THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSERVATIVE RP

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The fundamental social importance of accent in contemporary England[1] has frequently been commented on. Perhaps the most noteworthy statement concerning the importance of accent in England appears in the preface to George Bernard Shaw's *Pigmalion,* published in 1912 (Honey 1989: 1-2): "It is impossible for one Englishman to open his mouth without making another Englishman hate or despise him." Shaw was writing of the rigid English class system —so often partly manifested through accent— in existence nearly ninety years ago but, nevertheless, his words still have echoes in contemporary English society. Giles and Powesland (1975: 24), for instance, mention that the English sensitivity to variations in pronunciation "... is not paralleled in any other country or even in other parts of the English speaking world" while Gimson, quoted in Quirk (1968: 307), affirms that "... a man's accent has more significance in this country than anywhere else in the world."

While the purpose of this paper is to describe the main phonemic traits of Conservative RP (henceforth CRP), it is worthwhile first commenting on the broader context of RP. RP as a generic term poses problems of definition and classification. Barnes (1993: 44) states that: "the subject of RP is bedevilled with prejudice and misinformation, no less among the highly educated than among those with very little formal education." RP has also been labelled as BBC English, BBC accent, The Queen's English, Oxford English, Public School English, Public School Pronunciation, Educated English, Southern English, London English, British Standard and Standard English. Some of these la-

[1] "In Scotland and Ireland RP is generally seen as a foreign (English) accent, these countries have their own higher class accents which differ in many important aspects from RP." (Wells: 1982: 15)

bels include areas of the language outside the scope of phonology, such as syntax and vocabulary, while others are manifestly absurd in that they assume that RP is a dialect —which it is not— and/or that it constitutes a regional accent —which, again, it does not. That RP constitutes a *social* rather than a regional accent is reiterated by numerous linguists: Strevens (1977:138), Stork and Widdowson (1974: 159), O'Donnell and Todd (1980: 41), Trudgill (1974: 19), Crystal (1988: 62) and Ramsaran (1990). Janet Holmes (1992: 143) sums up the matter thus: "[RP is] ... essentially a social accent, not a regional one. Indeed, it conceals a speaker's regional origins."

Numerous authors note the social prestige associated with RP, among them Leith (1993: 313), and Hughes and Trudgill (1996: 3). However, Holmes (1992: 347) points out that "prestige is a slippery concept" and makes a distinction (1992: 347-348) between *overt* and *covert* prestige, the former being an accent which is "overtly admired and accepted as a model of good/correct speech by the speech community as a whole" and the latter "... positive attitudes towards vernacular or non-standard speech varieties, i.e. despite *official* protestations to the contrary, people do, in fact, value vernacular varieties." This, of course, depends on the vernacular we are talking about as the educated speech of lowland Scots and certain rural accents are prestigious while most of the urban accents or dialects are most definitely not.

Quirk (1968: 92), appears to accept the notion, albeit with reservations, of RP as the standard accent: "RP approaches the status of a standard almost only in England." Other critics unambiguously reject such a notion: O'Donnell and Todd (1980: 41) state that "RP is not a standard pronunciation; there is, in fact, no such a standard"; indeed O'Donnell and Todd (1974: 20) consider the term "received" as in "received pronunciation" to be meaningless, even misleading. Further, Gimson, quoted in Quirk (1968: 309) argues that: "[RP] cannot be said to be standard in the sense that it has been consciously accepted as such or has had its features defined by an official body." Finally, an important point is made by Strevens (1977: 138): "RP is usually described and discussed as if it were a single invariant accent. There is some doubt whether this has ever been strictly true." Both Honey (1989: 38) and Crystal (1988: 63) concur with this view. While agreeing that RP is not totally monolithic, Ramsaran (1990: 182) affirms that such views are true when applied to any variety of English. She also goes on to say that the number of RP speakers is only surpassed by those of the Cockney and Yorkshire varieties. Given that RP is not totally homogeneous, how is variety manifested in RP? Strevens's (1977: 138) classification is misleadingly rudimentary: marked RP = "I am upper class" while unmarked RP = "I am middle class". The terminology becomes gradually more disparate and complex. Both Wells and Gimson establish within RP three varieties whose descriptions do not exactly coincide. Wells, quoted in Hughes and Trudgill (1966: 38), places at the top of the scale *U-RP* (a term coined by Ross 1956), i.e. upper crust RP spoken by the upper classes while at the top of Gimson's scale, also quoted by Hughes and Trudgill (1966: 37-38), we have *Conservative RP*, spoken by older generations and certain professions and social groups. Second on the descending scale, Wells and Gimson respectively establish *Mainstream RP* and *General RP* while at the bottom of the scale Wells places *Adoptive RP* to describe RP users who acquire the accent after childhood, and Gimson posits the term *Advanced RP* to describe the kind of RP "spoken by the younger members of exclusive social groups." Crystal's (1988: 63) classification appears to draw partly from Wells and partly from Gimson; he establishes three kinds of RP:

a) a mainstream variety as generally heard on the BBC
b) a trend-setting form often described as 'far back' or 'frightfully, frightfully' —the 'Sloan Ranger' accent of the 1980's and
c) an 'old-fashioned' or 'more conservative' variety found mainly in older speakers.

Hughes and Trudgill (1996: 49) add another dimension, referring to "marginal RP speakers" described as "[those] who would be considered by other RP speakers as near-RP speakers." Interestingly, Honey (1989: 57) describes Well's *Mainstream RP* and Gimson's *General RP* as an *Acrolect* or *Meso-acrolect* while Wells's *U-RP* and Gimson's *Conservative RP* are referred to as a *Hyperlect.* Kachru (1985: 19) uses identical terminology. The main factors accounting for variability within RP, according to Hughes and Trudgill (1996: 37) are the speaker's age i.e. "generation gap" differences, social class, the age at which the speakers began to acquire an RP accent and other personal factors such as schools attended, profession, personality, etc. Further variety is introduced into RP variants by additional factors such as idiolect, tenor, connected speech, individual preferences for alternative pronunciations, elision, linking and assimilation.

There seems to be agreement that there are at least two types of marked RP, based broadly on the age factor; conservative and advanced. We use the term 'marked' to highlight the fact that these varieties of RP are immediately recognised by other speakers of British English —whether they speak with an RP or

regional accent— often provoking either hilarity or rejection. This article, however, is concerned only with the pronunciation of one of the marked varieties, CRP, although certain pronunciation patterns coincide with those of the advanced variety.

Before looking at the pronunciation of CRP, it is necessary to identify, as far as is possible, those who actually speak it. Honey (1989: 39) suggests some members of the royal family, some Oxbridge dons —perhaps only film or TV versions rather than in reality— a number of high-ranking members of the civil service, the judiciary and the armed forces, some aristocrats and some members of the landed gentry. As numbers of RP speakers in the UK are usually estimated at about 3% of the total population (Ramsaran 1990: 182); and only a fraction of these speak CRP, it is clear that CRP speakers make up a very small minority. As to where CRP is predominantly spoken, the best one can do is to offer a vague, intuitive hunch that the main geographical focus is South-East England, in and around the home counties, always bearing in mind that RP and CRP are social *not* regional accents.

Why did CRP emerge? Honey (1989: 42) describes how, by as early as the 16th century, a more affected form, spoken particularly by members of the courtly circle, began to distinguish it from the unmarked standard spoken in government and other educated circles. The obvious reason for the adoption of the marked accent was not only to increase and highlight the speaker's social status but, more importantly, to erect a language barrier which would distinguish them not only from the lower classes but, more particularly, from the rising middle classes and the intelligentsia. The establishing of 'distance' by CRP speakers with respect to speakers of RP or the many non-standard dialects to be found in Britain is described by Giles and Powesland (1975: 178) as "Upward Accent Divergence", that is "... indicating the sender's desire to appear superior to the receiver in social status and competence." Giles and Powesland (1975: 157) draw the following sociological conclusions:

> ... cases where a minority group retains its code as an expression of group or national identity in the face of the majority culture's language could be regarded as demonstrating forms of divergent behaviour.

In brief, the reasons for the original emergence of what we now call CRP and that of advanced RP are social distance and exclusiveness.

In the following sections we will describe the characteristics sounds of CRP. Hughes and Trudgill (1996: 36) propose three main forms of variability: a) systemic or inventory variability when different speakers have different sets or

systems of phonemes. For instance, American English has no centring diphthongs and so the vowel inventory of this variety of English is smaller than that of RP; b) realisation variability whereby single phonemes may have different phonetic realisations, i.e. the phoneme /æ/ exists in northern English but has a more open realisation [a] than in RP; and c) lexical variability whereby different series of phonemes may express the same word, as is the case in the words *either/neither*. Systemically RP and CRP are identical, all differences are due to realizational variability. The following tables, therefore, will describe the phonetic realisations typical of CRP alongside the RP phonemes. Those phonetic realisations that occur regularly will be dealt with first while those that only appear in a limited number of lexical items will be left till the end.

Table 1. A vocoid near Cardinal vowel /ɑ/ instead of /ɑː/

Example	RP	CRP
branch	brɑːntʃ	brɑːntʃ
dance	dɑːns	dɑːns

Note: The vowel in CRP is a backer version of the RP phoneme /ɑ/, although the symbol used is the same. A slight rounding of the lips may occur in the pronunciation of these words making the sound nearer to Cardinal vowel ɒ.

Table 2. ʌ instead of /ə/ in word-final position

Example	RP	CRP
Peter	ˈpiːtə	ˈpiːtʌ
super	ˈsuːpə	ˈsuːpʌ

Note: The CRP pronunciation coincides with that of advanced RP.

Table /ɜː/ /ɜ̟ː/ ~ /æ̟/ instead of /ɜː/

Example	RP	CRP
serve	sɜːv	sɜ̟ːv
turn	tɜːn	tɜ̟ːn

Table 4. /ɛ/ instead of /æ/

Example	RP	CRP
accent	ˈæksənt	ˈɛksənt
thanks	θæŋks	θɛŋks

Table 5. /e/ instead of /i/

Example	RP	CRP
funny	ˈfʌni	ˈfʌne
military	ˈmɪlɪtrɪ	ˈmɪlɪtre

Note: Although Bauer (1984: 74) claims that to be considered an RP speaker /ɪ/ for *happY* endings is a prerequisite, according to Windsor-Lewis (1991: 161) this is the least common and most old fashioned realisation. In the latest editions of the *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* and *The Cambridge Pronouncing Dictionary*, the /i/ pronunciation for happY words is the only one given.

Table 6. /eə/ instead of /ɪə/

Example	RP	CRP
really	ˈrɪəli	ˈreəle
cheers	ˈtʃɪəz	ˈtʃeəz

Note: In CRP *really* is pronounced like *rarely* and *cheers* is pronounced like 'chairs'.

Table 7. /e̝ə/ or /æə/ instead of /eə/

Example	RP	CRP
care	keə	ˈke̝ə / ˈkæə
barely	ˈbeəli	ˈbe̝əli / ˈbæəle

Note: This realisation with a very open front element is found in both the advanced RP and CRP types but a monophthong is also used in advanced RP: *careful* ˈkɛːfᵊl (Gimson 1989: 144)

Table 8. /ɜɪ/ instead of /aɪ/ (Gimson 1989: 132)

Example	RP	CRP
night	naɪt	nɜɪt
I'll	aɪl	ɜɪl

Table 9. /ëʊ/ instead of /əʊ/

Example	RP	CRP
stone	stəʊn	stoʊn
floats	fləʊts	floʊts

Note: The RP diphthong /əʊ/ is quite recent. The CRP realisation is quite different from that of the advanced RP [ëʊ] (Gimson 1989: 134).

Table 10. ɑː instead of aʊ

Example	RP	CRP
brown	braʊn	brɑːn
trousers	ˈtraʊzəz	ˈtrɑːzəz

Note: The CRP pronunciation coincides with that of advanced RP.

Table 11.1 /ɔː/ instead of /ʊə/

Example	RP	CRP
cure	kjʊə	kjɔː
poor	pjʊə	pjɔː

Note: The above realisation [ɔː] instead of /ʊə/ occurs in words like *cure, pure, etc.*, whose pronunciation variants pose problems to both teachers and students mainly because, in everyday usage, the two variants are frequently interchanged between RP and CRP speakers. This is particularly manifest in the following examples:

Table 11.2

Example	RP	CRP
insure	ɪnˈʃʊə	ɪnˈʃɔː
ensure	ɪnˈʃɔː	ɪnˈʃʊə

Table 12. /ɑː(ə)/ instead of /aɪə/

Example	RP	CRP
fire	faɪə	fɑː(ə)
shire	ʃaɪə	ʃɑː(ə)

tyre	taɪə	tɑː$^{(ə)}$

Note: Particularly in connected speech, RP triphthongs behave erratically. Many advanced RP and general RP users would opt for the pronunciations listed under the CRP heading. Finally, the [ɑː] or [ɑːᵊ] realisations suggest potentially different graphemic realisations: *tyre* to *tar, shire* to *shah* and *fire* to *far*.

Table 13. /ɑː$^{(ə)}$/ instead of /aʊə/

Example	RP	CRP
flower	flaʊə	flɑː$^{(ə)}$
shower	ʃaʊə	ʃɑː$^{(ə)}$
tower	taʊə	tɑː$^{(ə)}$

Note: See note to table 12 above. Once again, many RP users would now have the monophthong realisation: ɑː. Again, potential graphemic representations could lead to ambiguity: [tɑː] might be used to transcribe *tyre, tower* or *tar* while [ʃɑː] might transcribe be used to *shire, shower* or *Shah*.

Table 14. /ɜː/ instead of /əʊə/

Example	RP	CRP
slower	sləʊə	slɜː
mower	məʊə	mɜː
grower	grəʊə	grɜː

The following tables show phonetic realisations which are limited to a very small number of lexical items. Whether these should be described as cases of phonetic variability or alternative pronunciations is debatable and depends on the number of items affected.

Table 15. /ɔː / instead of /ɒ/

Example	RP	CRP
off	ɒf	ɔːf
gone	gɒn	gɔːn

Note: It is interesting to observe that CRP shares some characteristics with the disparaged dialects, notably Cockney, of the lower classes. The realisation [ɔː] is a case in point (Mugglestone 1995: 231).

Table 16. /ʊ/ instead of /uː /

Example	RP	CRP
room	ruːm	rʊm
broom	bruːm	brʊm

Note: The [uː] and the [ʊ] variants are heard in both RP and CRP.

Table 17. /ɑː / instead of /æ/

Example	RP	CRP
piano	ˈpɪænəʊ	ˈpɪɑːnəʊ

Table 18. /e/ instead of /ɜː/

Example	RP	CRP
girls	gɜːlz	gelz

Table 19. /ɛː / instead of /eɾi/ in word final position

Example	RP	CRP
very	ˈveɾi	ˈvɛː

Note: Tables 17, 18 and 19 are pronunciations which are deemed to be a sign of extreme affectation. The realisation of [ɑː] for /æ/, [e] for /ɜː/ and [ɛː] for /eɾi/ may be limited exclusively to the words *piano(s), girl(s)* and *very* respectively. *Very,* may also adopt an alternative MRP pronunciation (see table 21).

The consonants which may properly be said to be characteristic of CRP are less numerous than their vocoid counterparts, but are, nevertheless, quite striking.

Table 20. Tapped/flapped /ɾ/ in intervocalic position instead of /r/ [ɹ]

Example	RP	CRP
very	ˈveɾi	ˈveɾe
Arabic	ˈærəbɪk	ˈɛɾəbɪk

Table 21. /n/ for /ŋ/ in word-final position

Example	RP	CRP
hunting	'hʌntɪŋ	'hʌntɪn

Note: The realisation of [n] for /ŋ/ refers exclusively to the *-ing* ending. The [n] pronunciation of *huntin' shootin' and fishin'* was used as a mark of distinction by CRP speakers until a generation ago approximately.

Table 22. /ʊ-w/ instead of /r/ [ɹ]

Example	RP	CRP
Rodger Rabbit	'rɒdʒə ræbɪt	'ʊɒdʒə ʊɛbɪt
Robert Redford	'rɒbət 'redfəd	'ʊɒbət 'ʊedfəd

Note: Quite frequently heard in films to portray the "upper-class twit", this mutation is sometimes due to a speech defect though usually due to extreme affectation.

Table 23. /ju: / instead of /u: /

Example	RP	CRP
suit	su:t	sju:t
super	'su:pə	'sju:pʌ

Note: At least with respect to example one both pronunciations would be used by either RP or CRP speakers. Example two would definitely be limited to CRP or possibly advanced RP speakers.

Table 24. /lju: / instead of /lu: /

Example	RP	CRP
lewd	lu:d	lju:d
lute	lu:t	lju:t

Note: RP speakers would be extremely unlikely to use the pronunciations listed under CRP or vice-versa. There is a gradual tendency in RP for the /j/ to be dropped after most consonants, except /t/, /d/ and /n/; this a trend which can be observed in many other dialects of English.

It is clear that in some cases RP users might use pronunciations listed under CRP and vice-versa. It is also possible that CRP speakers may have adopted some advanced RP or RP pronunciations. Needless to say, not all CRP speakers would use either the entire range of variant forms available. Nor would CRP speakers avail themselves of all the supra-segmental variants associated with CRP, the most noteworthy of which are the 'creaky voice'. and the 'stiff upper lip' articulatory mode, typical of CRP, in which vowels are much tenser.

From a teaching point of view, why is the study of CRP a worthwhile activity?. It is certainly not the kind of pronunciation we would teach nowadays. No ELT materials or teaching methods currently concede CRP target status. The trends in teaching educational texts are set between Acrolect and Mesolect; that is to say, RP as a target accent is gradually but unmistakably moving downmarket, in exactly the opposite direction to CRP, which has been called, among other things: 'pompous', 'affected', 'anachronistic', 'incongruous' and 'old-fashioned'. Thus, as Honey (1989: 39), states CRP "... seems to assert a claim to a special degree of social privilege" which makes it (1989: 94) "... more of a liability than an advantage", a fact borne out by the experience of one of the present authors even in the mid-1960s. However, from the point of view of research into the development of English, CRP is just as interesting as any other accent. In this sense, Brook (1978: 167) comments that boys at Eton or Winchester "... would be as useful to a field-worker studying class dialect as elderly villagers, who have never left their native village... ." A knowledge of CRP would also be of use to those studying British cinema, theatre, novels, poetry and songs.

What does the future hold for CRP? It is doubtless technically still alive but far from well. The passing of time, the gradual erosion of the rigid English class system, the consolidation of a more egalitarian society, the influence of the RP-dominated mass media and the ever-increasing predominance of downmarket-oriented RP in virtually all walks of British life have taken their toll. We believe that by the next generation CRP, as we currently understand the term, will have practically disappeared and that whatever tiny pockets of resistance remain will be considered as the quaint, definitely non-standard —perhaps even sub-standard— reminders of a defunct —but fascinating— accent.

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