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## **The accent of BBC radio presenters**

### **Introduction**

Accent, defined by Wells (1982a: 1) as “a pattern of pronunciation used by a speaker for whom English is the native language (...)”, has been an important notion in the English sociolinguistic studies. The English assess and are assessed by other native speakers on the basis of the way they speak (Meyerhoff 2006). There is a multitude of accents in Great Britain as inhabitants of each region speak in their own distinctive manner. It appears that the accent of each region carries some social values and native speakers have a tendency to attribute certain characteristics to users of a given accent (Wells 1982a). For instance, speakers of accents of southern England are regarded as more intelligent, with a higher social status than it is the case in north urban England (Stockwell 2007).

The present paper describes a study conducted on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), one of the largest networks of radio stations, TV channels as well as commercial activities worldwide. It analyses the pronunciation of BBC radio presenters with respect to a standard English accent known as Received Pronunciation (RP). The study aims to examine the connection between the BBC and the RP which once was strong, but has changed in the recent years (Fabricius 2000), and to determine the role of RP on the BBC.

### **RP: then and now**

RP is defined by phoneticians as a social, prestigious, non-localizable, non-rhotic accent (Crystal 2008; Hughes & Trudgill 1996), spoken mainly in England by around 3% of the English population and functioning as a model for foreign learners of English. Socially, it tends to be associated with the English upper

class and upper middle class, high level of education (typically, public-school education), Queen's language, BBC newsreaders and professional domains like the Court, the Civil Service and the law (Wells 1982a). What distinguishes this accent from other British accents is that it does not reveal where its speakers come from since it is a non-regional accent.

After the standardisation of the spoken language in the nineteenth century in England RP became the accent of power and of those who wield power. It was codified as correct English pronunciation in the dictionaries of Daniel Jones. RP continued to spread from the southeast England to the rest of the country, from the upper class downwards, to the rest of the society who recognised it as a model (Fabricius 2000; Honey 1997). For years it continued to enjoy immense prestige and its users were regarded as well-educated, powerful, trustworthy, ambitious, self-confident and intelligent (Giles 1973), even by speakers who did not speak the accent themselves.

The situation began to change in late twentieth century when regional accents became more and more popular, with RP starting to be considered rather posh and snobbish (Morrish 1999). It is especially true of the form of RP associated with the English aristocracy which has been regarded by the English society as outdated and is claimed to be dying out (Morrish 1999). However, English phoneticians maintain that RP still functions as a model and can be heard on a daily basis (Honey 1997).

It is worth pointing out that RP is an accent which, like all other accents, undergoes change with time (Trudgill 2008). It also has many types. According to Wells' (1982b) classification, for instance, among others, there exists U-RP, spoken by the English aristocracy and members of the upper class, very conservative and rigid, adoptive RP, used by speakers who did not speak this variety as children, and mainstream RP, employed by the BBC, most frequent in use. The study deals with the last type, mainstream RP, spoken by BBC radio presenters.

### **RP on the BBC**

The other name for RP is BBC English, which points to a clear connection between the accent itself and the medium through which it has been disseminated: the BBC. When the BBC came into being, it was generally agreed that RP is the accent everyone should try to acquire (Crystal 2000) because it provides formality and anonymity to the presenters and conveys a sense of culture, educatedness and status (Schwyter 2016). Crystal (2008: 404) stresses: "The BBC originally adopted RP for its announcers because it was the form of pronunciation most likely to be nationally understood, and to attract least regional criticism".

John Reith, the first director of the BBC, believed that the mission of the BBC was to "educate »the masses«" (Schwyter 2016: 16). He saw its task as both the entertainer and the educator of the nation: "As we conceive it, our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement (...)"

(Reith 1924: 34). The mission of the BBC was to portray itself as the broadcaster for everyone, not for some chosen members of the British society. At the same time, Received Pronunciation seemed to be the right voice to achieve these purposes and the correct pronunciation that the public should aspire to (Schwyter 2016). And so, the broadcasters spoke with RP, a tendency which was for a long time maintained and reinforced (Schwyter 2016). Linguists disagree whether RP was directly or indirectly promoted, but the BBC certainly played a part in recommending and spreading the accent (Hannisdal 2006; Honey 1989).

Due to the increasing influence of commercial television, ITV, the introduction of regional local radio and the popularisation of regional accents, in the 1970s and 1980s it was no longer necessary for BBC presenters to speak RP. The BBC abandoned its mission as the educator of the masses as it realised that spoken language avoids standardisation (Schwyter 2016). Since then, a number of mild regional accents have been allowed as long as the presenters' speech is intelligible to the audience. Schwyter (2016: 195) stresses: "clarity, competence and comprehensibility are by far the most important criteria".

Now it is common to hear a considerable number of different accents on the BBC and RP is just one of many (Honey 1989). Schwyter (2016) reports that local stations often use local accents of the society which the broadcasts are aimed at, so do the on-the-spot reporters outside of the BBC studio. At the same time, the news are mainly read in mainstream RP (Hannisdal 2006). Honey (1997: 100) points out that "In Britain, BBC listeners expect the news to be presented by RP speakers (...), whereas "practical" information on gardening or the weather is stereotypically given by speakers with broad paralects or even mesolectal accents". It therefore seems that the distribution of accents is not completely random, but may follow a certain pattern. According to what Honey (1989) reports, the application of an accent on the part of the BBC is a conscious technique. The choice of the accent appears to be determined by the target audience, the type of radio or television station and the type of broadcast.

The study aims to find out if the accent use on the BBC in 2017 is different from the accent examined by Honey (1989) in the 1980s and if the model, RP variety is still given preference over non-standard features of pronunciation in certain circumstances. It also investigates whether the choice of RP features is determined by the type of broadcast and the profile of radio station.

### **/t/ glottalling and h-dropping**

Two phonetic variables have been analysed in the recordings of BBC radio presenters: /t/ glottalling and h-dropping. The former, also known as glottal replacement, includes the substitution of /t/ sound with a sound made with the use of the glottis. A glottal stop, transcribed as /ʔ/, is "the audible release of a complete closure at the glottis" (Crystal 2008: 213). This can be heard in English for example in a situation in which a particular vowel is articulated with much force (as in *are you*); intervocalically (as in *co-operate*), or at the end of words (as in *what*).

The use of /t/ glottalling has become so ubiquitous in many English accents that Trudgill (1999: 136) suggests that it “is one of the most dramatic, wide-spread and rapid changes to have occurred in British English in recent times”. It is most often heard in word-final preconsonantal environment (as in *what* [wʌʔ]) in which it is accepted as a feature of mainstream RP (Wells 1982a). According to Wells (1997), it is possible for a speaker of RP to use /t/ glottalling before any non-syllabic consonant and it has also been allowed before a pause and before vowels across word boundaries (as in *quite easy* [kwaɪʔ ˈi:zi]). Whether /t/ glottalling is inside or outside RP when used before a pause or a vowel is still a contentious issue. It is most easily permissible before consonants, less so before a pause, and even less before a vowel in which context it is considered to be non-standard. Doubtless, the use of glottal replacement does not fall within RP before syllabic /l/ or /n/ (as in *button* [bʌʔn]) and intervocalically within one word (as in *butter* [bʌʔə]).

H-dropping, in turn, is often defined as “absence of [h] in words where standard accents have it” (Wells 1982a: 17), that is to say in content and all accented words, e.g. *horse*, *hit*, *hedge*. Wells (1994) highlights that the deletion of the initial /h/ in pronouns and weak function words is a widely acceptable process in RP, contrary to h-dropping in content words. Therefore, deleting /h/ from the word *he* when it is used in its weak form is acceptable in RP, but not pronouncing /h/ in the word *horse* is not.

The study in question analyses all instances of /t/ glottalling and h-dropping in the speech of BBC radio presenters. Any omission of non-standard initial /h/ sound on the part of speakers means that their accent is treated as outside of RP. As regards /t/ glottalling, it is investigated both in its standard and non-standard usage.

## The study

The present study analyses the speech of BBC radio presenters on different radio stations: BBC Radio 1, BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 5 Live and BBC World Service. The stations have been chosen so that they reflect different target audience and deal with different genre. On each radio station three types of broadcasts have been distinguished: the news, sports news and live sports commentaries, and entertainment. The first category involves one BBC broadcaster presenting the current news, usually every hour or every half an hour. The second type deals with two kinds of broadcasts: sports news, which are presented by one or a few broadcasters after the national and foreign news is announced, and sports commentaries, which are delivered live and concern only football. The third type involves BBC radio programmes in which there is some interaction between the presenter and the audience or between the presenter and the invited guests: interviews, phone-in programmes and game shows. The majority of these programmes concern entertainment issues such as musical records and charts, hence the name entertainment programmes, but some of them, for lack

of any other ones available on a particular radio station, concern sports or talks, for instance *HARDtalk* on BBC World Service. The key discerning factor is that in this type there is interaction between the presenter or a number of presenters with other people who are not directly connected with the BBC. The third category includes the following programmes: *Gardeners' Question Time* (BBC Radio 4), *Hard Talk* (BBC World Service), *The Radio One Breakfast Show* and *The Official Chart with Greg James* (BBC Radio 1) and *606* and *Fighting Talk* (BBC Radio 5 Live).

There are two samples of each type of broadcasts on each radio station. In other words, there are two news samples, sports samples and entertainment samples taken from each radio station, which makes six samples from one radio station and twenty four samples altogether. Each sample is approximately forty-fifty seconds long.

Studies show that there are differences in man's and woman's language (Weatherall 2002), including differences in the pronunciation of /t/ sound and glottalisation across speakers of different gender (Fabricius 2000). For this reason, all the presenters whose speech is analysed in the present study are male so as to exclude gender as the factor that can be responsible for differences in pronunciation. Another factor why male broadcasters have been chosen is that there seem to be more programmes hosted by men than by women, especially in sports and entertainment. The presenters are for the most part different in the two samples taken from the same type of broadcast, with the exception of Stephen Sackur, the presenter of *HARDtalk* on BBC World Service, whose pronunciation is examined in two distinct extracts. Another similar example concerns Simon Mundie, a broadcaster who presents both the news and the sports news on BBC Radio 1. The presenters are British, the youngest being around 30 years old and the oldest around 60 years old.

All the extracts from radio programmes are taken from BBC iPlayer Radio (online source 1 and 2), a webpage which makes it possible to listen to different radio stations live and to re-listen to particular programmes after they have been broadcast. The extracts have been recorded either live, if possible, and, if not, relistened after they have been transmitted (online source 2). They have been recorded by means of Apowersoft Free Online Audio Recorder, a programme used to record sounds.

The extracts from different broadcasts which have been recorded and put into a separate folder have been listened to repetitively and transcribed orthographically on paper with the help of English native speakers. Next, all the possible contexts of h-dropping and /t/ glottalling have been highlighted in the transcriptions.

As far as h-dropping is concerned, the study deals with this phenomenon as a non-standard feature, restricted only to accented syllables, i.e. in content words and accented function words. H-dropping in unaccented initial syllables is not the subject of investigation. With respect to /t/ glottalling, all the possible contexts have been highlighted, including both word-medial and word-final glottalling in unaccented syllables, in which /t/ is in the coda position or ambisyllabic, following a vowel, a nasal or a liquid, either before a vowel, a pause or a consonant. Contexts in which /t/ appears in consonant clusters which make glottal replacement impossible to happen have been excluded from the study.

The extracts have been analysed both auditorily, through repetitive listening, and acoustically in Praat, a computer programme used to study the quality of sounds and speech. Both the spectrograms and the waveforms have been used and attention has been devoted to the movement and transition of formants, pulses and any aperiodicity and irregularity in the formant values, amplitude and pitch.

The extract below comes from the news delivery on BBC Radio 1. All possible contexts for /t/ glottalling and h-dropping are in bold. Instances of /t/ glottalling and h-dropping are highlighted, while slashes indicate pauses in the presenter's speech.

[Then that is assuming \ that you have finished work for the week so apologies \ to those working \ nights \ or \ or weekend \ I'm very sorry \ And you might think \ that most people would be dying \ to get out of the office \ for the weekend \ but research \ by the BBC \ has found that two thirds of British workers \ do enjoy going to work most days \ four out of five are proud \ and \ to be honest \ it wasn't hard to find many of them\]

[BBC Radio 1: the news<sup>1</sup>]

As can be observed, there are several instances of /t/ glottalling (highlighted /t/ letters in bold). They can be found in different contexts, both in standard ones, before a consonant (e.g. in *that* two), and those whose inclusion in RP is debatable (intervocally, e.g. in *that* is). Extracts from the transcriptions of programmes on other BBC radio stations can be found below:

- [(..)Made your \ fortune and your name by \ introducing a new \ form of sort of er \ cheaper budget aviation travel \ to Asia \ and you are of course proud to be Asian \ and yet \ as people listen to your voice and as they perhaps \ listen to some of your attitudes as well you're also \ it seems to me \ culturally quite Western educated in the UK \ (...)]

[BBC World Service: *HARDtalk*<sup>2</sup>]

- [**H**ang... hanging baskets what about liners for hanging baskets so what about er \ insulation for \ dahlias and plants like that in the \ in the wintertime \ just as a \ as a protective layer surely you could lay that over the top and there'll still be air movement \ and i think anywhere where you need insulation just put that in there \ put it in \ (...)]

[BBC Radio 4: *Gardeners' Question Time*<sup>3</sup>]

- [All right Andrew \ well the very fact we're **having** this debate i think on the lines \ (...) \ What a terrific start to the season \ **He's had** \ eh and let's completely flip that because \ **not** having a terrific start to the season]

[BBC Radio 5 Live: 606<sup>4</sup>]

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09202h1> (accessed: 20.04.2018).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csty5c> (accessed: 20.04.2018).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b091wf7n> (accessed: 20.04.2018).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09423xc> (accessed: 20.04.2018).

After the classification of all the instances as either examples of /t/ glottalling or not, they have been further divided into three categories: /t/ glottalling across word boundaries, before a pause and word-internal /t/ glottalling. Instances from the first and the third group have been subdivided into examples of /t/ glottalling before a true consonant, before a liquid or a semivowel and before a vowel or intervocalic /t/ glottalling, following Wells' (1982a) classification. The term "true consonants" (Wells 1982a: 260) stands for nasals and obstruents. The numbers in each category and subcategory have been calculated both for each BBC radio extract and for the two extracts of the same kind of programme taken together, for instance the two news extracts on a particular radio station. It has also been calculated how many instances of /t/ glottalling have appeared on each radio station and in each type of broadcast.

A similar approach has been adopted when analysing h-dropping. All the possible contexts have been highlighted and examined auditorily and acoustically, marked with a plus or a minus and calculated. They have been divided into instances of h-dropping in content words and accented function words.

## Results

The study has shown a relatively low number of glottally replaced tokens: out of all the 409 possible contexts 60 underwent this process, which makes for less than 15% per cent. This number varies according to each radio station; it is lowest in the case of BBC World Service and BBC Radio 4: 10% and 7% respectively. It has been expected that these two radio stations will have more of the RP accent than BBC Radio 1 or BBC Radio 5 Live, whose topics are not as serious as these on BBC World Service and BBC Radio 4. The number of items with /t/ glottalling on BBC Radio 5 Live is rather low: only 12%.

As regards glottal replacement on BBC World Service, which appears to be the most conservative of all the four radio stations analysed, it is rare. There are just several instances of this phenomenon happening only in entertainment programmes and sports and the percentage of the glottally replaced tokens is around 15% in both kinds of programmes. There is no /t/ glottalling in the news, which is usually delivered in the formal, standard accent and in which the examples analysed lack glottal replacement in all the possible contexts.

Contrary to BBC World Service, /t/ glottalling on BBC Radio 1, a radio station with a pop and rock music profile, is more common: 28% of all possible items. Glottal replacement happens here both in the circumstances characteristic of mainstream RP (e.g. *right now*, *that was*) and in these circumstances whose classification as either RP or non-RP is a contentious issue (intervocalic, e.g. *that is*).

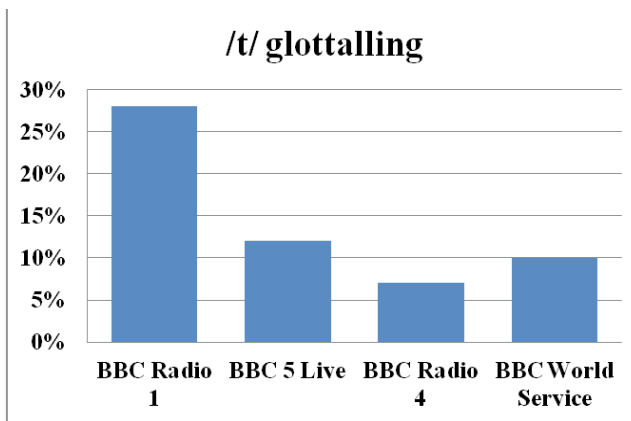
Surprisingly enough, on BBC Radio 1 the number of /t/ glottalling is larger for the news than for any other type of broadcasts: 41% as compared with 6% in the sports and 37% in entertainment programmes. One of possible reasons why this might be so is that this radio station is considered to be aimed especially at young audience and so the language of the presenters might be tailored to some

extent to how the majority of young English people speak, including in the news delivery. Moreover, the voice of the presenter on BBC Radio 1 who uses glottal replacement gives the impression of the presenter being in his early or mid thirties. This is a considerably lower age than that of these presenters of other BBC radio stations whose age has been established. As the tendency is to consider the young generation to glottalise more than the old generations (Fabricius 2000), it might be the case why there is more /t/ glottalling among young presenters than the rest of the presenters.

On BBC Radio 5 Live, a radio station which specialises in sports news delivery, the highest number of glottally replaced items can be found in entertainment programmes in which it reaches around 23%, while being very low for the news (0%) and sports (6%). This contrast is stark, similar to the one on BBC Radio 1 (6% in the sports and 37% in entertainment).

Table 1 summarises the distribution of /t/ glottalling on different radio stations. As mentioned above, BBC Radio 1 has the largest number of glottally replaced tokens, over 25% of all possible contexts in all types of broadcasts, with BBC Radio 4 and BBC World Service only up to 10%.

Table 1. Source: own work



It seems that there still is a considerable difference in the accent between different types of broadcast, with entertainment programmes having much more instances of non-standard phonetic features than the news and sports news. The number of glottally replaced items in the news is almost non-existent, apart from BBC Radio 1. What is surprising is a rather low percentage of /t/ glottalling in sports news which appears to be less formal than the news.

Similarly, singular cases of non-standard h-dropping can be found only in entertainment programmes. The phenomenon is still rare on national radio stations, especially in more formal contexts, such as news delivery.



### Concluding remarks

By and large, the study has shown that the type of broadcast matters with respect to accent use. Standard, RP features are still popular in newsreading, but this is not the main criterion: a high percentage of glottally replaced tokens in the news on BBC Radio 1 shows that the profile of radio stations might be a decisive factor in accent use. Contrary to a situation in the 1960s and 1970s, Received Pronunciation is now not necessarily a unique accent used in news delivery, especially on less formal radio stations, but it is still a preferred accent on national radio stations. As regards entertainment programmes and sports news, the accent with which the BBC presenters speak is very often regional, with non-standard features of pronunciation. The role of Received Pronunciation has changed over the last years: it is still popular in certain genres, but in less formal ones it has given way to local accents.

The study has shown some tendencies regarding the speech of BBC radio presenters, but there is certainly a need for more extensive research, including a wider number of analysed tokens, in order to validate these tendencies.

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## Streszczenie

Magda Kowalska

### *Akcent prezenterów radia BBC*

Artykuł opisuje badanie audytoryjne oraz akustyczne przeprowadzone na nagraniach prezenterów czterech stacji radiowych BBC: BBC Radio 1, BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 5 Live i BBC World Service w trzech typach audycji: wiadomościach, wiadomościach sportowych oraz programach rozrywkowych. Badanie miało na celu znalezienie odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy występują różnice w akcencie brytyjskich prezenterów reprezentujących różne stacje radiowe BBC oraz prowadzących różne typy audycji, a także – jeśli w istocie tak jest – w jakich kontekstach używany jest formalny, standardowy brytyjski akcent RP oraz jaką pełni funkcję. Szczegółowym analizom poddano dwa zjawiska fonetyczne: h-dropping, czyli elizję dźwięku /h/ w pierwszej akcentowanej sylabie w słowie, oraz /t/ glottalling, czyli zastąpienie głoski /t/ przez zwarcie krtaniowe. Badanie potwierdziło

występowanie różnic w akcencie prezenterów. W wiadomościach względnie często zauważono występowanie standardowego akcentu RP, natomiast w programach rozrywkowych oraz wiadomościach i reportażach sportowych znacznie rzadziej. Badanie pokazało także, że różnice w wymowie prezenterów odzwierciedlają różnice poszczególnych stacji radiowych: stacje ukierunkowane na młodych odbiorców mają większy zasób regionalnych, niestandardowych akcentów aniżeli stacje ukierunkowane na dorosłych odbiorców, skupiające się na przekazie informacji.

**Key words:** BBC radio presenter, Received Pronunciation, /t/ glottalling, h-dropping, accent

**Słowa kluczowe:** akcent RP, prezenterzy radia BBC