

RP: Received or Reference Pronunciation?

L'articolo prende in esame la *Received Pronunciation*. Sebbene sia ancora considerato l'accento standard dell'inglese britannico, soprattutto dal mondo dell'*English Language Teaching*, tale posizione è stata gradualmente rifiutata dai fonologi contemporanei. Nella prima parte dell'articolo si offre una breve descrizione dell'*RP* e si traccia un quadro storico per spiegare come essa sia effettivamente diventata la forma 'accettata' dell'inglese standard a partire dalla fine del diciannovesimo secolo fino ai primi decenni del secolo scorso. Nell'ultima parte vengono analizzati alcuni cambiamenti – riconosciuti e riconoscibili – che riguardano la *Received Pronunciation*, anche se non registrati dai testi di fonologia della lingua inglese per insegnanti e studenti.

1. *RP and the English phonology tradition*

This section provides a reconstruction of the history and success of RP as the 'Standard British English accent', relying on the extensive literature on the topic. However, it must be clear from the outset that the concept of standard accent, especially in consideration of the "widening debate" (Bex and Watts 1999) which has recently characterised most of the linguistic discussion mainly among British linguists and sociolinguists (see for example Honey 1997; Bex and Watts 1999; McArthur 2001; J. Milroy 1999; L. Milroy 1999; Stein and Quirk 1995; Trudgill 1996, 1999 and 2002), will be interpreted here as the model accent in an ELT (English Language Teaching) and especially in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) perspective, where British English is used as the target language.

The expression 'Received Pronunciation' refers not only to a 'standard accent', but also to a "prestige accent" (Crystal 1995: 365), due to its association with the court, the upper-middle class, Public School education and the BBC. Though it has its origins in the south-eastern region of England, RP has always been regarded as a non-regional accent because of its detachment from any regional phonological influence. It

is, however, not ‘standard’ in the sense of being the system used by the majority; in fact, as pointed out by Rogers (2000: 111, see also J. Milroy 2001: 16) it is spoken “natively” by only a very small proportion of Britons. Rogers’s comment seems to have been clearly influenced by the figures (3 to 5 per cent) first introduced by Trudgill (1974), Hughes and Trudgill (1979: 3) and Trudgill and Hannah (1985: 2)¹ to describe the small proportion of genuine RP native speakers.

Though the term *received* in the sense of ‘socially accepted’ dates from Victorian times (cf. Spencer 1957, Philp 1968; Gimson 1984 and Macaulay 1988) the phenomenon of an ‘accent’ perceived inter-regionally as ‘correct’ has a longer history. Gimson (1984: 45) points out that:

It is a remarkable fact that, for at least four centuries, the English have cultivated a concept of a form of pronunciation which has been considered more correct, desirable, acceptable or elegant than others. It has always been a matter of preoccupation for a small section of society, but this minority interest has grown in recent times, without a very precise specification of the standard or of the typical speaker having been given until this century.

For example, one cannot but remember what Puttenham wrote in the sixteenth century when suggesting the language a poet should refer to:

¹ Christophersen (1987: 19) in his defence of RP, even though indirectly, criticises Trudgill and Hannah’s findings and comments when he states that: “others have said that RP is ‘undemocratic’ because only about four per cent of the population speak it naturally. How that percentage figure is arrived at is not clear”. Indeed, this figure has long been over-cited and over-abused. Despite the fact it was related to an investigation carried out in the 1970s, it is still reported by scholars (Crystal, 1988: 63; Medgyes, 1994: 5 quoting McArthur 1992; J. Milroy 1999; L. Milroy 1999 and J. Milroy 2001) to describe the low percentage of RP speakers, as if time had never passed. Only recently has Trudgill (2002: 171-172) felt the need to justify and “discuss where this statistic came from”. He re-presents his “sociolinguistic urban dialect study of the city of Norwich” conducted and published for the first time in *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich* (1974). Whether this study can be proved reliable or not will not be discussed here, but Trudgill draws the following conclusion: “In the end, I decided that 3% was approximately correct, but if anybody wishes to say that we should raise the figure to, say, 5%, I would have no objection. The point is that RP speakers have always represented a very small proportion of the population of native speakers of English in Britain”. In conclusion, one might have the impression that Trudgill wished also to reply to Honey’s (1997:121) comment: “the figure of only 3 per cent of RP speakers is a highly speculative, not a scientific, one [...]”. However, Jones himself claimed that: “The fact that RP and approximations to it are easily *understood* almost everywhere in the English-speaking world does not mean that RP is *used* by a majority of English-speaking people. On the contrary, it is used by a rather small minority”. (1934: ix, see also 1967: xviii. Italics in the original).

Any speech used beyond the river of Trent, though no man can deny but that theirs is the purer English Saxon at this day, yet it is not so Courtly nor so currant as our Southerne English is, no more is the far Westerne mā's speach: ye shall therfore take the usuall speach of the Court, and that of London and the shires lying about London within lx. myles, and not much above. (1589: 150)

Ellis, Wyld, Jones and Gimson are the four English phoneticians who, more than others, have tried to define, describe and fix RP and make it what it is today. Though Daniel Jones is the name mainly associated with RP thanks to his successful *The Pronunciation of English* (1909) and *An English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1917), the first use of the term *received* and the correlation between social status and pronunciation is generally ascribed to Alexander J. Ellis. He wrote:

In the present day we may [...] recognise a received pronunciation all over the country, not widely differing in any particular locality, and admitting a certain degree of variety. It may be considered as the educated pronunciation of the metropolis, of the court, the pulpit and the bar. (1869 I: 23, qu. Gimson 1984: 45, Macaulay 1988: 115-116)

However, quite recently, Mugglestone (1997) has asked for an “ante-dating” of the definition of the term ‘received pronunciation’ as given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*) to describe:

The pronunciation of that variety of British English widely considered to be least regional, being originally that used by educated speakers in southern England; also, the ‘accepted’, standard pronunciation of any specified area [...], the spoken language of a linguistic area (usu. Britain) in its traditionally most correct and acceptable form. (*OED* 21999)

Mugglestone has suggested ascribing it to the works of the eighteenth-century lexicographer John Walker. In fact, the first three quotations reported by the *OED* are taken from Ellis’s works. Moreover, she claims that up to recent times² the name of Ellis has been unjustly and frequently connected to the association of RP as a social and a standard accent. In her attempt to defend and disassociate the nineteenth century

² Mugglestone quotes Honey (1985), Crowley (1989) and Ramsaran (1990).

phonetician and phonologist from the idea of a standard in pronunciation, and at the same time to free him from any reference to a prescriptive attitude, Mugglestone manages to explain why in turn Walker should be linked to this association. For example, the title-page of Walker's *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* reports that "Where Words are subject to different Pronunciations, the Reasons for each are at large displayed, and the *preferable* Pronunciation is pointed out" (1791 qu. Mugglestone 1997: 106. My italics).

To turn to the term 'received' as an expression of the Victorian concept of general acceptability, clear examples are to be found in Walker's descriptions in his dictionary; see, for instance, the following:

Those sounds, therefore, which are the most generally received among the learned and polite, as well as the bulk of speakers, are the most legitimate, we may conclude that a majority of two of these ought to concur, in order to constitute what is called good usage. (1791: viii qu. Mugglestone 1997: 106)

For Mugglestone the specification of 'received pronunciation' in Walker's works deliberately engages with those notions of acceptability (both social and linguistic) which are precisely in line with the evaluative meanings suggested by 'received' in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: 'generally adopted, accepted, approved as true or good', as noted by the *OED*³. As she points out:

Walker's deployment of 'received pronunciation' as a prescriptive ideal does, of course, necessarily manifest considerable divergence from Ellis's own later usages, and not least since Walker is expressly dealing with those notions of a 'standard' which, albeit being outlined by *OED*, were intentionally – and unambiguously – rejected by Ellis. (Mugglestone 1997: 107)

The other pioneering English phonetician who used the word 're-

³ In his dictionary Walker also made explicit reference to the "superior acceptability and propriety" of the English spoken in the capital: "though the pronunciation of London is certainly erroneous in many words, yet, upon being compared with that of any other place, it is undoubtedly the best; that is, not only the best by courtesy, and because it happens to be the pronunciation of the capital, but best by a better title; that of being more generally received". (1791: xiii qu. Mugglestone 1997: 106).

ceived' was H. C. Wyld in the term *Received Standard English* (1914 and 1936). Unlike Ellis, Wyld had “no inhibitions about class or correctness” (Macaulay 1988: 117) and for this reason he has been recently described by James Milroy as “very influential scholar in [the] elitist tradition” (1999: 31). He distinguished between Regional Dialects, “spoken in particular parts of the country” (1936: xv) and Class Dialects, “which have grown up within particular sections or social divisions” (1936: xv), to which Received Standard English belongs.

Jones himself only introduced for the first time and adopted the term RP – instead of PSP (Public School Pronunciation) – in 1926 (Gimson 1984: 45). However, Jones (²1934: viii) proposes the term *Received Pronunciation* and its abbreviation RP, though he is not particularly enthusiastic about it:

This form of speech is more widely understood with ease in Great Britain than any other form would be. In what follows I call it “Received Pronunciation” (abbreviation RP), *for want of a better form*. I wish it to be clearly understood, however, that RP means merely “widely understood pronunciation”, and that I do not hold it up as a standard which everyone is recommended to adopt. (My italics)⁴

Even though Jones gave up the label PSP as early as 1926 in favour of RP, he continued to make references to public school education also in the Introduction to later editions as one can see from the following extract:

The pronunciation represented in this book is that which I believe to be very usually heard in everyday speech in the families of Southern English people who have been educated at the public schools. This pronunciation is also used (sometimes with modifications) by those who do not come from Southern England, but who have been educated at these schools. (Jones 1967: xvii)

Gimson’s attempt (1984: 45) to give “RP a distinguished ancestry by tracing it back to Ellis” does not convince Macaulay (1988: 116). According to the latter – and his viewpoint seems to be shared by Honey

⁴ In the Introduction of a later edition Jones (1967: xviii) changed the “I called it” into “it is often called”.

(1985 and 1997) – what is commonly referred to as RP is more a product of the twentieth century.

What seems clear is that the legend and the myth created around this accent were probably something beyond the intention of the phonetician who made it famous in his works. Jones justified his interest in the RP accent because it was the one he used himself and thus he was able to “obtain full and accurate information” (21934: ix); in this respect he follows Henry Sweet⁵, who, at the beginning of the century, stated:

I must disclaim any intention of setting up a standard of Spoken English. All I can do is to record those facts which are accessible to me – to describe that variety of Spoken English of which I have a personal knowledge, that is, the educated speech of London and the district round it. (1900: i, qu. Trim 1961: 29)

Though Jones never overtly claimed any superiority for RP because of its social status, he supported the idea that a “non-regional” variety of English had to be used as a standard. He wrote:

It is thought by many that there ought to exist a standard [...]. Ability to speak in a standard way might be considered advantageous by some of those whose home language is a distinctly local form of speech; if their vocations require them to work in districts remote from their home locality, they would not be hampered by speaking in a manner differing considerably from the speech of those around them. A standard pronunciation would also be useful to the foreign learner of English. (Jones 1956: 3)

Jones was aware of the criticism (see for example Spencer 1957; Abercrombie 1963) that his prescriptive attitude towards RP may have raised. He used the prefatorial material of his dictionary to set forth his defence:

I wish also to state that I have no intention of becoming either a reformer of pronunciation or a judge who decides what pronunciations are ‘good’ and what are ‘bad’. My aim is to observe and record accurately, and I do not believe in the feasibility of imposing one particular form of

⁵ As Wright (1996: 260) remarks, “RP is one of the most comprehensively described English accents because early twentieth-century British linguists attempting to arrive at a description of the sounds of English were essentially describing their own accent”.

pronunciation on the English-speaking world. I take the view that people should be allowed to speak as they like. And if the public wants a standardized pronunciation, I have no doubt that some appropriate standard will evolve itself. If there are any who think otherwise, it must be left to them to undertake the invidious task of deciding what is to be approved and what is to be condemned. (Jones 1967: xviii)⁶

From the very moment of their publication Jones's book and dictionary became a milestone work in the literature, especially for English language learners and has been recently described (Windsor Lewis 1999: 225) as "the pronunciation bible for generations of EFL teachers". Their success seems to justify Ripman's enthusiasm for his dictionary as expressed in the Preface to Jones's dictionary:

a work of permanent value as the record, by a competent and careful observer, of a certain type of English speech at the beginning of the twentieth century. (21934: v. My italics)

The "permanent" value of such a work was, furthermore, guaranteed by the several editions revised by the author himself and by his successor A. C. Gimson (responsible for the 13th and 14th editions, 1967 and 1977). Gimson is the latest in a series of authoritative phoneticians whose efforts are responsible for the concept of Received Pronunciation. Not only did he follow the tracks of his predecessor, but with the different editions of his *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (1962, 1970, 1980, 1989, 1994) and, as already mentioned, of Jones's *Pronouncing Dictionary*, he also carried forward Jones's tradition. Gimson did not keep things unchanged. Even though he maintained the phoneme inventory as described by Jones (twenty-four consonantal phonemes and twenty vocalic ones), he was always attentive in recording and reporting new changes occurring within the established RP system. I think it appropriate to quote Gimson's statement in his Introduction to the last revised edition of Jones's *Pronouncing Dictionary*:

Although the traditional term 'received pronunciation' (RP) has been retained, I have thought it proper to widen its application [...]. *It seems no*

⁶ In an earlier edition Jones (21934: ix) wrote rather naively: "If the public wants a standard pronunciation, I believe that a standard will evolve itself without any inference by phoneticians".

longer appropriate, at the end of the twentieth century, to define RP speakers in the strict social terms used by Daniel Jones in 1917 and in later editions of the Dictionary. The speech-style now recorded, while retaining its underlying South-Eastern English characteristics, is applicable to a wider sample of contemporary speakers, especially those of the middle generations. Such a model will be of particular relevance of foreign users of the Dictionary. As a result of this relaxation of definition, the ordering of pronunciation variants has frequently been modified and certain new variants have been included. (1977: vii. My italics).

It is clear from this that the intention of the phonetician was to make his readers aware of a new way of looking at RP. What Gimson was referring to was not only a change in the attitude of English people towards that accent – a consequence of the breaking down of the previous class barriers – but also to changes within the structure of the accent itself.

In turn, as a consequence of both changes, the term *Received Pronunciation*, in its meaning of *Standard English accent*, began to be questioned and gradually rejected. Trudgill (1999 and 2002), the Milroys (1999) and Leith (²1997), listed by Honey (1997) among the “enemies” of Standard English, have convincingly enough pointed out on various occasions that it is no longer the case to associate Received Pronunciation with Standard English. In fact, to use Trudgill’s words (1999: 118, but see also 2002: 160), “While RP is in a sense standardised, it is a standardised accent of English and not Standard English itself”. However, the abbreviation RP has been long maintained in view of the fact that, in Abercrombie’s words, “the initials make a convenient neutral label” (1963: 48). The following section will give an overall view of some of the new terms suggested to substitute RP, as a label to refer to the Standard English accent.

2. *RP: “the widening debate”*

Despite its world-wide fame and success, RP has never been immune from criticism. Because of its social nature and its being perceived as a status symbol, it has always inspired hostility against its speakers, who are inevitably perceived as belonging to “a privileged social category”

(Abercrombie 1963: 52). Gimson, for example, referring to this social aspect, points out that:

Indeed RP itself can be a handicap if used in inappropriate social situations, since it may be taken as a mark of affectation or a desire to emphasize social superiority. (Gimson 1994: 79)

If speakers could sometimes find RP inappropriate, phoneticians found the term itself an embarrassment, mainly because of the word ‘received’; for this reason a number of other labels have been proposed since the early 1960s. As pointed out in the previous section, the start of this tendency was partly due to a general acceptance of the fact that RP no longer represented a well-defined social class. Gimson, again, emphasised the fact that:

RP has become less and less the property of a particular class (as in the 19th century) and, with the increasing blurring of social boundaries in Britain, is adopted or aimed at by a more and more considerable section of the population. (Gimson 1964: 132)

As a consequence of this, the term *received* in its meaning of ‘socially and generally accepted’ became overtly questionable. The BBC’s policy – in the decisions of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English⁷ – rendered this accent available as a model to many people all over the country, yet at the same time this widespread diffusion inevitably led to “dilution” (Gimson 1964: 79). In other words, because a growing section of the population had an RP model to imitate, its exposure to regional influences was inevitable.

Another point to make is that even today RP is often described, as will be seen later, as the BBC accent, or the accent of radio and television broadcasts. It does not seem an exaggeration to say that this is no

⁷ In 1926 John Reith who was at the head of British Broadcasting from 1922 until 1938, “to implement and supplement his language policy” (McArthur 1996: 107), which was basically characterised by strict prescriptivism, established the Advisory Committee on Spoken English which consisted of linguists and men of letters such as, among others, George Bernard Shaw, Daniel Jones and Arthur Lloyd James. The committee took decisions on the ‘right’ pronunciation of “contentious” words and it agreed in using, as a reference model, the accent described by Jones for its impartial and impersonal nature.

longer the case. Two reasons can be given here. Firstly, the more relaxed attitude shown by the BBC towards regional accents, in that since the autumn of 1963 it has “discontinued its policy of anonymity for announcers” (Windsor Lewis 1972: xv). Secondly, with the advent of commercial television and radio companies, regional accents have gained more power.

However, notwithstanding a general dissatisfaction with this term shown by scholars in general for the reasons mentioned above, Roach and Hartman, the editors of the fifteenth edition of Jones’s Dictionary, in the Introduction state:

For this edition a more broadly-based and accessible model accent for British English is represented [...]. The time has come to abandon the archaic name Received Pronunciation. The model used for British English is what is referred to as *BBC English*; this is the pronunciation of professional speakers employed by the BBC as newsreaders and announcers on BBC1 and BBC2 television, the World Service and BBC Radio 3 and 4, as well as many commercial broadcasting organisations such as ITN. Of course, one finds differences between such speakers, but there is still a reasonable consensus on pronunciation in this group of professionals, and their speech does not carry for most people the connotations of high social class and privilege that PSP and RP have had in the past. An additional advantage in concentrating on the accent of broadcasters is that it is easy to gain access to examples, and the sound quality is usually of a very high standard. (Jones 1997: v)

Such a decision to adopt the BBC label seems problematic. If on the one hand it eases the dissatisfaction of many scholars regarding use of the Received Pronunciation label when referring to the model accent proposed, on the other hand it sounds a little anachronistic and, as Windsor Lewis has recently put it, “There are many objections to this choice of term, not the least being that it would have made much better sense 40 years ago” (1999: 225). Windsor Lewis’s viewpoint partly evokes Stein and Quirk’s words (1995: 62): “For some Standard English seems to mean only a particular accent: the dulcet vowel of RP as formerly heard on the BBC”. The inappropriateness of BBC English as a label has also been discussed by John Wells, editor of the successful *Longman Pronunciation Dictionary* (henceforth *LPD*), in the preface of his dictionary; presenting the model of pronunciation used, which he

characterises as a “modernized version” of the type known as Received Pronunciation, Wells claims that:

It is what was traditionally used by the BBC newsreaders – hence the educated name BBC pronunciation, although now that the BBC admits regional accents among its announcers this name has become less appropriate (2000: xiii).

However, Roach (one of the above-mentioned editors of the fifteenth edition of Jones’s pronouncing dictionary), while arguing that the name Received Pronunciation is “old-fashioned and misleading”, in his “new practical course of English phonetics and phonology” opts once more for “BBC pronunciation” (2000: 3). Although he avoids giving a reason for the ‘misleading’ nature of the name RP, he makes it clear that it is simply a matter of labelling:

I have given up the use of the name *Received Pronunciation (RP)* for the accent described in the book: it is a term which I have always disliked, and I have chosen to refer instead to *BBC pronunciation*. (2000: vii. Italics in the original)

Indeed, a close analysis of the studies by Wells (2000), Roach and Hartman (in Jones 1997) and Roach (2000) will reveal that they discuss the same accent. However, Roach’s explanations are not totally clear. In many respects his Introduction resembles the modest tone of Jones’s defence, for example when he states: “There is, of course no implication that other accents are inferior or less pleasant-sounding” or “I am not, of course, suggesting that you should try to change your pronunciation!” (2000: 3 and 4), as if he wished to avoid any accusation of being prescriptive. Roach manages to be clear and direct when he states that:

The reason is simply that BBC is the accent that has always been chosen by British teachers to teach to foreign learners, and is the accent that has been most fully described and has been used as the basis for textbooks and pronouncing dictionaries. (2000: 3-4)

Apart from Roach’s idiosyncratic aversion to RP, which was imperceptible in the first edition of his book (1983: 3), in recent times many new terms have started to gain currency in substituting the Jonesian

term. Most of them, however, appear to be misleading and thus prove of very little help. Some were analysed and rejected already by Abercrombie (1963: 52) – for example, he quotes “Educated English”, “Southern English”, “London English”, and “British Standard”, all of which could cause misunderstandings. Abercrombie considers the first inappropriate because RP is not the accent of all educated English people. The second does not find any justification because, as a standard, Southern English is not spoken all over the country. ‘London English’ is particularly confusing because of the existence of an already well-established and recognisable accent typical of the capital. Finally, British Standard is not applicable because Received Pronunciation is a social Standard for England and not all of the British Isles. Nevertheless, the label RP still retains its power, particularly in the ELT world (see Section 4 below). The growing feeling of dissatisfaction with the term ‘received’ has been recently emphasised by Rosewarne, who claims that:

Some phoneticians have tried to replace the term *Received Pronunciation* by something more satisfactory. They have not succeeded, partly because the abbreviation RP is so well established. I suggest, therefore, that we retain the name RP, but as an abbreviation for *Reference Pronunciation*.

The term *received* is dated and confusing. Many people misunderstand its meaning, which is ‘generally accepted’ (as in the expression *received ideas*). Accepted, though, by whom? The two reference accents, or norms, of English (in the ELT world at least) are RP and General American. We ought to reflect on this fact in the terms we employ. The name RP, being economical and widely used, deserves to survive. Let it stand for *Reference Pronunciation*. (Rosewarne 1984: 91)

As the promoter of “Estuary English as tomorrow’s RP”, Rosewarne (1994)⁸ believes that we all have to accept the idea that RP is gradually losing power, even among those social *strata* where it once used to

⁸ When Rosewarne (1984) first introduced the term, named after the banks of the Thames and its estuary, he characterised a variety of modified regional speech and as Wells (1997: 46) puts it “many of the features that distinguish [EE, i.e. Estuary English] from RP are features it shares with Cockney: things that may mark it as being distinctively south-eastern (as against RP, which is not localizable within England). But these features are spreading geographically and socially, thus losing their localizability and thus to some extent justifying the claim that EE is ‘tomorrow’s RP’”. For a recent, detailed “contribution to the problem of EE” see Przedlacka (2001).

dominate. However, he is aware of the fact that it is unlikely that RP will be replaced in ELT and Wells, quite rightly, argues that:

Rather than try to adopt EE, perhaps a more realistic aim for EFL teachers and learners would be to make sure that our description of Received Pronunciation keeps up to date. (1997: 47)

Nonetheless, Rosewarne's suggestion of substituting 'received' with 'reference' should be taken into serious consideration. However, his viewpoint of Estuary English as a possible competitor of RP is fully rejected by Trudgill (2002: 177-178) who not only finds the term "inaccurate"⁹ since it is not a variety of English confined to the banks of the Thames Estuary as the label seems to suggest, but also emphasises its sociolinguistic conditions which would prevent it from turning into the new RP.

In conclusion, there is no reason to remain attached to 'ideal' RP. 'Jones's English', despite all the efforts, will not continue unchanged. Several changes are already under way and some of them have already substituted old, accepted forms. As a matter of fact, the reference accent is not a fixed entity, but it has been subject to change throughout language history. Jones's description is therefore felt to be increasingly distant in several points from the system now perceived as a model. The analysis of one of these changes will be the aim of the next section.

3. *Changing RP: the centring diphthong /ʊə/*

Among the many changes which concern RP¹⁰, I will focus on one phonological change, which involves the centring diphthong /ʊə/. Daniel Jones (1956: 66) described it as follows:

/ʊə/. No 21 of RP. Examples: **tʊə** (tour), **muəz** (moors). This diphthong starts with a quality similar to that of RP short u and ends with RP ə. In phonetic terminology it begins at a vowel which may be described as

⁹ Elsewhere, Trudgill (2001: 10) had defined the term Estuary English as being "foolish".

¹⁰ For a complete analysis and an up-to-date investigation of the current changes within RP see Ramsaran (1990) and Gimson (1994).

between close and half-close, back and moderately rounded, and moves to a nearly half-open, central, unrounded sound.

After this clear description of the realisation of the diphthong, Jones mentions three other possible realisations: one with the diphthong /oə/; another with the more open diphthong /ɔə/ and, finally, the pure vowel /ɔ:/. He concludes by saying that: “the use of /ɔ:/ for /ʊə/ in the above words [sure, pure, curious] is *so frequent* among *non-dialectal speakers* that it has to be considered as belonging to RP as a recognised variant of /ʊə/.” (My italics).

Even though Jones refers to other possible pronunciations as equally ‘accepted’, his attention falls on /ʊə/ as the ‘correct’ (RP) form. Gimson, Jones’s successor as the RP phonetician, in the paragraph dedicated to Sound Change in his *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* does not make any reference to the change concerning the diphthong in question. Only in the fourth edition does he write:

A change of a different kind – the use of another phoneme in a class of words – is illustrated by the case of words such as *poor* and *sure*; these tend to be said by older generation with /ʊə/, whereas the new generation much more commonly uses /ɔ:/. At any given moment, therefore, we must expect several pronunciations to be current representing at least the older, traditional, forms and the new tendencies. (1989: 69)

In the fifth edition, revised a few years later, one reads: “Another noticeable trend is *the replacement* of /ʊə/ by /ɔ:/ in many common words, e.g. *poor* /pɔ:/, *sure* /ʃɔ:/, though /ʊə/ still retains its phonemic status.” (1994: 83)

The monophthongization of /ʊə/ can still be considered in progress, even though – as shown by recent studies (Henton 1983; Ball 1984; Bauer 1985; Trudgill and Hannah 1985; Honey 1997; Leith 1997; Wells 2000) – /ɔ:/, from its position of ‘possible realisation’, has gradually moved to the position of an ‘attested’ one or listed among the “features which used not to be RP and now are RP” (Trudgill 2002: 174). As for any change which concerns the language, even this process of replacement is slow. This is testified by the actual co-occurrence of /ʊə/ and /ɔ:/ in some dictionaries and phonology books (see Section 4 below). Before returning to this last point, I would like to quote Wells’s point of

view about the way dictionaries, in general, deal with “pronunciation variants currently in use”. He writes:

The purpose served by pronunciation indication is much the same in monolingual as in bilingual dictionaries: to advise the user who is unsure of the spoken form of a word by recommending a suitable pronunciation for it. The larger monolingual dictionaries may also nod in the direction of registering the whole range of pronunciation variants currently in use (particularly among educated speakers), although most dictionaries remain firmly prescriptive rather than descriptive. (Wells 1985: 45).

A prescriptive tendency is revealed, for example, by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The second edition (1989 and ²1999 on CD-ROM) does not give its users any hint about the change in question. For words like *poor* and *sure* it still registers two possible realisations, in order: /ʊə/ and /ɔə/¹¹ - in typical Received Pronunciation style. However, it is interesting to note that Gimson had already pointed out the completed loss of /ɔə/ from the phonemic inventory (1964: 135).

Even though RP in its spirit, the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary* (1987) provides its readers with /ʊə/ first but, then, also /ɔ:/. However, the new edition (1995) has only [ʃʊəʔ]. A different tendency is shown by the recent editions of the two most widely used pronouncing dictionaries, that is Wells’s *LPD* (2000) and Jones’s *EPD* (1997). For the word ‘sure’ the former records first [ʃɔ:] and then [ʃʊə] (according to the figures provided, a 1998 poll showed that [ʃɔ:] was preferred by 60% of speakers born after 1973), while the latter still has [ʃɔ:] as a variant. Interestingly enough, the *Cambridge Learner’s Dictionary* (2001 on CD-ROM) only has [ʃɔ:ʔ]. How long shall we have to wait until printed materials recognise /ɔ:/ as the received or rather, standard or reference pronunciation?

It may seem appropriate to quote here a passage written by Mathews in the early 1930s. He stated:

The efforts to standardize pronunciation have failed to such an extent that one feature of some modern dictionaries is the attention which they give to recording variant pronunciations. (Mathews 1933: 92).

¹¹ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993) gives only the diphthong /ʊə/. For further developments in the policy of the *OED* we will have to wait until the year 2005, when the new edition is to be published.

Unfortunately, as will be shown in the following section, this has not always been the case.

4. *RP and the ELT world: the status quo*

Though most sociolinguists (eg. Trudgill and Hannah 1985: 1-3) would question the reality of ‘RP’, there is no doubt that this ‘reference accent’ “retains considerable status” (Crystal 1995: 365) and in particular it still remains the model of British English accent taught to foreign learners.

As already mentioned, the main reason for this lies in the fact that, starting from Jones’s tradition, RP has been the object of many detailed phonetic and phonological studies. Other English accents, in contrast, have largely been ignored and not systematically described (Philp 1968: 34). Only in recent times has more attention been paid to regional accents (Wells 1982; Trudgill and Hannah 1985) though these studies are not so exhaustive as those devoted to RP - despite Smith’s claim that “it is even now not fully described” (1996: 65).

Let us now consider the role played by RP within the ELT world. Critics do not all seem to agree on whether RP should still be used as a label without specifying what exactly RP is (cf. Rosewarne 1984: 91). In other words, it is advisable to point out when the term refers to the accent described by Jones and other phoneticians (with its precise set of phonemes and possible variants) or when it is used as a convenient label describing the model accent used for teaching purposes. Trudgill and Hannah (1985), Honey (1985) and Macaulay (1988), among others, in their descriptions of RP as the accent normally taught to foreign students, seem to agree on the advantages and disadvantages of learning this particular accent. Among the advantages often stated, one can find the following: it is used in most radio and television broadcasts¹², and it is easy to understand because of its non-regional nature. Conversely, the

¹² RP tends to be associated with ‘official’ broadcasting (news and documentaries). Apart from the ‘dilution’ of RP in these genres (see Section 2), one might point out that they are only a minority of all broadcasting, and that a wider range of accents is heard on other types of programmes.

most quoted disadvantages arise from the fact that only a minority of British English native speakers use it, thus learners have few opportunities to practise it when outside the classroom.

There is a clear discrepancy between what phoneticians and dialectologists have written on RP and on its changing role as a prescriptive norm and the norm itself as used in ELT publications (or rather in those which have ‘British English’ and not other ‘Englishes’ – American, Australian, etc. – as a model). For example, it is not unusual to find sentences like the following in the Introduction of EFL dictionaries:

In this dictionary a guide is given to the pronunciation of the English words [...] the accent represented is Received Pronunciation, or RP for short, [...] [which] is perhaps most widely used as a norm for teaching purposes. (Collins Cobuild 1987: xii)¹³.

or like the following one in a book on phonology for teachers of ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages):

All the material in the following chapters refers to a single accent. It happens to be approximately that of the authors and is generally referred to as Received Pronunciation or R.P. for short. (Parker and Graham 1994: 8-9).

In neither of the two extracts quoted can one perceive the dismissive tone which was already evident in Gimson’s Introduction to Jones’s *Pronouncing Dictionary*, written more than a decade before:

If I have retained *the traditional though imprecise term “received pronunciation”*, it is because the label has such wide currency in books on present-day English and because it is a convenient name for an accent which remains generally acceptable and intelligible within Britain. (1977: xi. My italics).

¹³ If we read between the lines of the Pronunciation section of the new edition (1995) of the Collins Cobuild Dictionary, a more relaxed attitude may be perceived on the part of the editors: “The basic principle underlying the suggested pronunciations is ‘If you pronounce it like this, most people will understand you’. The pronunciations are therefore *broadly based* on the two most widely taught accents of English, RP or Received Pronunciation for British English, and GenAm or General American for American English” (my italics).

If RP is to be understood as the typical accent fully analysed and described by Jones and Gimson, for example, it seems clear that we are dealing with a paradox; that is, proposing as a model an accent which is spoken by a very low percentage of people. Moreover, if RP is to stand as Standard British English, it is necessary to find a new term. The reason for this last statement lies in the fact that ‘Received Pronunciation’ has been undergoing a number of changes.

If one takes into account the huge number of people who teach English, both native and non-native speakers of the language, and relates it to the figures reported by Trudgill and Hannah already mentioned (3-5 % of the population are RP speakers), what is, then, the use of still proposing RP as a model? Another problem is that even though nowadays the teaching of English phonology has re-gained importance, learners might end up being confused when confronted with the audio-visual material which accompanies the textbooks (rigorously RP!) and the teachers’ own pronunciation (very frequently non-RP). Macaulay (1988: 122) speaks of teachers “forced either to modify their speech in the direction of RP or fall back on the formula ‘Do as I tell you, not as I do’”. Even so, we can find stances like François Chevillet’s:

As an EFL teacher, I am a firm believer in using RP as a model, because it has a long descriptive tradition with prestigious names like Jones, Gimson and Wells going with it: the literature describing RP is a unique example of its kind. (Chevillet 1992: 28)

It goes without saying that he is absolutely right about “the literature describing RP”, but his claim makes it clear that in spite of the phoneticians’ research in the field, ELT representatives still seem reluctant to get away from the old label. Even though later in the same article Chevillet (1992: 29) writes: “I am not by any means saying that RP is better than any other accent” he then overgeneralizes by stating that “academics, phoneticians, *and even ordinary English people* know what RP is” (original emphasis). Such sweeping statements give rise to some questions: Do we all know what RP is? Do ordinary English people know what RP is? What ordinary people do seem to know is that speaking with an RP accent means “talking lah-di-dah”, “talking posh”, “cut-glass accent”, “Oxford accent”, “BBC voice”, “Queen’s English” and so on (Spencer 1957: 9; Leith 1997: 56, McArthur 1998: 115). As a non-

native speaker himself, Chevillet should know how difficult it is for a foreigner to acquire such a speech form. Moreover, even native speakers not used to that accent from childhood may have difficulty acquiring it (see, for example, Spencer 1957: 16), provided they may wish to do so. Furthermore, to what extent can EFL teachers, in general, state that they teach it, or better, use it in everyday speech? If they continue to follow Jones's or Gimson's descriptions faithfully, they risk finding themselves on the wrong track and taking their students with them because, whereas language keeps changing, the published materials at their disposal do not always reflect such changes.

Every year new coursebooks enter the market of the ELT world. Most of the time teachers find useful material to help them teach English phonology, but the problem lies in the model they offer. It is clear that 'Jones's RP' is still the model commonly adopted, in spite of the discrepancy referred to above. For example, it is interesting to note that all of the ten ELT books consulted by the present writer still propose the diphthong /ʊə/ for the pronunciation of such words as *poor* and *sure*¹⁴. Only two of them, Roach (³2000) and Porcelli and Hotimsky (1997), following Wells's *LPD*, give the /ɔ:/ option.

5. *Conclusion*

This paper has sought to highlight the clear discrepancy emerging between scientific discussions of RP and the attitude of ELT publications towards it. Indeed, there appears to be an urgent need to revise the latter, so that a greater awareness of phonological variation may ensue. This need is particularly evident now that the teaching of English phonology, after the relative neglect it had suffered in ELT curricula since the advent of communicative approaches, has gained more prominence – even though many scholars have suggested there is a need to “asses and clarify the current status of the teaching of pronunciation” (Pennington and Richards 1986: 207-208, but see also Jenkins 1998).

¹⁴ The books consulted are: O'Connor (1967); Roach (1983, ³2000); O'Connor and Fletcher (1989); Swan and Walter (1989); Cunningham and Bowler (1990); Gagliardi (1991), Parker and Graham (1994), Hancock (1995), Porcelli and Hotimsky (1997).

Despite all the various attempts made to reduce the role of RP as described by Jones, it still retains its status as ‘the Standard accent’. It is still commonly adopted by the ELT world and its representatives. ‘Reference Pronunciation’ is just a change of label to avoid the old-fashioned associations of ‘received’ – it may also correspond to a change in meaning: a system that recognises the evolution that has taken place. Nevertheless, one cannot but agree with Windsor Lewis’s statement (1999: 226) that, “What is certain is that the pronunciation of English is an area of learning that is full of pitfalls for the unwary”.

If we assume that there must be a model in teaching any foreign language, as Trudgill (2002: 172) seems to do when he answers the opponents of the teaching of RP (after all, “we have to teach something”), it must in any case be clear that the model should present as accurate a description as possible of the language in its present state. Even though RP remains the most prestigious accent with which foreign learners are made familiar, a failure to stress the “degree of variation to be found within standard English and RP” (Hughes/Trudgill 1974: 12) would clearly be a deficiency.

As shown by the uncertain treatment of the development in the pronunciation of ‘sure’, ELT materials do not seem to account for the variability affecting even such a “standardised” accent as the Jonesian Received Pronunciation. On a scientific level, this is no longer regarded as a monolithic accent (cf. Leith 1997: 130); indeed, some linguists have claimed that RP is a dead or a dying accent (J. Milroy 1999: 33) and have considered the proposition that it “no longer exists” (Milroy 2001), even though these statements have been challenged by Trudgill (2002: 176-177). Probably, the only reason for its continued existence is to be found in the ELT industry, a view substantiated by James Milroy’s following comment:

This RP industry has been fuelled by the need to teach English to overseas learners and is justifiable in this context, but it is also true that overseas learners of British English have thus been taught a conservative pronunciation that they will now seldom hear except in the public pronouncements of the Prince of Wales and other dignitaries. (1999: 33)

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