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UDC: 811.111'342

■ TRENDY CHANGES OR CHANGING TRENDS: THE PRONUNCIATION OF BRITISH ENGLISH

The text that follows is a scientific interview with John C. Wells, Emeritus Professor of Phonetics in the University of London and former Head of the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics at University College London (UCL). He is a Fellow of the British Academy. His interests centre on the phonetic and phonological description of languages but also extend to lexicography and language teaching. Until retirement in 2006 he was the director of UCL's annual Summer Course in English Phonetics. He is a frequent contributor to BBC radio (R2, R4, R5, BBC English), and writes a daily phonetic blog (<http://phonetic-blog.blogspot.com/>).

As the world's leading authority on English pronunciation Professor Wells comments on the relevance and speed of change in the domain of the phonetics of English, as well as on the pronunciation preferences in Britain. Among his greatest achievements is his pronouncing dictionary, entitled Longman Pronunciation Dictionary (LPD), now available in its third edition (2008). He has published extensively on general phonetics and English phonetics, especially on the dialectal variation in English (Accents of English, 1982) and the intonation of English (English Intonation: an Introduction, 2006).

Biljana Čubrović [BČ]: The tendency for change in BrE pronunciation is obviously one of the topics which have recently attracted a lot of attention. What do you think about it, and how do you perceive these modifications which have been happening in the last twenty or so years? Have you noticed any changes in your most recent pronunciation polls that you have worked on for the latest edition of LPD?

Professor John C. Wells [JCW]: All languages change. English has gradually changed as the years pass and as generation succeeds generation. But we mustn't exaggerate the speed of change. Although there are indeed age-related differences in the pronunciation of English, the phonetic **system** remains essentially the same. We still have the same vowel system, the same consonant system, the same system of stress and intonation. Things like weak forms and vowel reduction (which many EFL learners find very difficult) remain virtually unchanged.

In any case, twenty years — less than a single generation — is too short a time to observe any substantial change in language. At most we might be able to observe slight percentage differences between generations in this or that phenomenon.

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Over longer periods there may be subtle or not-so-subtle changes in the way particular vowels or consonants are pronounced (for example, the TRAP vowel becoming more open and [a]-like in BrE, though not in AmE; or the extension of the range of T glottalling to new phonetic environments).

In many cases we are dealing not with the sudden appearance of some new phonetic phenomenon, but with a gradual change in the social evaluation of something that has been present for a long time. For example, a glottal stop for /t/ in a phrase such as *Show me what I did wrong* is now sometimes to be heard in RP-style pronunciation, whereas previously it was confined to local accents. (I would still not recommend it to learners of EFL.)

Serbian students of English should still concentrate on such basic matters as getting the difference between the DRESS and TRAP vowels, as heard in minimal pairs such as *pet-pat*, *bend-band*. The distinction between these two vowels shows no tendency whatever to disappear.

Most of the pronunciation poll findings reported in LPD relate to individual words, individual lexical items. These are words which people disagree on how to pronounce. As you can see from the percentages and graphs in the dictionary, there are often swings in people's preferences over time. When I pronounce the word *Asia* I have a voiceless fricative in the middle, but a majority of younger people prefer it with a voiced fricative.

A few of the findings do relate to general trends. For example, an affricate [tʃ] in words such as *tune*, *Tuesday*, *student* does not feel right to most people of my generation, but many younger people use this pronunciation as a matter of course.

BČ: Let me go back to a topic that I find most intriguing. You have mentioned T glottalling as a process which tends to spread to the phonetic contexts other than the original ones. How far do you think T glottalling can be incorporated into RP, knowing that it originates from local accents? Can any other local pronunciation features claim to be accepted by RP speakers?

JCW: Many, perhaps most, of the innovations that have come into RP over the last five hundred years seem to have originated in popular London speech. The historical evidence is perhaps not conclusive, but I strongly suspect that the diphthonging of the FACE and GOAT vowels (which were previously monophthongs) originated as a London working-class characteristic and then spread not only geographically but, more importantly, socially.

Concerning /t/: syllable-finally before a following obstruent, as in *not bad*, *quite good*, glottalling of /t/ (replacement or at least reinforcement) is entirely normal in everyday RP. People just don't notice it as anything unusual. Before a following vowel, however, as in *quite easy*, *that is*, people would be much more aware of it and most RP speakers would not use it. Yet this is the typical phonetic environment in which it seems to be becoming more frequent.

BČ: What are your views on similar phonetic processes like L vocalization. Is it strong enough so as to catch on among the ever-increasing population of non-native speakers of English?

JCW: Decades ago my predecessor A.C. Gimson pointed out that L vocalization adjacent to labials — as in *tables*, *careful* — is quite frequent in relaxed RP. There are speakers who do it virtually everywhere except before vowel sounds, others who

do not do it at all. There is absolutely no need for an EFL learner to make any special effort to adopt it. On the other hand, those who find dark /l/ difficult might well consider using [o] instead. Probably native speakers won't notice anything odd. It is better for a Japanese learner, for example, to pronounce *milk* as [miok] rather than as [miɾɯkwɯ].

BĀ: Which of these should be legitimately taught to non-native speakers?

JCW: This is a matter for the teacher to decide. My job is to describe reality as accurately as I can. Yours is to teach EFL. None of these recent trends is a *requirement* for the EFL speaker.

BĀ: Do you consider pronunciation change predictable at all?

JCW: Overall, no. We cannot predict in any detail what any language will be like in a hundred or five hundred years' time. It seems a safe bet, however, that various English pronunciation features now characterizing London working-class speech will in due course spread out geographically and socially, as has been happening for the last five hundred years and more. And probably American English will exert a growing influence on world English.

BĀ: You have raised the topic of the increasing influence of American English on world English. Having in mind that one of your professional interests is dialectal variation and that you studied it in detail with regard to English, can you remember the first situation which struck you as an instance of Americanization of British English?

JCW: Vocabulary, obviously. As a boy I remember noticing that various words marked as AmE in my *Concise Oxford Dictionary* were words I was accustomed to using myself. In pronunciation, I suppose it is t-voicing (as in *better*) that first comes to mind.

BĀ: Do laymen pay attention to pronunciation changes?

JCW: They pay little or no attention to general trends. They are more likely to comment on the pronunciation of individual words, such as *scone* or *applicable* or *contribute*. The only phonetic technical term in general use is "glottal stop", but people are often quite bad at identifying glottal stops in speech.

BĀ: The issue of the use of glottal stops with non-native speakers is still shunned. Do you think it is time to remove this barrier?

JCW: You may know better than I do what is "shunned". Think of the Icelandic singer Björk, with her excellent English: she uses plenty of glottal stops. On the other hand the pronunciation of pop singers would be expected to be different from that of, say, diplomats.

One warning: do not glottalize *voiced* consonants. It sounds very odd to have a glottal stop for /d/ in *bad things*. In my experience, NNS' problems with glottalling tend to be those of overdoing it rather than ignoring it.

BĀ: Have these topics received any attention in the media? (The Guardian is very frequently mentioned in your blog.)

JCW: The Guardian is the paper I read every day, so I do sometimes pick up stories of interest from it and discuss them in my phonetic blog (phonetic-blog.blogspot.com). Lots of educated people are very interested in language, and often have strong views on points of grammar, pronunciation, or usage.

BĀ: How different are these journalistic views from a phonetician's standpoint?

JCW: Considerably. For example, the term “Estuary English” is something popularized by journalists: phoneticians and sociolinguists deny that any such coherent thing exists. What we have is a number of different sound changes spreading geographically and, importantly, socially — but at different rates from one another. The idea that the whole of the southeast of England has been suddenly swamped by a single new variety of English is simply wrong.

BČ: Would you expect any of the innovative features of Estuary English or southern British variety to be incorporated into standard English in the future? Could you enumerate and illustrate some of these?

JCW: History suggests that probably most of will be. But no one can predict the future. There is always countervailing pressure from the spelling system, e.g. “if it’s spelt t, it ought to be pronounced as a proper t”.

BČ: Apart from segmental changes, could you comment on the suprasegmental variation within in Britain? Which tones are most likely to gradually disappear from everyday use and which ones are most beneficial for EFL learners and should be insisted upon? What is your advice to Slavic or Serbian EFL learners?

JCW: I don’t expect any tones to “disappear from general use”. I think learners ought to be able to make and distinguish a fall, a rise, and a fall-rise. Intonation is largely the same in Serbian and English, but not entirely so: for example, English uses many more fall-rises. However for most learners, including Slavs, learning tones is not nearly as important as knowing which words to accent (where to place the nucleus).

BČ: And finally, do you think English is different from other languages when it comes to current pronunciation changes?

JCW: I don’t really know enough about other languages to say. There are thousands of languages in the world, and I only know a handful of them. I’m certainly aware of gradual changes in French and German, for example, and I expect the collapse of “Serbo-Croatian” has stimulated changes in the Serbian norm. So probably English is not different from other languages. However, we could perhaps say that the attitude of native speakers of English towards their language is less authoritarian than that of native speakers of French and German, and this may lead to a readier acceptance of innovation.