ENGLISH ACCENTS

by D. Crystal

There has been so much written on the subject of 'English accents' that it might seem presumptuous to add to the stockpile, and inconceivable that there could be anything new to say. After all, any summer school or lecture course worth its salt gives a period or two over to this issue; choice of accent provides a perennial, and consequently a familiar problem, both for the teacher and the being taught; there is plenty of detailed descriptive information available (for example, in the second half of A.C. Gimson's Introduction to the Pronunciation of English); and the linguist's and phonetician's attitudes to the phenomenon of accent are nowadays well-known and appreciated. Certainly, with all this verbiage, it would be silly and unnecessary to repeat or even summarise all that has been said about such fundamental issues as the difference between 'accent' and 'dialect', or about the various popular misconceptions as to what accents are and how they should be evaluated (misguided criteria of 'correctness', and so on). (Anyone not familiar with this background should read David Abercrombie' excellent presentation of the situation in Problems and Principles without delay). But despite all this interest and attention, there is surprisingly an enormous amount which has not been said. Accents are deceptively complicated things still.

It is the very familiarity of the notion of accent which makes it so dangerous, of course. Our ability to formulate a few generalisations about it, couched in vaguely scientific terms, produces a disease called complacency, which obscures the real and deep-rooted difficulties involved. This is most undesirable, as there are still many important factors which have not been systematically considered in relation to accent (e.g. the notion of styles of speech), there are distinctions which have not been clearly made, though they need to be (e.g. that between voice-quality and accent), and there is no theoretical framework which explains and interrelates all the formal features which enter into the definition of an accent, and the functional factors which relate the use of different accents to different situations. Many of the problems and confusions which teachers of English overseas have can be reduced - possibly even removed - if one begins to study such omissions.

Any theory of accent must show the relevance and nature of both linguistic and situational factors. Comprehensive, accurate discussion of accents in English, or any language, will not take place until at least the following influential variables have been identified and discriminated. Variables in the situation in which we speak are of five types, which we may label personal, diachronic, regional, class and stylistic. Features in the form or substance of an accent, which do different jobs, are of four

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kinds: the basic *phonemic* system, the *allophonic* system, *non-segmental* features, and *non-linguistic* features. Different problems arise at each point in these lists of relevant factors. We shall briefly discuss each in turn, beginning with the situational factors, as these will probably be the most familiar.

The *personal* factor in our discussion of accent is usually referred to under the general heading of *voice-quality*. This is very often confused with accent, though it should be kept clearly apart. While we speak, apart from the actual message we are trying to put across, we also communicate information of a quite different kind, operating at an entirely different level. This is information about our personalities. Whenever we speak, we make known our identity to the outside world; there are features of everyone's voice which allow others to recognise an individual without seeing him. These features are difficult to pin down precisely, but they clearly exist, and they are very different from the rest of our utterance. Voice-quality is a relatively permanent feature of our speech; it only alters with age or physiological change (as when we develop a hoarse throat, for instance). Mimics (people who deliberately imitate other people's voice-quality) are the exception in society rather than the rule. Normally, people can do nothing about their voice-quality, nor do they usually *want* to change it — unless they have some professional interest in mimicry or acting. (A similar situation exists in writing: a person's handwriting is the factor which allows us to recognise anyone for who he is, and we only alter this on very exceptional occasions).

The main contrast between voice-quality and accent is that the latter is a more general phenomenon. It can be used to refer to the *totality* of sonic features a person has (including his voice-quality), as in 'I *do* like his accent' (i.e. way of speaking); or it can be used in a more restricted sense to refer to those non-idiosyncratic features of a person's pronunciation — that is, those sounds which are shared by a number of other people and which inform us that someone comes from a particular region or social group. Voice-quality tells us who someone is; accent tells us where he is from, either diachronically (i.e. temporally), regionally, or socially.

Let us now examine the implications of this last sentence. First, what do we mean when we say that accent conveys *diachronic* information as to origin? Essentially, we mean that a person's accent can tell us the general period in history in which he was born and brought up. This does not come to the fore very often, of course, but we do notice diachronic contrasts of this type whenever we become aware of phonetic differences between generations of people. When we talk of a 'conservative' pronunciation, for example, we usually mean a pronunciation characteristic of older people. Younger generations in England are frequently singled out by their distinctive 'advanced' pronunciation, which is primarily due to the influence of American English.

Such changes, as is usual in comparative dialectology, primarily affect the vowel sounds, and a useful survey of the most noticeable changes from the traditional realisation of Received Pronunciation can be found in an article called 'Phonetic Change and the RP Vowel System', written by A.C. Gimson, and published in *In Honour of Daniel Jones* (Longmans, 1964, pp. 131-6). He points to the unstable nature of the final elements of closing diphthongs, for example — a tendency to monophthongise eɪ , oʊ , aɪ , ɑʊ and ɔɪ , so that pairs of words like *tower* and *tar*, *slower* and *slur* become homophonous; and describes how the centring diphthongs ɪə , ɛə , ɔə and ʊə are also changing, particularly in their relation to the pure vowels, ɪ , e , æ and ɔ: (for example, ɔə now only exists in the speech of older speakers of RP, or of people directly influenced by them — in all other cases, it has been levelled with ɔ: , so that *sore* and *saw* are homophones). These along with a number of

other changes, provide clear evidence of the existence of stable phonetic differences between the generations. Many of these differences, affect the pronunciation of individual words, as opposed to being general tendencies; for example, changes in the stress pattern of small groups of words, such as 'controversy', which is now more frequently 'controversy'. The cataloguing of these changes is a long and difficult task, but a great deal of information about them will be incorporated into the revised edition of Daniel Jones' *English Pronouncing Dictionary*, which is due out in the near future.

Diachronic information, in view of the very slow rate of language change, is not by any means as obvious as the other kinds discussed below. If we had some means of observing longer stretches of speech history, then presumably we would be able to note diachronic differences very clearly, in much the same way as we can readily associate different styles of handwriting with different historical periods. Until the advent of time-machines, or the discovery of primitive gramophone records, however, we are forced to rely on scholarly reconstruction of the older states of a language, based on writing and other clues. This is always approximate, but we do now have a reasonably good idea of the sound system current in Chaucer's and Shakespeare's times and since.

Temporal changes in accent are of course often due to the influence of regional or social factors - for example, the development of pop records from America leads to changes in pronunciation amongst the younger generation of British speakers only. But *regional* and social factors (the second being divisible into *class* and *stylistic* factors) are of importance in themselves, and we must now discuss each in turn.

Regional information, first, is probably the most usual thing we read into anyone's accent, and there should therefore be no need to labour the point: an accent can identify where in the world or a country a person is from. But what is often forgotten is that there are two quite different kinds of regional accent in English these days, which we might label *intra*national and *inter*national. The intranational accents should not be new to anyone, being the subject-matter of traditional dialectology, and referring to those accents which can be distinguished within a given country. The international accents have not been so well studied, however. These are the national accents which have developed due to the spread of English throughout the world. Despite the differences which exist between Welsh, Lancashire and London English, there is a common bond which makes them distinctively British, as opposed to American and Australian. And there is a similar bond for the different dialects of American English. Standard accounts of the phonetics and phonology of these major regional dialects have yet to be written, in the majority of cases. We must remember that quite a few areas are involved - apart from Britain and the U.S.A., there is Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the West Indies, and many other areas where English acts as a second language. Only the first two have sufficient global status and influence to present the teacher of English with any selectional problems, however. We shall discuss this further below.

There is one further thing to be said about intranational regional accents, however, and this has important implications for pedagogy. This is to note the development of *new* local regional dialects (*ergo* accents). It is sometimes said that English regional dialects are dying. This is a gross oversimplification. It is true that many of the old, rural dialects are being spoken by fewer and fewer people - this is being made very clear by such surveys as the one currently being carried on in Leeds (the first two volumes of which have already been published); but these are being replaced, so to say, by the growth of new urban dialects, such as those of Liverpool or Birmingham.

The accents associated with these cities are themselves variegated: there are extremely localised forms, sometimes verging on the unintelligible

save only to the initiated, which are hardly the concern of the foreign teacher; and there are more general, standardised forms, intelligible to everyone, which are. These latter accents are in a way composite forms, mixtures of the local accent and RP. It is not difficult to see how these 'modified RP' accents developed. Because cities are cultural, economic and educational centres, they contain influential people, who do not wish to change the accent with which they are brought up, and who see no need to. Those days are gone when one had to conform to the educated London accent to get social preferment. But so too are those days gone when cities were isolated communities. Due to the rapid development of inter-city communication, and the availability of local mass media, influential people come into contact with other influential people more frequently than ever before; and the result of contact between friendly social groups is inevitably partial standardisation. Consequently, we find very clear tendencies for speakers of urban dialects to conform to more generally used kinds of accent - and in view of the traditional prestige attached to RP, they usually stray in that direction.

These days, then, the concept of a single, pure, monolithic, homogeneous RP, always making use of the same set of phonetic and phonological contrasts, is a myth. There are many kinds of RP, mixtures of the traditional RP and a regional accent. Sometimes the traces of regional influence are very slight: I have heard speakers where the only difference between their speech and traditional RP was the use of ə for ʌ in words like cup. In such cases, indeed, it is impossible to define the speaker's place of origin, as a number of regional accents could have caused this change. In other cases, the 'modified RP' might be very clearly identifiable with a particular area - as in the Yorkshire-based speech of the British Prime Minister, for example. The moral for the foreign learner of English, then, is to be aware of the complexity of the situation, and try to get conversant with the main regional modifications of RP; and while he will probably learn the regionally most neutral form himself (i.e. the traditional form), he must not go away with the impression that all deviations from this standard are equally bad! The moral for the phonetician is that he should describe, not a single accent, but the range of accents which constitute educated or generally acceptable speech.

We can see from all this talk about education and prestige that the theoretical distinction between regional and class accent is much blurred these days, at least as far as English is concerned. (It is clearer in some other languages, such as Welsh). For English, accent can give some information about class differences - identify who a person is in terms of a social scale of some kind - but this information is not very reliable. To begin with, no-one is really very sure about how many social classes there are anyway: the old triad of working, middle and upper has very little scientific standing, largely because of the problem of defining the boundaries between the supposed classes. Moreover, even if one grants this threefold distinction as a working hypothesis, it has been shown that it is impossible to predict most people's class merely from their accent, and vice versa.

But while granting these difficulties of obtaining precise information, it is nonetheless the case that there are strong intuitive grounds for postulating that accents in at least British English carry some overtones of social background, or class. Objective evidence for this is scattered, and we await the first sociolinguistic surveys of this question eagerly, but it does exist. Satirical reviews and comedians make frequent use of accents to point a joke about social differentiation; and a phonetician colleague of mine can elicit a 'sir' out of most bus-conductors by asking for his ticket using a highly conservative form of RP! It is on account of a multiplicity of stories such as these that one would be forced to incorporate class factors into any theory of accent.

The last situational factor I want to discuss I have labelled <u>stylistic</u>; by this I simply mean the association of a particular accent, or 'tone of voice' (as it is often called in this context) with a particular kind of social situation, usually an occupation. One would, consciously or otherwise, make use of a different accent from what one would normally use in everyday conversation, as soon as one began a particular task. The accent associated with preachers, barristers, undertakers, television advertisers, politicians speaking in public, and so on, would all be cases in point. All of us have at least two accents which we make use of regularly - one for informal occasions, and one for formal or professional occasions. Many public figures accumulate quite a range of accents to meet various situations. The foreign learner can, initially, make do with one - a relatively informal variety; but he must remember that he cannot use this with equal appropriateness in all English-speaking situations, even if he is fluent in it. This is not a question of linguistic correctness, of course, but of linguistic manners. To use an informal accent (or dialect) on a formal occasion produces a similar kind of criticism to using informal clothing on a formal occasion. We may not like this situation, and foreigners are usually forgiven for temporary breaches of linguistic etiquette; but the situation exists, and if you are trying to get as near perfection in your English as possible, then you should try to master it.

It should be clear from this brief survey that selectional problems for the teacher will depend on his assessment of the relevance of each of the above situational variables. Voice-quality can usually be discounted in the field of teaching English as a foreign language, though I have come across cases of courses designed to give students an accent modelled on that of Sir Winston Churchill or Bing Crosby. (Doubtless the Beatles are being deified as a phonetic model in some dark corner of Rio at the moment!) Elocution classes for native speakers of English certainly use this technique quite often. Stylistic factors are also unimportant, apart from the question of formality just discussed, though again I have heard of courses teaching a restricted kind of English accent to teachers wanting to use it only at conferences. Class factors should also provide no problem, as I doubt whether anyone would ever want to teach anything other than a form of the educated, prestige accent.

The only problems, in fact, are connected with the diachronic and regional factors - particularly the international sense of the latter. As far as diachrony is concerned, it is probably best to teach the more conservative forms of accent, partly because their status is more well-established, partly because these are the forms which are most satisfactorily described in the textbooks, which in the nature of things must always be a little or a lot out of date.

In the case of international regional accents, the only real problem is the question of deciding between a General American pronunciation or RP, and here it is <u>non</u>-linguistic factors which will dictate the answer. One will teach that accent which the student is most likely to come into contact with in his English-speaking life, and this will be largely decided by which country his own is most strongly influenced by, either politically, culturally, economically, educationally, or in any other way. If it is impossible to decide this question (it rarely is) then the teacher has no choice: he must be arbitrary, and take one and stick to it; or he must teach both. And we all know which solution all sane teachers would prefer! But in such a dilemma, arbitrariness is not to be criticised. What I <u>would</u> criticise would be the absence of <u>any</u> attempt to make students aware of the most important differences between major regional accents, for this is something which could easily be brought in at the more advanced stages of a course — or even earlier, if the students were in such a mixed English-speaking country that the differences between, say, British and American would force themselves on their attention daily.

We can thus be flexible in our attitude towards choosing an accent to teach; but, having chosen, we must be quite precise as to the nature of the formal features constituting it. This leads us on to the second part of our theory of accent, which must show us how to distinguish between the components of an accent which do different jobs. There is no space to go into any of these in detail here, but what must be pointed out is that there is a clear progression between the four aspects specified above — a definable ordering of priorities, in terms of the criteria of intelligibility and overall acceptability.

The four aspects were: the basic system of segmental phonemes, the system of allophones, the system of non-segmental features, and other vocal features of a non-linguistic nature. As far as any question of the intelligibility of one's English is concerned, one has to be able to master the phonemic contrasts before anything else; and this, in the nature of things, means being able to master at least one allophone per phoneme (for phonemes are abstractions which can adopt any number of shapes depending on the phonetic context — we cannot speak any phoneme directly, but only one of its possible shapes, i.e. allophones). And (to carry the argument a stage further), as allophones can only really be clearly explained by describing all the allophones of a given phoneme more or less at once, (try explaining what'clear l' is without any reference to 'dark l' for example) to master the phonemes is in effect to master the majority of the allophones also. So the first two components, separable in theory, are really one in practice: they must be mastered if intelligible English is to result — and intelligibility is one of the prerequisites of acceptability.

I think it is probably true that teachers would like to cover the entire range of allophones in any course, all duly graded and drilled. I find that people are more uncertain as to exactly how much non-segmental vocal effect they should instil into their pupils. Now by non-segmental effect I basically mean all those linguistic contrasts which are caused by variations in the pitch, loudness or speed of the voice - such as the intonation patterns, and the stress. Here the teacher must distinguish carefully between those parts of intonation and stress which cause clear-cut differences in meaning, of a grammatical type, and those which do not. The former - for example, the difference between a restrictive and a non-restrictive relative clause, which in speech is entirely made through non-segmental features - is clearly something that has got to be taught, as it affects the basic intelligibility of an utterance. The latter are not so basic, though they too may affect intelligibility, in various degrees.

These aspects of intonation are what is normally referred to under the general heading of the 'attitudinal' function of intonation, and few teachers try to teach this systematically, but hope (beyond hope!) that students will pick this up, as they themselves did. This is not the place to argue the case for and against the teachability of intonational attitudes. I personally think this will be perfectly possible as soon as more research has been done. The point I want to make here is that mistakes of an attitudinal sort in using intonation are not grievous sins against intelligibility, usually. If one is known to be a pleasant foreigner, attitudinal faux pas are normally tolerated - or at least one can get one's message across, even if the response carries with it a queer look. Consequently, this does not pose a very urgent pedagogical problem.

In other words, inability to master the entire range of English's intonational patterns will not seriously affect our ability to understand or communicate in English. Similarly, inability to master the non-linguistic features of an accent completely - voice-quality features which do not affect the meaning of our utterances, but which do contribute towards the national identification of an individual, e.g. American nasality - will not affect our communicational ability either. Such inabilities should only give us an inferiority complex if we seek perfection in mastering an accent - and by perfection here I mean that a foreigner should not be recognised as such by the linguistically-naive man in the street (the criterion is not, heaven help us, a phonetician!) The ultimate tribute a foreigner can have is to be asked 'You're not from round here,

are you? Which part of the country are you from?' Such perfection is quite attainable; but even if you yourself have been recognised as coming from abroad, take heart! - nine people out of ten in the South of England think that (according to their accent, at any rate) people from Newcastle should come from abroad too!

REGIONAL SUMMER SCHOOLS

Following the success of the International Summer School in Rio last January, the British Council has decided to hold two Regional Summer Schools for Brazilian teachers of English, one for Southern Brazil in January 1968, and one for Northern Brazil for July 1968. We are not quite sure where the dividing line comes: but perhaps teachers from Rio might consider themselves as Southerners for the occasion, and those from Brasilia as Northerners.

We hope that each of the two Schools will cater for about 50 or 60 active teachers. These will be selected mainly from State Schools in as many parts of the Region as possible — although Cultura teachers will certainly be eligible to apply, especially if they also work in State schools. We shall be sending round in the near future supplies of application forms, and with these will come further details of the Southern Region course.

In the meantime however, we can say this much: that the Schools will be concerned entirely with the English language and ways of teaching it. We shall keep the work as practical as possible, and the emphasis will be on methodology rather than linguistics. A great deal of the time will be spent in small seminar groups, and that is one reason why we are limiting the numbers to 50 or 60 at the most. The staff will be mainly British.

The January School for the Southern Region will almost certainly be held in Curitiba, and the State of Parana has very kindly offered its support and assistance. We are very grateful to the State Education Secretary for the enthusiasm with which he has received our plans.

The British Council will be able to assist teachers who are accepted for the School with bursaries, to cover a large part of their costs — the exact amount will vary according to the distance they have to travel.

If any of our readers wish to, they are very welcome to write to me at once, and I will send them the Application Forms as soon as possible.

The next International Summer School will probably be held in Santiago de Chile in January-February 1969.