



Estuary Accent of English

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Abstract: *For several decades ‘Estuary English’ has always been presented as an argumentative issue. Unignorable number of linguists, researchers besides the lay public brought this issue into discussion. This research paper provides an overview of what ‘Estuary English’ actually is, what its functions are or whether it really exists, the social and geographical status of the new variety among other varieties of English used in Britain, the salient features of this variety, its nature, its origins and its speakers. Also this paper looks at how standard RP was influenced by the lowest working class - Cockney accent - and the result was the emergence of the so-called ‘Estuary English’ on one hand. On the other hand, the paper touches on a number of views that tend to prove it as an independent variety in its own right. The linguists and researchers interested in issues mentioned above were two parties: Supporters and opponents, so it may replace the current RP and be the new Standard English in the future.*

Keywords: *Estuary English, the Social and Geographical Status, Standard RP, Cockney Accent, Supporters and Opponents.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a lively thing. It changes constantly as do people who speak it. Some of the changes are rapid and some take a longer time to be accepted by the speakers; some changes may even never be accepted. In the best condition, that may imply a rather different community in which a voice's sentences, not its vowels, carry power (Ulrik, 2003: 1). Experienced linguists were not interested in EE until the late 1990s. It was neatly followed by the initial experimental studies focusing on and around EE. Those studies aimed to concentrating on one specific side of EE. Parsons (1998), for instance, has looked for the relationship between RP and EE; Haenni (1999) has focused on the public conception of EE; Hilgers (1999) has investigated the existence of EE variants on the radio, while Przedlacka (1999) and a number of other surveys have handled the linguistic make-up of south-eastern English. None of those experimental studies has provided a definite declaration on what EE actually is. EE may be a phenomenon with quite vague limits in every aspect. The definition behind this term can become clearer



when seen in relation to the nuances of its surrounding accents rather than in isolation (Ibid, 3).

Basic Definitions

The term ‘Estuary English’ was coined in 1984 by the EFL teacher David Rosewarne in an article in the Times Educational Supplement. Ultendorf (2003: 1) presents ‘Estuary English’ as a form of adapted regional speech which is an assortment of non-regional and native south-eastern English enunciation and intonation. He carried on explaining: If one thinks of a continuum with R.P. and popular London talk at both ends, the English-speaking Estuary speakers are centrally concentrated. Wright (2018: 74) does not agree with this term because he reckons that –it indicates we are arguing about a new variety, which we are not; and because it suggests that it is a variety of English limited to the riverbanks of the Thames Estuary, which it is not.

Crystal (2018: 347) states that Estuary English was –something of a misnomer, as the effect of the London speech is clearly visible for a while outside the Estuary of Thames, especially in the Oxford – Cambridge – London triangle to the area of south and east of London in so far as the coast.

Wotschke (2014: 149) illustrates that EE is the national spread of London speech characteristics, specially of glottal stop and T-deletion, has been attributed to the new status of Estuary English, originally being the prevalent usage of the younger people in the South East, primarily based on the district of the Thames valley north and south of London.

Koudelkova (2012: 13) argues that Estuary English is not only an accent, as it is frequently shown, but a dialect, and advocates this argument with examples of the variations not only in pronunciation, but also in grammar. The majority of the linguists is thus careful about labeling Estuary English and calls it simply ‘a variety’. For Stredova (2007: 11), she believes that within what would be called as Estuary English, there are so many varieties that it seems difficult to consider it as a unitary accent, and she suggests that we are treating with a number of distinct accents, not a single and definable variety. She continues to describe Estuary English as an umbrella, a term which comprises a number of accents commonly used in the area of England around London.

The Accents of English Language

Linguists use the term Accent when they refer to the typical pronunciation features of people who belong to the same geographical region or social class; speakers’ accents may also reflect their age, sex, level of education, etc. In this regard, Clayton & Kemp (2015: 66) state that Accent indicates to the way in which people articulate sounds. They illustrate that the so-called Received Pronunciation (RP) has been historically the most prestigious accent; because it was socially favorable. Some authors tend to refer to this accent as non-regional; because it’s the only individual accent that does not imply the speakers’ regionality — but instead refers that they belong to a higher social class. This accent is believed to have emerged during the 19th century, and its outgrowth was correlating with the public school system and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. While its origins seem to be southern



rather than northern, but nowadays speakers of RP may come from any region.

It is difficult to define precisely how many accents of English there are. Even within the United Kingdom, there are accents, beside the RP, as varied as Scottish English, Irish English, Welsh English, Cockney, a newly-emerged accent called Estuary English, and many others. EE is reported to be a variety of middleclass people dominating the southeast of England, linguistically somewhere between RP and Cockney. Furthermore, EE is reportedly said to be levelling out the regional differences earlier found in this area.

Like RP, Cockney is based on a variety of London English. But this variety is unlike RP, however, it was associated with the lower social prestige and not appropriate for polite discourses. It is characterized as the most commonly disapproving and oppressed of all the non-standard forms of English. Cockney essentially scores the least on the part of ranking. It is fundamentally regarded as being incorrect, inconvenient for more prestigious contexts and as one of the most disapproving English accents as it has been shown in Language evaluation tests. Teachers are extremely opposed to the "Cockney mode of pronunciation and their attitude seems to have remained stable over the last decade (Ultendorf, 2003: 37- 38).

On the level of individual sounds, or phonemes, "Estuary English" is a mixture of "London" and General RP forms. Although there are individual differences resulting from the speech background and choices of pronunciation made by the speaker, there is a general pattern. An example of this is the use of /w/ by the "Estuary English" speaker while RP uses /l/ in the final position or in a final consonant cluster; as in the utterance: 'Bill will build the wall.' (McArthur, 2018).

Since the general impact of the capital London has always been significant, Estuary English may keep influencing the other accents of the surrounding counties and accents of other parts of the country as well. The young may continue speaking it to fit into their peer groups and others may use it to increase their street credibility and in order to adapt to their new environment, geographical or social.

The Difference between RP and Estuary Accents

RP is the most widely studied and frequently described variety of spoken English in the world and the accent that English student are taught as a universal one and the –right! one, as if the popularity of native English speakers use it. The definitions of this variety integrate phonological criteria with social characteristics. But where does the term originally come from? Replying on this question, Parsons (1998: 7) implies that the term ‘_Received Pronunciation’ was first used by the linguist A. J. ELLIS in (1867) to describe the spoken language of educated and polite society of London. He goes on to say ‘_Received’ here means –agreed upon by those fit to judge. The word is occasionally taken to have meant ‘_socially received’, as in the grand drawing rooms. It has been established as a model or reference accent for teaching purposes, and it has become customary to justify this choice. For any variety to be considered a ‘_standard’, it should have appointed characteristics and needs to obtain the requirements of being standard. Sevensen (2009: 30) shows that the more requirements a variety fulfills, the higher degree of being standard it is. He offers the characteristics which a standard variety



should have in the following table:

Dimension	Characteristics of standard varieties
Linguistic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal variation in form: Standard varieties aim at providing one form for one meaning. Alternative forms are considered as "incorrect" (notion of 'correctness'). Maximal variation in function: Standard varieties must accommodate the linguistic needs of various functions.
Functional	Appropriate for use in "high functions": The standard variety is used in situations of official or formal character, such as language of education, science, administration and the national media.
Geographical	Supra-local or supra-regional: A standard must have at least supra-local currency
Social	Prestigious: The standard is accepted and used by members of high-status social groups and is a prerequisite for social recognition, power and wealth.
Attitudinal	Scores high on the status dimension: The standard variety is qualified as correct, pure and pleasant. The speaker of this variety is characterized as educated and Intelligent.
Historical	The standard variety has gone through a process of standardization consisting of the following stages: selection, codification of form, elaboration of function and acceptance.

He, as many others before, adds RP is a variety with a critical degree of standard feature as it attains all the requirements listed above. But the two most noticeable traits of RP are (1) the lack of tolerance for other regional variations and (2) its social singularity.

One of the most characteristic features of EE is T-glottalling. This refers to the use of a glottal stop (i.e. [ʔ]) as a realisation of /t/. The typical position of T- glottalling is in the final syllable, preceded by a vowel within a word called pre- pausal positions (e.g. got [gɒʔ]) and before another consonant within a word (e.g. Britney ['brɪʔni]) or across word-boundaries (e.g. quite nice [kwanaʔs]). T-glottalling is not only found in EE. The presence of the glottal stop in RP has long been noted but was somehow stigmatized since it was also a characteristic of Cockney and other local accents (Brinton, 2012: 1923). However, T-glottalling has to some extent lost its stigma in RP at present, although it has not yet acquired prestige.

L-vocalisation is also often used to compare RP and EE and it indicates to the process by which the post-vocalic, velarised allophone of /l/ in most English accents (i.e. -darkl [ɫ]) is realised



phonetically as a distinctly close, back, rounded vowel, and typically transcribed with the symbol [o]. This happens both in pre- consonantal positions (e.g. silk [sɪok]) or word-finally (e.g. hill [hɪo]). (Ultendorf, 2003: 67)

The phenomenon of Yod-coalescence, i.e. the use of the post-alveolar affricates [tʃ] or [dʒ] in pre-positions. It is commonly found in RP but it is typically limited to unstressed syllables within a word (e.g. institute ['ɪnstɪtʃut]; gradual ['grædʒuəl]). Thus, RP tune and duke, typically pronounced [tju:n], [dʒu:k], become EE [tʃu:n] and [dʒu:k]. However, Yod-coalescence has a larger distribution in EE since it is found not only in non-stressed syllables but also before vowels in stressed syllables.

In this respect, the RP diphthongs /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /əʊ/ and /aʊ/ are typically pronounced [ɛɪ], [ɔɪ], [ʌʊ] and [æʊ] respectively in EE, with a more open quality in the first part of the diphthong. Another characteristic feature of EE is its peculiar realizations of what would correspond to the RP diphthong /əʊ/. As stated above, the EE phonetic value of the diphthong is [ʌʊ]. However, this applies typically to words where the diphthong is not followed by [ɪ] or its vocalized reflex (i.e. [o]). However, before [ɪ] or [o], the diphthong is realised as [ɒʊ]. Thus EE row is [rɒ] but roll is [rɒʊ] or [rʌʊ]. Therefore, it appears that a phonological division in EE is in progress since its speakers seem to reject the classification of [ɒʊ] pre-laterally or before [o] with the phoneme /əʊ/, that is pronounced [ʌʊ] elsewhere. (ibid, 71)

The Appearance of Estuary English

As I mentioned earlier, the inventor of the term Estuary English is David Rosewarne. In his article, published in 1984 in The Times Educational Supplement, he describes it as a variety of modified regional speech. It is a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation. According to Przedlacka (1999: 4), Rosewarne (1994) imputes the rising of EE to the outgrowth of extensive conceptions. The blend of linguistic backgrounds led to accommodating accent which resided in speakers of regional accents getting rid of certain features and RP speakers toned down their pronunciation. In addition, He indicates that the press has originated a confounding image, setting EE to be equivalent to Cockney. Bergs & Brinton (2017: 65) discuss that Rosewarne geographically locates Estuary English in the southeast of England, more precisely by the banks of the Thames River and its estuary; this is the reason why the variety is called Estuary English. He also claims that Estuary English is integrated in all levels of the British society in the southeast of England. It is well established in Cities, business communities, public Service, local government, politics, the media, and advertising besides the medical and educational professions in the southeast. Though many researchers overweigh the estuary of the Thames River and its surroundings as the emanation area of this new variety, Sevensen (2009:

14) suspects the name – Estuary English – itself claiming that: the Thames River is not mentioned in the name. Then how can we recognise that the estuary is that of the Thames River itself? After all, this is not the only extensive and familiar estuary in England. While Haugom (2012: 1).



Sevensen (2009: 66) elucidates that Estuary English is supposed to be the middle ground between regional varieties on one side and Received Pronunciation on the other, which is why it is attractive to so many people. The future of Estuary English is hard to predict. When Rosewarne wrote his article in 1984, he was quite optimistic that Estuary English could become the RP of the future. Later, several linguists argued against this hypothesis and claimed that Estuary English can only change RP in some way, but can never substitute it completely. However, the changes have already begun and many of the features of Estuary English have already been accepted soon after the publication of Rosewarne's article, Estuary English became the main subject of discussion in many magazines and newspapers as well as on television and radio. People started to divide into two groups: those who saw Estuary English as a positive development and those who saw it as something that is to be demolished, erased and despised.

Several authors have chosen to focus on its geographical and sociolinguistic aspects, which seem to play a significant role in people's perception of the 'new' variety. In general, everybody tends to agree that EE is spreading, although any determination of its spreading always depends on the particular concept of the variety that one has in mind. As for the geographical spread of EE, there appears to be a consensus in terms of its supposed 'heartland', which is generally held to comprise London and the adjacent 'Home Counties'. Since World War II large numbers of Londoners have, for various reasons, moved out of the capital. Many took the opportunity of being rehoused when overspill building programmes were carried out after the war. Cockney speakers were uprooted and transplanted in large numbers to Greenfield sites, mainly in the Home Counties. Others left London when they retired and realised a dream of a lifetime by purchasing a bungalow by the seaside. The Sussex coast was favoured, but Kent and East Anglia also took their share of London's elderly.

EE is almost certainly the result of the growth of comprehensive state schools, which were firmly established by the 1970s. From that decade onwards an overwhelming majority of teenage pupils, from all but the upper classes, found themselves studying together. RP-speaking pupils felt uncomfortably posh, while those with broad localisable accents felt rather unsophisticated, particularly the girls. The accent accommodation or levelling process which ensued led to the creation of EE.

Estuary English as a Modern Accent of English

In the past twenty years, one of the foremost prominent pronunciation tendencies is that the features of Estuary English have expanded from the London area to other districts of the country. It is not that they have altered the local accents of these regions (though this occasionally occurs); rather they have mutated the phonetic figure of those accents, pulling both the vowels and consonants in various trends. Currently, old inhabitants of rural districts look much different from the younger people who live there. People sometimes allege that accents could vanish. What they have recognized is the demise of old rural ways of speech beside the people who used them pass away too. But the people who now live in these areas still have varied accents, though they are different in character (Smith & Storey, 2010: 30). Wit (2010: 26) believes that since regional variation is considerably



distinguished in English, and as Estuary English collaborates features with Cockney, therefore, it is not astonishing that RP – a socially based accent – is said to be vanishing and gradually giving space to a regionally based accent: Estuary English. As he (2010: 25) claims that TV comes in the first status to present style changes in spoken language and is often before linguists. In preceding, the RP used to be the major English trendsetter, but as the mass media scenery is mutating and expanding, the RP is losing a huge amount of its power. What supports the latter is when Davies (2013: 2) shows that as a socially prestigious accent, RP in England is promptly regressing to more classy urban accents spoken increasingly by a less considerate younger and experienced generation. Nearly all those commentators share the stereotypical equation of the standard accent with ‘_education’, ‘_intelligence’ and ‘_refinement’, while localised accents are commonly associated with ‘_ignorance’ and often ‘_evil’. Haenni (1999: 10) presents a whole catalogue of quotes about EE which are similarly disconcerting:

- It is not an accent ... just lazy speaking that disturbs the ears and is a quite detestable example to our children.
- The prevalence of Estuary English can only be described as horrifying. We are invaded with idiots on radio and television who speak English like the dregs of humanity.
- God forbid that it becomes Standard English. Are standards not meant to be upheld? We must not slip into negligence because of a lack of respect for the language.. Ours is a lovely language, a rich language, which has a huge vocabulary.

Thus, we have to safeguard it. It is slob speak, limp and flaccid: the mouths uttering it deserve to be stuffed with broken glass.. It is the speech of middle class and working class, a bastardised version of Cockney. So far, these quotes seem to suggest that Estuary English does not rank among the most pleasant accents. Such overt stigmatisation of EE stands in sharp contrast to the pioneers’ – Rosewarne and Coggle – perspective of the notion. Haenni (1999: 3) touches on Coggle’s view in his book subtitled ‘_The new Standard English’ in which the latter claims that EE may displace RP and become the reference accent for British English. It seems to me that this discrepancy is only a single view of the considerable amount of disruption which surrounds EE, as many people in Britain seem to use the term without any particularly pure sight of its meaning. Sevensiek (2009: 27) assumes that RP is not fading, but has just some changes over time, as all accents do. He alleges that young generations who are said to be RP speakers, are still like that. Their RP is partly different from that of their parents, but university students such as those of Eton or Cambridge University, who are former pupils at the big Public Schools, are still for the maximum part RP speakers. Though their RP has new features, for example t-glottaling, but is still RP.

One of the researchers who advocates the latter speech is Parsons (1998: 63) declaring that speakers and learners of English around the world have been accustomed to the public notion that the standard speech of English looks like traditional RP, and that anything else is sub-standard. He goes with the idea of RP is still being the standard pronunciation for TEFL, but sooner or later there may be no TEFL teachers left who (most of them) are both willing and able to adopt it. Anywise, in England itself EE has gained so much ground that it is already ‘received’ and traditional RP may just slowly elapse with its last speaker. Many expert linguists compare EE as a ‘_downgrading’ of RP towards other forms based in London, the commonalty



selected to look at it from another angle as Haenni (1999: 9) states that the young people of upper-class already talk EE, the weakly Cockneyfied accent of the South east. He suspects that RP itself will be substituted by Estuary English which is spreading not only across the southeast but across the whole nation by the broadcasters. Last not least, Koudelkova (2012: 62) argues that EE is much likable for many people. He also anticipates that mostly young people are very likely to be influenced by EE in the future, since they unconsciously wish to promote their pronunciation towards RP (to gain higher social position), but want to maintain their linguistic identity at the same time. By virtue of what has been said, it seems to me that this attraction of EE would refer that it is imaginable for this accent to turn into not only major variety, but that its broad prevalence soon will define its non-regionality in order that it would meet the requirements for being also the typical variety and indeed become *‘the new RP’*. So looking at RP as any other variety, it is completely willing and exposed to adopt some modifications with the passage of time so that it would not become outdated.

Attitudes of Estuary English

It is claimed that British people are much sensitive about their language. For a lengthy period of time the accent was the base determining factor by which people judge each other. In fact, opinions about the favourable quality of sounds are subjective and have a limited scope. Accent could tell others who you are, where you are from and what your social status is. With the growth of EE it looks that the social discrimination began to swoon, since EE became spoken by lower-class people, middle-class people and also by the members of the upper-class who a while ago still spoke only with RP. Following that, Ultendorf (2003: 18) considers Estuary English to be a neutral accent, in other words "a middle ground among all types of RP on a single side and regional varieties on the other". The social agreeableness of RP was primarily quite high. From the 19th century onwards the division into classes became less rigid and less explicit. Later, more surprising changes occurred that made attitudes towards RP virtually reversed. Przedlacka (1999: 22) mentions that the reversal of those attitudes perhaps brought about EE. Its emanation is the result of contracting of class distinctions. Thus, it has been reanimated as a more contemporary pronunciation. On the other hand, it seems to share the fate of many linguistic innovations. In 1993 as Przedlacka remarks, a surge of complaints about the present state of the language took out, indicating the new pronunciation as "increasingly grubby use of speech", depicting the spread of EE as "horrifying" and referring to the speakers of the new variety as "idiots on radio and television who speak English like the dregs of humanity". Therefore it can be deduced that EE, in the eyes of the public, is the antonym of RP.

Generally, for the side of linguists, Bergs & Brinton (2012: 1924) remark that some linguists have counted EE a problem; because it does not fit the based sociolinguistic and dialectological categories. After all, if a phenomenon that subsists couldn't be described in academic terms, the problem is in need to be solved at the level of the academic domain. The phenomenon could be neither converted to fit the existing conceptualization, nor abolished. The term, however, keeps coming to light which denotes the existence of the phenomenon. Brinton delivers Wells' (1995) recognition:—Many of our undergraduate native speakers use a variety of English that I suppose we have to call Estuary English, following Rosewarne 1984, Coggle 1993, and many recent reports on press and television [...] This means that their accent is



located somewhere in the continuum between RP and broad Cockney [...] As with the equally unsatisfactory term Received Pronunciation, we are forced to go along. Kerswill (1996) goes with Wells (1995), as it is proved in Ultendorf (2003: 24), in that EE is a new name but not a new phenomenon. He offers his explication as following:

—The Estuary English phenomenon is an old one, since people have long been shifting to Standard English while retaining parts of their local pronunciation. What is new is the increasing acceptability of this form of speech in the media and the professions, where it is replacing RP, much to the annoyance of several newspaper columnists. When it comes to criticizing EE, a variety of other linguists believes EE to be (1) erroneous, (2) inadequate for the higher roles of language use and (3) not appealing to listen to. In this regard, Ultendorf (2003: 23) brings out some reactions of linguists and writers over the extending of EE as:

. My own anxiety is that the rise of EE could make an international standard of English, comprehended by the whole speakers, much hard to obtain. The evolution of EE as an esteemed substitute for RP will help to provoke new problems.

. Estuary English is actually setting itself as a new standard, both in contraposition to and cohabiting with other accents, particularly RP. It is reaching to the extent that it is being adopted by people in professions where RP has always been the standard.

3. CONCLUSIONS

‘Estuary English’ is an extremely dialectical issue. Since the term was coined in the mid-1980s by Rosewarne, linguists as well as lay people have been discussing multiple aspects of the concept. In fact, the more closely the concept of EE is examined, the more problems arise due to its lack of precision. Perhaps it was this vagueness that made many other linguists evade a more critical treatment of the term. Starting with defining the term which it is not as easy as it seems. The impression is that EE is different from RP, but it is similar to Cockney and vice versa. Though it is an accent in its own right, the majority of speakers cannot be determined as either ‘pure’ RP or ‘pure’ Cockney speakers. Estuary English speakers are in between and sometimes they can be closer to RP and some other time closer to Cockney. After a long debate has gone, I can elicit that the main reason for the fast spread of EE is that it is seen as a classless accent. It is used by working-class people as well as middle-class people and some members of upper-class such as politicians, business people, educators, etc.

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