at the expense of /ə/ and zero. See Tables 2 and 3.

<i>February</i>	<i>/j/</i>		<i>/r/</i>		total
	n	%	n	%	n
b. -1933	55	13	358	87	413
1934-53	222	26	642	74	864
1954-73	176	46	205	54	381
1974-	134	64	74	36	208

Table 2. Consonant after /b/ in February.

<i>February</i>	<i>/eri/</i>		<i>/əri/</i>		total
	n	%	n	%	n
b. –1933	169	42	236	58	405
1934–53	332	40	508	60	840
1954–73	155	41	222	59	377
1974–	102	49	106	51	208

Table 3. Segments after /u/ in February.

3.1.4 American influence?

People complain that British English is becoming Americanised. One piece of evidence they point to is the pronunciation of *schedule*. Is the traditional BrE /ʃ-/ being displaced by AmE /sk-/? Briefly, yes: the /sk-/ form, preferred by 30% of respondents overall, received 8% of votes for the oldest group but 64% for the youngest. See Fig. 3. We are also gradually moving away from /dj/ and towards /dʒ/ in this word, though the latter remains a minority preference (8% for the oldest, 35% for the youngest.)

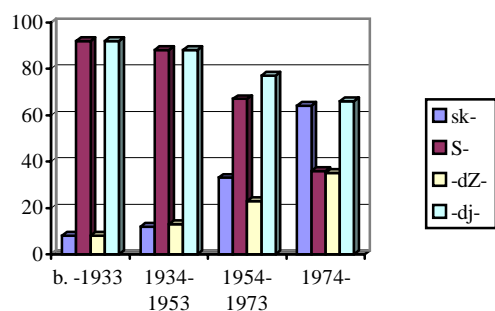


Figure 3. Preferences in schedule, by age

3.2 Sound changes in progress

3.2.1 Morphology.

Many nouns in /θ/ traditionally switch to /ð/ in the plural, as *mouth* /maʊθ/ – *mouths* /maʊðz/. They follow the same minor rule as *knife–knives*, but are gradually being regularised, perhaps because the spoken alternation is not reflected in spelling. We asked about the plural of *youth*, *youths*. Although /ju:ðz/ remains the preferred form overall, at 82%, we found the expected increase in popularity of /ju:θs/, but only among the youngest age group, and even with them scoring only 27%. This finding is very different from Shitara's finding for American English [3], where 61% overall favoured the voiceless fricative, fairly constantly across age groups. In Britain, only the Scots (57%) approach AmE levels.

3.2.2 Yod coalescence.

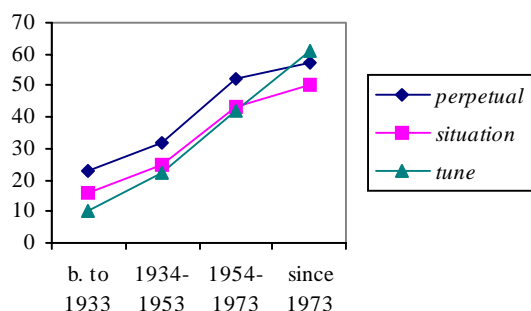


Figure 4. Yod coalescence /tj/ to /tʃ/, by age

In a process lasting for centuries, /tj/ is gradually becoming /tʃ/. We looked at *perpetual*, *situation* and *tune*, words in which RP used to have only /tj/. The polling figures for all three (Chart 3) show evidence of sound change in progress. My impressionistic view was that this process was much more readily accepted before a weak vowel (where it has indeed happened in AmE) than before a strong one (where Americans never coalesce, but tend rather to lose the /j/ altogether). But the polling figures hardly bear this out. It is in *tune* that we seem to be moving fastest. It may be that the change is more readily accepted in familiar words than in more learned ones. Regionally, *tune* with /tʃ/ is most readily accepted in Scotland (49%), least readily in Wales (16%), overall 34%.

3.2.3 What's yours?

The diphthong /ʊə/ is disappearing, mostly being replaced by /ɔ:/. Respondents were asked whether **yours** sounds identical to yaws. 58% of them thought it does, 33% that it does not, and 8% that it varies. Not surprisingly, the Scots gave very different answers from the rest: 96% of them thought the two words sounded different. Responses by age group are given in Figure 5.

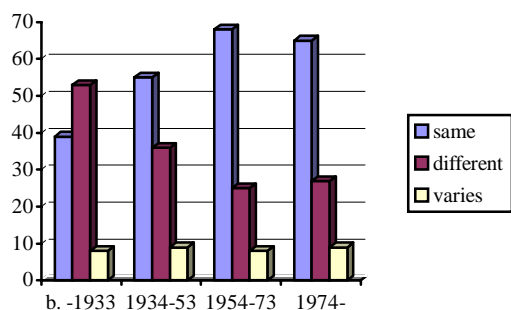


Figure 5. Comparison of yours and yaws, by age group

3.2.4 Preconsonantal weak vowels.

There is a slow drift in English from /ɪ/ to /ə/ in weak preconsonantal positions. We looked at the second syllable of **careless**. Respondents were asked whether it is the same as in *callous* (i.e. /ə/), or as in *Alice* (/ɪ/), or whether these words rhyme anyhow (putative /i/), or whether the vowel is as in *less* (/e/). We are pretty confident that people don't actually pronounce it as the last of these, although 38% of respondents claimed to prefer this option (55% of the oldest, 32% of the youngest). Disregarding these votes and the mere 3% cast for the putative /i/, the respondents split 76% for /ə/, 24% for /ɪ/. This seems to vindicate my decision in LPD [2] to give /-ləs/ first place, a decision which surprised some people. Schwa was particularly favoured in Wales (where nobody voted for /ɪ/) and in the north of England; it was particularly disfavoured in Scotland (the only region where /ɪ/ got more votes than /ə/).

3.2.5 Cheshire-cat plosives.

In words such as **chance** we know that the perceptual difference between /-ns/ and /-nts/ may depend on no more than the fine timing of the relative movements of the tongue tip and the velum. There are those of us for whom *chance* and *chants* are homophones, and those of us for whom they are clearly different. The polling figures revealed a firm preference in *chance* for /ns/ (83% overall), firmer though among the old (87%) than the young (75%). Regionally, resistance to the epenthetic plosive is strongest among the northern English (90%), weakest among the southerners (81%). I suspect that for many this may reflect an idealistic preference rather than their actual pronunciation.

The figures for **length** were rather different. Here both /lenθ/ and /lenkθ/ are competing against an interloper, /len(t)θ/. Among those who voted for a velar nasal, epenthetic /k/ reached scores as high as 51% (southerners) and 50% (youngest), with an age-corrected mean of 40%. An alveolar nasal was preferred by 17% overall, with highs of 30% (youngest) and 25% (Scots).

The other side of the epenthesis coin, from a morphological as well as an orthographic point of view, is elision (deletion). We asked about **puncture** and **jumped**. The first of these may have [k] or [t] or both or neither; there is also the possibility of being a homophone of *puncher*. Voting overwhelmingly favoured presence of both plosive elements (87%). Only among the youngest was there any substantial vote for ['pʌntʃə] (11%). In *jumped*, the vote for 'like *jum* plus *t*' was 24%, higher than I at any rate had expected; perhaps some of those who chose it were really thinking of [dʒʌmʔt] rather than [dʒʌmt].

3.2.6 Stress

In **princess** the typically BrE final stress competes with a supposedly AmE initial stress. To exclude the effects of stress shift (iambic reversal), the test frame *Did you see the princess?* was suggested. Most people indeed favoured final stress (60%), though the young less strongly than the old (Fig. 6).

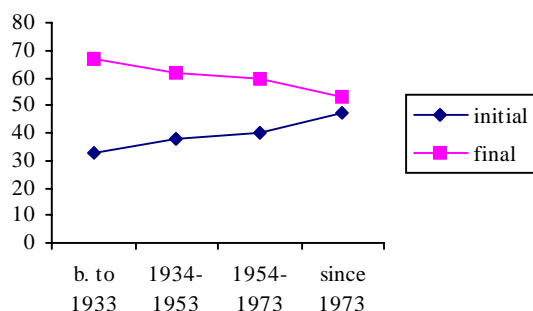


Figure 6. *Stress in princess*

3.3 *Mysteries remain*

In the case of the fricative in *absorb*, the respondents voted 83-17 in favour of /z/. In the case of that in *absurd*, they voted 77-23 in favour of /s/. Why? No one knows. Yet with a sample size of nearly 2,000 this is a very robust result.

Acknowledgements

Over two thousand volunteers requested questionnaires. Molly Bennett sent them out. Jonathan Wadman entered the data on computer. Andy Faulkner helped with the statistics. Thanks to all.

References

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