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ESTUARY ENGLISH AND ITS LINGUISTIC FEATURES AS AN ACCENT

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Abstract: English language learners often get in contact with different pronunciations and accents as nearly everyone in Great Britain speaks with an accent and only about 3-5 % uses the RP in their everyday language. Among them Estuary English has a special role in the U.K. Some people think it is “tomorrow’s RP”. It first really appeared in 1980s, but now it is established in the South of England as a new accent.

Key words: Estuary English, RP, Cockney English, l-vocalization, glottaling, happy-tensing, yod-coalescence, accent, h dropping, th fronting.

Though in 1995 the UK Minister of Education, Gillian Shephard, launched into a denunciation of Estuary English, condemning it as slovenly, mumbling, bastardized Cockney and claimed that teachers have to do their best to eradicate it, presently not only are the prominent politicians, sportsmen, media personalities claimed as typical speakers of it, but even people as eminent as Queen Elizabeth’s youngest son, Prince Edward. In 1993 the London *Sunday Times* reported that Estuary English was ‘sweeping southern Britain’.

Linguists see ‘RP’ as the standard accent and this accent is taught to foreign language learners but very few people in Great Britain really speak RP. These facts are important to know EFL-teachers to pay much attention on accents as well.

The term ‘Estuary English’ was coined in 1984 by David Rosewarne, an EFL teacher. He characterized it as ‘a variety of modified regional speech [...] a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation. If one imagines a continuum with RP and London speech at either end, “Estuary English” speakers are to be found grouped in the middle ground.’

The accent which is named after the ‘banks of the Thames and its estuary’, is to be heard in the House of Commons, the City, the Civil Service, local government, the media, advertising, and the medical and teaching professions in the south-east.

Being a young accent Estuary English spread rather quickly to the north and to the west and its development continues to increase.

Thus, Estuary English is a new name but it is not a new phenomenon. It is the continuation of a trend that has been going on for five hundred years or more - the tendency of London speech features spreading out of London. Nevertheless some linguists foresee that Estuary English is unlikely ever become anything more than a regional accent and that the sociolinguistic conditions are not such that it could turn over into the new RP. Anyway, if not the whole accent is taken over as the standard, maybe some of the most remarkable features might become the norm.

There really are no hard and strict rules of speaking Estuary English, because it’s individual how one wants to speak it. Sometimes they drop the ‘t’-s and sometimes they don’t. The same refers to the pronunciation of sound [h].

In general Estuary English shares a lot of features with the Cockney accent (the dialect of the English language traditionally spoken by working-class Londoners), for example l-vocalization, glottaling, happy-tensing, yod-coalescence etc. But on the other hand, things like h-dropping, which means omitting the h sound before vowels, or th-fronting, which means replacing the dental fricatives ([t, d]) with labiodental fricatives ([f, v]) are absent in Estuary English.

Happy-tensing describes the change of the /i/ sound at the end of words like *happy* or *coffee*. The sound in Estuary English changes from the normally used [i] as in *bit* to the longer and lower [i:] as in *beat*. That affects the final vowels of words such as *happy*, *city*, *hurry*, *taxi*, *movie*, *Charlie*, *coffee*, *money*, *Chelsea*. It may also apply in inflected forms of such words containing an additional final consonant sound, such as *cities*, *Charlie's* and *hurried*. It can also affect words such as *me*, *he* and *she* when used as clitics, as in *show me*, *would he?*

The process of losing the 'y' is termed yod-dropping.

Yod-coalescence is a process that fuses the clusters /dj, tj, sj, zj/ into the sibilants [dʒ, tʃ, ʃ, ʒ] respectively (for the meanings of those symbols, see English phonology). The first two are examples of affrication.

This is a phenomenon which concerns the semi-vowel y and its development.

The Yod-coalescence and Yod-dropping, have been very influential on RP in recent decades. Yod-coalescence means that a [tʃ] sound is used where a [tj] sound would be the norm. This occurs in words like *tune*, *Tuesday* or *tulip*. The same happens with the voiced /d/ sound in advance of a /j/- sound: the [dj] sound at the beginning of such words as *dune* or *duke* turns into a [dʒ]- sound. The consequences of this process are that the words *dune/June* and *due/Jew* become homophonous. This change is very strongly used in Cockney as well.

Thus, [tj] > [tʃ], e. g. got you - gɒtʃə

[dj] > [dʒ], e.g. would you - wʊdʒə

[sj] > [ʃ], e.g. this year - ðɪʃjə

[zj] > [ʒ], e.g. casual - kæzʊəl > kæʒʊəl

Yod-coalescence is an assimilation and every assimilation is a simplification of articulation.

Another London feature is the Yod-dropping. This can also be seen in EE after alveolars, especially after an /l/, for example in words like *absolute*, *lieu* and *illuminate* which were once pronounced with a /j/- sound before the /u/. But this has changed and now the socially accepted pronunciation is just the /u/- sound.

Estuary English created some diphthongs where RP uses simply vowels. The RP /i:/ becomes a diphthong in EE, the /əi/ to be exact; for example *sea* will be pronounced /səi/ in EE. The same change happens with /u:/ which becomes /əu:/. This sound occurs in 'blue'.

There is also a change in the other direction. In words like *either* and *neither* the RP diphthong /aɪ/ in EE is pronounced simply as /i:/. This is when I caught myself in the act, because I used to pronounce it exactly this way (/ˈi:Deɪ/), thinking it was the norm.

Moreover, EE uses /ai/ instead of the RP /ei/ diphthong. That makes the word 'say', being pronounced as /sai/ homophonous to *sigh* in EE. The pronunciation of 'say' in cockney (/sVi/) though is slightly different.

L-vocalization

L-vocalization, in linguistics, is a process by which a lateral approximant sound such as [l], or, perhaps more often, velarized [ɫ], is replaced by a vowel or a semivowel. This is typical to cockney English. People pronounce [l] without bothering to let the tongue touch the palate. As a result [l] turns into something like [u] or [o] or even [w]. Its a simplification of articulation.

Another phonetic pronunciation is the change of the dark [ɫ] that sounds like [w]. So the alveolar consonant /l/ changes into semi-vowel /w/. For example, the word “football” sounds like ‘foo’baw’.

The l-vocalization is a subtle change, because it can lead to misunderstandings. David Rosewarne gave a funny example l-vocalization consequence. He wrote: “In Estuary English *awful* and *all full* could be confusable in rapid speech, as in the possible utterance: ‘I’m afraid our single rooms are awfuw’” (Rosewarne 1994b: 5).

Glottaling/ the glottal stop

Glottaling is perhaps the most known change in the English language in recent years. Wells describes it as “catch in the throat” instead of a t-sound. Altendorf gives a more precise definition: “The glottal stop is a voiceless plosive produced by an obstruction of the air-stream formed at the vocal folds.” (Altendorf, 2003: 63).

The real sound isn’t heard and the listener only perceives “the abrupt cessation or the abrupt onset of the following sound.” It must be noted that this change doesn’t mean just leaving out the t-sound. Wells’ example of this phonetic alternation is the word *plate*, which due to the glottal stop becomes [plei] and this is certainly different to play [plei]. Other examples are the words *catwalk* [kæ’wɔk] and *bottle* [bɔ’l]

Why are these phonetic changes so popular? The most probable answer to this question is that people want to sound different from the accepted phonetic rules. “When we speak, we must constantly make choices of many different kinds: what we want to say, how we want to say it, and the specific sentence types, words, and sounds that best unite the what with the how” (Wardhaugh, 1992: 258). So Estuary speakers make their own choices with respect to their communication patterns.

What refers to the vocabulary and grammar David Rosewarne mentions some small differences concerning special vocabulary items. He writes that *Cheers* is preferred to *thank you* and the word basically is used more often during the course of speaking. Instead of ‘here you are’ they say ‘there you go’, Shortened words are widely used: enough- nuff, brother- bro/bra, elision of the words want to and going to-wanna, gonna is common. Other examples of Estuary vocabulary are: ski -wench, bellend- someone annoying, skank-prostitute etc. It must be mentioned that the usage of this kind of lexical expressions are not enough to decide that the speaker speaks Estuary English. Every speaker is free to choose certain words in certain context, it is pronunciation and the rise fall intonation that differentiate the Estuary speaker.

As for grammar it can be mentioned the usage of *was* for plural subjects. E.g. We was walking down the street. Ain’t is used as negative am/is/have. E.g. I ain’t well. There can be multiple negation in the sentence. E.g. Tom hasn’t got no money. There can be adjective form with adverbial function. E.g. She sang real nice. Most frequent use of tags, especially “inni”. E.g. Nice

day, inni? David Crystal writes about the ‘confrontational’ question tag, as in *I said I was going, didn’t I?*

Estuary English gains increasing social acceptability. It has become an intermediate accent spoken by speakers belonging to middle classes and is gradually replacing RP in an increasing number of functions. Though most of the speakers in the areas surrounding London have glottalling scores intermediate between RP and Cockney, yet they are far from being speakers of one uniform variety that we could call Estuary English.

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Երան Խաչատրյան - “ESTUARY ENGLISH” ԵՎ ՆՐԱ ԼԵԶՎԱԿԱՆ ԱՌԱՆՁՆԱՀԱՏԿՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԸ ՈՐՊԵՍ ԱԿՑԵՆՑ: «Estuary English» տերմինը ստեղծվել է Դեյվիդ Ռոզուորնի կողմից 1984 թվականին և առաջին անգամ նկարագրվել է Times թերթի ուսումնական հավելվածի հայտնի հոդվածում: Ըստ հեղինակի այն հնչյունաբանական և սոցիալական միջանկյալ խոսվածք է Քոքնիի (բնիկ լոնդոնցիների խոսվածքի) և RP-ի (Ընդունված արտասանություն) միջև, հիմնված Լոնդոնի հարավ-արևելյան առողջանության վրա: Այն, ինչ նա համարում է «Estuary English» -ի նորությունն ու ամենատառադրավ բնորոշ գիծը, նրա սոցիալական ընդունելիության աճն է: Ռոզուորնը նույնիսկ «Estuary English»-ը բնութագրում է որպես «Նոր RP»:

Еран Хачатрян - ЭСТИУАРИЙСКИЙ АНГЛИЙСКИЙ И ЕГО ЯЗЫКОВЫЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ КАК АКЦЕНТ. Термин «Estuary English» был придуман Дэвидом Розуорном в 1984 году и впервые был описан в известной статье в Образовательном приложении «Таймс». По мнению автора, это фонологический и социальный промежуточный акцент между Кокни (речь коренных лондонцев) и RP (Received Pronunciation), основанный на акценте юго-восточного Лондона. В чем он видит новизну и наиболее заметную характеристику эстуарного английского, так это в его растущей социальной приемлемости. Розуорн даже описывает «Estuary English» как «Новый RP».