Estuary English: Revisiting the Debate on its Status as a New Accent of English and Potential EFL Pronunciation Model

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Abstract

This paper examines the ontological status of the supposedly new accent of England termed Estuary English by comparing its phonetics with those of Received pronunciation and Cockney, two varieties with which Estuary English is often compared. The paper also discusses some of the criteria that may be used to draw the boundaries between the three varieties and the potential status of Estuary English as a pronunciation model in the field of English language teaching.

1   Introduction

It is now over twenty years since attention to a supposedly new accent of England originally called "Estuary English" was first drawn (see Rosewarne, 1984). It was then claimed that Estuary English had originated on or near the Thames estuary and spread elsewhere (mainly in the south-east of England) from there (see e.g. Coggle, 1993; Rosewarne 1984, 1994). However, its origins and even its own ontological status have been the source of much debate since 1984 in both the academic literature and the popular press.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the ontological status of Estuary English (henceforth EE). In order to do so, the phonetics of this supposedly new English accent will be compared with those of its two most widely acknowledged neighbours, i.e. Received pronunciation and Cockney, since it has become customary to use the visual image of a linear continuum in which these three varieties can be located,

with RP at one extreme, Cockney at the other and EE somewhere in-between (e.g. Rosewarne 1994: 3; Wells, 1994a: 259). After this comparison, the ontological status of EE will be discussed briefly in relation to the criteria that may distinguish it from Received Pronunciation (henceforth RP) and its role as a potential model of pronunciation in English language teaching (henceforth ELT).

Despite the impression that the popular press has often given as well as its first proponents (see Coggle, 1993; Rosewarne, 1984) there is general consensus in the academic literature nowadays that EE is an accent (or group of accents) with which Standard English (i.e. the standard dialect of the English Language) can be spoken. In this EE resembles RP. On the contrary, Cockney is a dialect as it exhibits specific grammar and vocabulary features as well as pronunciation characteristics.

Of the three varieties, EE is the most problematic. Its origins and even its own ontological status have been the source of much debate for the past twenty years. However, in section 2 of this paper it will be taken for granted that EE exists although the problem of the ontological status of this supposedly new accent will be resumed in section 3.

2   Comparing EE with RP and Cockney

An important aspect to be born in mind when comparing any two (or more) accents is that "no accent is a homogeneous invariant monolith..." (Wells, 1982: 279). This means that in any comparison between RP, EE and Cockney, the specific sub-varieties of RP, EE and Cockney discussed should be specified. As far as RP is concerned, the specialized literature seems to converge on the idea that there are two main sub-varieties of that accent: a marked one and an unmarked one. The unmarked variety has often been referred to as Mainstream RP (Wells, 1982: 279-280), or General RP (Gimson, 1980: 91). This sub-variety of the RP continuum is a socially relatively neutral type of RP to be contrasted with a form of RP that points to a group of speakers of a very high social, privileged class (upper-class). This second variety of RP has been referred to as U-RP -an abbreviation of upper-crust RP- (Wells, 1982: 280) or Refined RP (Cruttenden, 1994, 2001), among other terms.

As far as EE is concerned, no sub-varieties have been described so far because the very existence of the accent itself is a matter of discussion in the literature. On the contrary, the phonological/phonetic properties of Cockney are well-known (see e.g. Pointner, 1996; Sivertsen, 1960) and, as in the case of RP, several subtypes may be distinguished although no specific names are usually used to refer to these sub-varieties. Instead, authors seem to point to degrees of "broadness" of the accent.

As stated above, Wells (1994a: 259), for instance, locates EE in the continuum between RP and "broad Cockney" (emphasis added). In the rest of this section, we will compare the features of Mainstream RP with those of broad Cockney and the features claimed for EE. We will use Mainstream RP since it is the variety that is most commonly understood when the label "RP" is used in academic writing. Similarly, a broad variety of Cockney should be considered when the word "Cockney" is used. For EE, the discussion will take into account only the features that most authors seem to agree can characterize EE but not those that are highly dubious (for a list of such features see Maidment, 1994). Due to the insufficient treatment of suprasegmental aspects of EE in the literature, the discussion will only take into account the segmental level.

2.1   Comparison between RP and EE

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 syllable-final, preceded by a vowel in word-final 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* [kwaɪnaɪs]). T-glottalling is not only found in EE. The presence of the glottal stop in RP has long been noted (see e.g. Jones, 1960: 151) but was somehow stigmatized since it was also a characteristic of Cockney and other local accents. However, according to Fabricius (2000), T-glottalling has to some extent lost its stigma in RP at present (in the positions mentioned above), although it has not yet acquired prestige.

Apart from the different degrees of prestige attached to T-glottalling in RP and EE, the main difference between T-glottalling in RP and EE seems to be quantitative. Przedlacka (2001, 2002), for instance, found out that only 8% of all the tokens of her study exhibited T-glottalling in RP speakers. However, T-glottalling in the geographical areas where EE is supposed to be spoken had a higher frequency of occurrence (32% of all tokens in Przedlacka's study).

L-vocalisation is also often used to compare RP and EE and it refers to the process by means of which the post-vocalic, velarised allophone of /l/ in most English accents (i.e. "dark" [ɫ]) is realised phonetically as a fairly close, back, rounded vowel, most typically transcribed with the symbol [o]. This happens both in pre-consonantal positions (e.g. *silk* [sɪok]) or word-finally with or without an intervening word boundary -except where the following word begins with a vowel- (e.g. *hill* [hɪo]).

Although the process of L-vocalisation has been operating in the English language for some centuries (see e.g. Johnson & Britain, 2003), this process has only

been recently described for RP. While Jones (1960) does not mention it, Gimson (1980: 203), Wells (1982: 295) and Cruttenden (2001: 84, 184) state that it is occasionally found in RP, particularly before labial consonants. Moreover, Wells (1994b) wonders whether L-vocalisation should be considered a feature of current RP and not just a feature of regional accents. The data obtained by Przedlacka (2001), which show that over a third (34%) of the tokens pronounced by two young RP speakers was vocalized, seem to support such a view. While L-vocalisation may be an increasingly common phenomenon in RP at present, its frequency in EE seems to be much greater. Przedlacka (2001) found that L-vocalisation is widespread in the alleged territory of EE (77.4%). Again, as is the case with T-glottalling, the main difference between RP and EE is the frequency of occurrence of L-vocalisation. EE has much more L-vocalization than RP does.

The phenomenon of Yod-coalescence, i.e. the use of the post-alveolar affricates [tʃ] or [dʒ] in pre-nuclear positions instead of the bisegmental sequences of alveolar plosive plus yod (i.e. [tj] or [dj] respectively) is the third consonantal variable with which EE and RP are often compared. This phenomenon is commonly found in RP but it is typically limited to unstressed syllables within a word (e.g. *institute* ['ɪnstɪtʃuːt]; *gradual* ['grædʒuəɫ]) and in the unstressed clitic *you* or *your* (e.g. *did you* ['dɪdʒu]). However, Yod-coalescence has a larger distribution (and possibly frequency) in EE since it is found not only in non-stressed syllables but also before vowels in stressed syllables (Maidment, 1994; Wells, 1997). Thus, RP *tune* and *duke*, typically pronounced [tjuːn], [djuːk], become EE [tʃuːn] and [dʒuːk]. Nevertheless, Wells (1994b) notes that while Yod-coalescence in stressed syllables is still completely perceived as non-RP, it is likely that coalescence in this position may penetrate RP in a few decades although Cruttenden (2001) already considers this change *well-established* in current RP. The greatest consensus on the peculiarities of EE vowels that seem to distinguish it from RP is to be found in discussions of the realization of diphthongs. In this respect, the RP diphthongs /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /əʊ/ and /aʊ/ are typically pronounced [ʌɪ], [ɑɪ], [ʌʊ] and [æʊ] respectively in EE (Maidment, 1994; Wells, 1994a), with a generally 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 [ɫ] or its vocalized reflex (i.e. [o]). However, before [ɫ] or [o], the diphthong is realised as [ɒʊ]. Thus EE *row* is [ɹʌʊ] but *roll* is [ɹʌʊɫ] or [ɹʌʊo]. Therefore, a phonological split seems to be under way in EE since its speakers seem to reject the categorisation of [ɒʊ] pre-laterally or before [o] with the phoneme /əʊ/, pronounced [ʌʊ] elsewhere.

2.2   Comparison between EE and Cockney

In general, there is little controversy over the features that should not be attributed to EE but can normally be found in the broadest variety of Cockney (see e.g. Maidment, 1994; Wells, 1994a; 1997).

As far as consonants are concerned, both EE and Cockney share the presence of T-glottalling in pre-consonantal positions (the glottal replacement also affects [p] and [k] in Cockney). However, T-glottalling seems to be much less frequent in EE. Przedlacka (2002), for instance, found out that while the percentage of T-glottalling was 32% in EE, the percentage rose to 85% in Cockney. This may be due to the fact that, while word-internal intervocalic glottalling is a typical characteristic of Cockney, it is not acceptable in either EE or RP (see e.g. Altendorf, 1999; Maidment, 1994). Thus, the word *better*, for instance, is typically pronounced ['betə] in EE but ['beʔə] in Cockney. In addition, both RP and EE are similar in that T-glottalling is not considered acceptable before /l/ as it is in Cockney (see Altendorf, 1999; Cruttenden, 2001: 83).

Although T-glottalling is more similar between RP and EE than between EE and Cockney, the reverse is true for L-vocalisation. This is because both EE and Cockney have L-vocalisation where RP would have a laterally released alveolar plosive (Wells, 1994a, 1994b; 1997). For instance, the word *bottle* is typically pronounced ['bɒto] in EE and ['bɒtɫ] in RP but it is pronounced ['bɒʔo] in Cockney.

The variable of H-dropping is another feature that differentiates EE (and RP) from Cockney. Cockney is well known for its tendency to elide [h], not only in the weak-forms of function forms (e.g. *give her* ['gɪvə]), where /h/ is also typically elided in informal situations in both RP and EE, but also word-initially or word-medially in lexical items. Thus the words *hand* and *ahead* are pronounced [ænd] and [ə'ed] respectively in Cockney but they retain the /h/ in both RP and EE.

Other consonantal differences between EE and Cockney involve the phenomena of TH-fronting and G-dropping. On the one hand, TH-fronting refers to the use of the labio-dental fricatives /f/ and /v/ instead of dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/. This phenomenon is commonly found in Cockney but not in EE and RP. The words *brother* and *thin*, for example, are typically pronounced ['bɹʌvɐ] and [fɪn] in Cockney. On the other hand, G-dropping refers to the pronunciation of the *-ing* ending with an alveolar nasal (i.e. /n/) and not with a velar nasal (i.e. /ŋ/). This phenomenon is found in Cockney but not in EE or RP.

Turning now to a comparison of the vowels of EE and Cockney, it should be remarked that the EE realisations of the RP diphthongs /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /əʊ/ and /aʊ/ discussed above (i.e. [ʌɪ], [ɑɪ], [ʌʊ] and [æʊ]) are also what would be expected of a Cockney speaker (Maidment, 1994). However, one difference between EE and

Cockney is that while in the former accent there seem to be vowel neutralizations before [o] (i.e. the result of L-vocalisation) for some /ɪə/-/iː/ and /ʊ/-/uː/ contrasts (thus *fool = full* [fuo]; *real = reel* [ɹio]), in Cockney there is a greater number of vowel neutralizations. According to Wells (1994a) and Maidment (1994), these include the contrasts /ɪ/-/iː/, /e/-/ɜː/, /ɒ/-/əʊʔ/, /ʊ/-/uː/-/ɔː/, /eɪ/-/æ/, and /aɪ/-/ɑː/. The last vocalic difference between EE and Cockney that will be mentioned is the monophthongal realization of the diphthong in words like *mouth*, conventionally transcribed /aʊ/ for RP. While the diphthong in EE is [æʊ], in Cockney it is realized as a long monophthong (i.e. [æː]) so that the noun *mouth* is pronounced [mæːf].

3 What is Estuary English? Revisited: The ontological debate

After reviewing the most frequent similarities and differences discussed in the literature between EE and RP on the one hand and EE and Cockney on the other, the issue of the ontological status of EE will be the focus of this last section of the paper, particularly as it relates to the boundaries between EE and RP and to the potential status of EE as a pronunciation model in ELT.

As described in sections 2.1. and 2.2. above, EE does not seem to exhibit unique phonetic or phonological features. All of them are found in Cockney, in RP, or in both (Maidment 1994) and most of the features claimed for EE are also much in line with phonetic developments described for RP by phoneticians for decades and found in recent updates of the phonetics of RP (e.g. Collins & Mees, 2003). Since the phonetic differences between RP and EE seem to be a matter of degree of (and the range of segmental realisations of current RP seems to be so wide), it does not seem easy to draw a clear boundary between RP and EE on linguistic/phonetic grounds, even if stylistic variation is taken into account. In fact, some authors claim that EE might overlap with then most colloquial variety of RP (Lillo, 1994).

A possible sociolinguistic difference between RP and EE (and Cockney as well) is the social-class spectrum of their speakers. In this respect, traditional descriptions ascribe Cockney to the speech of the London uneducated working-classes, RP to the accent of the educated upper and upper middle classes throughout England and (mostly implicitly), Adoptive RP, i.e. a variety of RP spoken by adults who did not speak RP as children (Wells, 1982: 283), to people from lower middle-class backgrounds promoted to socially prominent positions. However, recent social changes have resulted in a greater amount of social mobility, with increas-

ingly more upwardly socially mobile people who in earlier generations would have become speakers of adoptive RP not doing so at present. According to Trudgill (2001), these people do reduce the number of regional features in their accents but many of them no longer strive to remove all such features. In relation to this, and as far as the south-east of England is concerned, it is often claimed that EE is spoken not only by upwardly mobile speakers of local accent/dialect increasing their social status and acquiring more standard habits in pronunciation but also by RP speakers from the younger generations who seem to reject a traditional or conservative type of RP (because of its association with the "Establishment" and the public school system) and wish to avoid the stigma of RP as "posh" (see e.g. Cruttenden, 2001: 81; Crystal, 1995; Maidment, 1994). Given this situation, it may be that, at least in the south-east of England, social class may not be so diagnostic of a particular accent at present (except for the most upper-class segment of the RP social continuum or the lower middle-class or educated working-class spectrum of EE).

This leads us to considering localisability as potentially the main difference between RP and EE/Cockney. RP does not have features which suggest affiliation of RP speakers with any particular region of England (or Britain). In fact, RP speakers come from all over Britain. According to Wells (1994a), the major difference between EE and RP is localizability within Britain with EE being localizable as belonging to the southeast of England and RP being regionally neutral. This character is even recognized in recent works that update the phonetics of RP. This seems to be the case, for instance, of the variety of RP that Collins and Mees (2003) describe under the heading of "non-regional pronunciation".

Given the criterion of localisability, Estuary English can be used as a label to refer to English spoken with a conspicuously regional accent (or accents) of the south-east of England, representing the intermediate possibilities between Mainstream RP and Cockney that can be readily identified as south-eastern. Moreover, the label EE should perhaps be used to refer to a group of accents of the southeast of England since evidence is available suggesting that EE is far from being a relatively homogeneous accent (see e.g. Przedlacka, 2001, 2002). According to Trudgill (2001), the label EE may be used to refer to the (lower) middle-class accents of the Home Counties surrounding London and bordering on the Thames Estuary (Essex and Kent) or not (Surrey, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Hertfordshire).

However, it should be born in mind that some authors maintain a less rigid or strong version of localizability. Nolan and Kerswill, for instance, (Nolan & Kerswill 1990), define RP as a prestigious South-Eastern English accent and Cruttenden (2001: 80) goes even further to suggest the term "Regional RP" to refer to RP influenced by the local accent of a specific region is a good example of this.

Cruttenden explicitly identifies the London-influenced form of RP (or "London Regional RP", as he calls it) with Estuary English (p. 86).

4 Estuary English as new EFL pronunciation model

An important aspect of English language teaching is the model accent used in pronunciation work (if a given model is felt or found to be needed). The question of the selection of a given model is complex since many factors need to be considered and different options are available although they can be reduced to two: (a). the choice of a local model -i.e. an accent that can be clearly linked to a specific English-speaking territory-; or (b) the choice of a non-local model -i.e. some sort of international pronunciation model not associated with any specific English-speaking territory.

The appeal of a non-local model, usually discussed under the heading of "international pronunciation" model for English language teaching has been gaining increasing attention in the last few years, particularly thanks to Jennifer Jenkins's recent proposals (see Jenkins, 2000). However, discussions about the validity or nature of such international pronunciation models are not new (see e.g. Gimson, 1978; West 1968).

Although potentially advantageous in many senses, an supposedly international accent needs to face two strong criticisms. On the one hand, an international pronunciation of English does not exist as a real accent spoken by native English-speaking people. Perhaps such a variety could appear one day due to linguistic evolution. If that were the case, the variety would not presumably have any obvious national or geographical affiliation (Gimson, 1978: 58). Ideally, this artificial accent would contain common or essential elements of pronunciation found in all varieties of English (Bradford, 1990; West, 1968). However, it has been claimed that it would of necessity involve an Anglo-American agreement (Trim, 1960: 37). Be that as it may, an international pronunciation model would have to be artificially formulated and disseminated at present (Cruttenden, 1994: 271). On the other hand, given that an international pronunciation would have to be an artificial construct, it would be necessary to establish very precisely which criteria are used to decide which areas or features of pronunciation are essential and which are not (Deterding, 2001). Jenkins, for instance, believes that some areas of pronunciation are more important than others and should therefore have priority. Using the criterion of "intelligibility amongst non-native speakers of English" (given that interactions in English increasingly involve no native speakers of English), Jenkins proposes, based on empirical research, that some "core areas" of pronunciation are

more important than others. For instance, some segments, nuclear stress, or effective use of articulatory settings seem to affect intelligibility among non-native speakers of English while like lexical stress or intonation do not.

The choice of specific local models for pronunciation teaching is the most widespread solution to the problem of setting up pronunciation models in ELT. In this respect, European countries, for instance, have traditionally used RP as a model while South American countries have typically used the North American variety of English called General American -GA- (Gimson, 1978). The apparent advantages that authors point out to justify the selection of these two models are similar. Among others, these advantages are that the two accents are (apparently) widely understood, that they are widely available through British and American national radio and TV channels, that they are widely available in EFL educational materials or that they are prestigious and standard accents in their respective countries. The potential disadvantages of these accents depend on which accent we are talking about. For RP, for instance, phonetic difficulty of the accent, the relatively small amount of people who speak it or some speakers' hostility towards the accent derived from the upper-class origins of the accent are widespread sources of criticism. However, the main (though often implicit) objection made by detractors of these two main local models is that choosing a local pronunciation model like RP or GA implies that these models should be considered normative. If considered as such, RP or GA are then connected strongly with ideas of correctness, and the aim in pronunciation teaching is perceived to be that students should fully attain one of these model accents. However, as Dalton and Seidlhofer claim (1994), RP or GA need not be treated as norms. Instead, they should be treated as points of reference or models for guidance, which means that teachers may decide to approximate to them more or less according to the demands of a specific situation or a specific purpose. Under this view, the aim in pronunciation pedagogy is rarely seen as the full attainment of a specific native-like pronunciation.

If a local accent is selected and the accent is British, at present, a few commentators seem to suggest that EE may soon become the new British English standard model of pronunciation (see e.g. Rosewarne, 1994). However, given the non-clear-cut differences, the debate may actually be a trivial one. The popularization of the label EE (and consequently also of the label RP, largely unfamiliar until the popularization of the other) may have had undesirable effects in that a clear-cut a polarisation of RP vs. EE has raised for some where the differences between EE and RP are matter of degree at best. This is reinforced by the existence of both terms although the term RP only became popular with the popularization of the EE label. This polarization is to the detriment of RP, often popularly associated even by educated speakers and foreign language teachers with the a stereotype of broad-

casting, BBC-like type of RP far removed from most people's way of pronouncing. For the time being, it may be that if the phonetics of RP are updated, as often considered necessary (e.g. Wells, 1997) and as many books already show (e.g. Collins & Mees, 2003; Cruttenden, 2001; García Lecumberri & Maidment, 2000), there may not be reason to discard RP as a pronunciation model. This does entails not only that RP should be treated non-normatively and only as a point of reference (with no implication that it should be fully attained at the production level -i.e. 100 percent attainment of a native-like accent) but also that students should also be familiarized (at the reception level) with the other representative accentual varieties of English, standard (e.g. GA), non-standard (e.g. Cockney) or non-standard varieties supposedly becoming more prestigious and even occasionally claimed to become standard in the future (e.g. EE). This may increase students' understanding of native English speech since EFL student often have comprehension problems when they encounter native speakers of English with an accent other than the standard one the former have been taught (see Deterding, 2005, for a case in point regarding Singaporean students's problems trying to understand EE).In other word, some exposure to accents other than the model selected may be very for students of English because they are perhaps more likely to encounter non-standard speakers thn standard ones.

5   Conclusion

A comparison between the phonetics of RP, EE and Cockney shows that it is very difficult to draw a boundary between the first two accents. Given this and the fact that the social-class spectrum of the two accents is not determining either for establishing boundaries between them, the main distinction between RP and EE may be considered to be the localisability of the speakers of these two varieties. While RP speakers cannot be related to any specific region or town in Britain, EE speakers are readily localised as belonging to the south-east of England. In other words, while RP is a non-regional accent, EE as well as Cockney are local or regional accentual varieties. However, the criterion of localizability distinguishes RP from EE only if a strong version of the criterion is maintained.

   As regards the potential status of EE as new EFL pronunciation model, it can be claimed that since the phonetic differences between RP and EE are so few and phoneticians have already begun to update the descriptions of RP, the latter accent may still be regarded as a valid model of British English pronunciation. In fact, the popularisation of the EE label, if of any use, may have served phonetician an language teachers to realise that descriptions of Received Pronunciation keep up

to date so that they do not "remain fossilized in the form codified by Daniel Jones almost a century ago" (Wells, 1997).

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