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Research methodology

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5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present chapter offers detailed information about the research into the current status of RP that was conducted in Britain and the Czech Republic in 2014–2016.

5.1 Samples

Almost all the samples used in the research were made by the author between 2009 and 2013 using an ordinary mp3 player with a built-in microphone. The three exceptions are Samples 8 and 18 (taken from Collins and Mees 2003: 4) and Sample 12 (taken from Hughes et al. 2005: 54–5).

For reasons of space, samples are sometimes abbreviated to S, especially in the tables that present the data. For example, Sample 4 is thus S4.

The accents vary from slightly regional to traditional RP. I did not include any strongly regional voices as these were easily identified as non-RP in a number of features by both sets of respondents (i.e. English and Czech, see 4.2) in Jezek (2009). The speakers cover the whole of England: there are speakers from the South of England, the East and West Midlands area as well as the North of England (for more detailed information see Appendix 1).

As regards age, the speakers form a rather homogenous group: all the samples made by the author include speakers aged 25–40. Sample 12 (taken from Hughes et al. 2005: 54–5) is presumably exceptional as the speaker seems to be well over 40 years of age. I have decided not to include older speakers since older voices tend to be labelled more conservative and since my respondents are mostly of the same age (i.e. about 25–40 years of age).

Further, I have recorded long stretches of speech (on average they are about 8 to 11 minutes long) with the aim of making my speakers more relaxed and thereby producing more authentic accents; it is one of the often employed ways of overcoming the observer's paradox: 'the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation'(Labov 1972: 209).

I do not, however, use the whole samples. I have cut out any 'irrelevant' parts (those which do not feature the pre-selected variables, see 5.3). Thus, in the end, the survey includes a high number of short samples. This procedure has been chosen in order to make the analysis much friendlier as far as respondents are concerned: the total time spent solely listening to the samples is only a little more than 8 minutes. The cuts are, I believe, hardly noticeable, as they do not occur in the middle of words and a great deal of attention has been paid to avoid making any illogical connections in terms of the content. For the very idea of a higher number of shorter samples (rather than vice versa) I feel deeply indebted to Zajac (2015).

While the total number of samples is 18, the total number of speakers is 12. Most speakers are represented by just one sample while none has more than three samples.

I have deliberately left out almost all the parts in which speakers talk about their jobs, education, family background and so on to minimise the impact of such pieces of information on my respondents. Samples discussed in the present publication are available in open access mode in the Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, at the following link: https://digilib.phil.muni.cz.

5.2 Respondents

The respondents can be divided into two main groups, namely those from the Czech Republic and those from England. Therefore, throughout the thesis the two groups are referred to as CZ and EN respondents.

Most of them are doctoral students of English linguistics with a solid knowledge of English phonetics and phonology. The others have already become Ph.D. holders. In other words, all the respondents are English language professionals who are well acquainted with the notion of Received Pronunciation.

This has turned out to be a blessing, for most of my respondents have taken part in surveys like this before and they have also often had direct experience with it as researchers themselves. As a result, their responses have typically been abundant in both quality and quantity and they have provided me with a wealth of data to deal with.

As far as EN respondents are concerned, I have had to apply the rule of allowing only native speakers of English in my research. Thus I had to eliminate several respondents whose first language was not English.

Also, the EN respondents group was further divided into Southern (hereinafter 'S EN') and Northern (hereinafter 'N EN') speakers of English. To assign the right group to the given speaker, their personal data from the questionnaire (5.4.1) has been used. In one case I have had to elicit more information about a respondent in the East Midlands area; since his preferred variants were short BATH and raised STRUT, he ended up in the Northern group.

In the tables below, respondents are referred to as R plus the appropriate number, thus Respondent 1 is R1.

5.3 Selecting variables

A crucial part in any sociolinguistic research is selecting the right set of variables. A succinct definition of a sociolinguistic variable can be found in Chambers and Trudgill (1998: 50): '[it is] a linguistic unit with two or more variants involved in covariation with other social and/or linguistic variables'. The invention of the concept of a sociolinguistic variable must, however, be credited to Labov (1966: 32), where more criteria are given to illustrate an ideal sociolinguistic variable, which should be:

— high in frequency
— to a certain extent immune from conscious suppression
— an integral part of larger structures
— easily quantified on a linear scale

The variables I decided to include in my research are

— short BATH
— lowered TRAP
— FOOT/GOOSE fronting
— the glottal stop
— intrusive /r/

The first two come from a simple comparison of the transcription models of vowels preferred by Wells (1982) and Upton (2008); cf. Table 1. Admittedly, there are more differences between the two models; the others were omitted because they did not prove salient enough in my MA research. This can be explained as an evident lack of social meaning, which seems to reduce them to mere transcriptional preferences. The ones left out include lowered DRESS, raised NURSE, lowered and backed PRICE, and monophthongal SQAURE.

The third variable seems to be relatively recent and has not attracted a lot of academic attention (see 4.2.1.15). It is not part of any existing transcription model of RP.

The remaining two are essentially consonantal and have long been, in certain phonetic environments, considered to be part of the (Near) RP repertoire (cf. 4.2.2.1 and 4.2.2.5).

By far the highest number of tokens belongs to the glottal stop (107), followed by lowered TRAP (47), short BATH (9), intrusive /r/ (6), and FOOT/GOOSE fronting (5). There are two reasons for such disproportionate numbers of tokens.

Firstly, the glottal stop needs many more tokens due to the various phonetic environments in which it can appear. I have deliberately set out to cover all the environments found in Wells (1982: 260 or p. 107 here). The only missing one is the intervocalic environment (e.g. glottalised /t/ in *water* or *butter*), which still falls firmly within the realm of urban working-class accents (cf. Cruttenden 2014: 184).

Secondly, lowered TRAP is a much more frequent phenomenon than intrusive /r/, for example. Therefore, the numbers actually seem to reflect the natural distributional frequency of the features.

Moreover, such a high number of tokens means that a particular variable is uttered by a variety of speakers: male as well as female and northern as well as southern. Respondents therefore do not react to a particular person and their accent; if they do not consider the glottal stop to be an RP sound, for instance, they state that for several speakers.

Also, utmost care was taken to ensure that each sample contains at least two variables. Thus, a respondent keen on finding 'that one mistake' might accept a variant they would otherwise (in isolation) mark as non-RP. This happened when I was part of a class at Leeds University a decade ago and we were asked to evaluate several accents on the basis of RP. My classmates (most of whom were northerners) marked down raised STRUT without the slightest hesitation but short BATH went almost completely unnoticed and they happily accepted it as an RP sound. However, if a recording included short BATH only (STRUT was RP [ʌ]), the majority of them noticed it.

5.4 The Website

The survey with an accompanying personal information questionnaire for respondents was placed at a fee-paying server for a limited period of time. First, respondents needed to answer several questions about themselves and their background. Then they could proceed to listen and to evaluate the samples. Finally, they were given some contact information so that they could get in touch with the author of the survey.

5.4.1 Personal Information Page

Before respondents entered the survey page itself, they were asked to supply several items of information. Some of them were optional (name and email address). These were included purely for the purpose of subsequent reference, but were only given as optional since people (particularly in England) tend to be rather sensitive about their personal data and for some it might be so off-putting that they decide not to take part in the survey at all. Consequently, many times these two pieces of information are missing and the respondents prefer to remain anonymous.

Other pieces of information, however, were far from referential as they might prove to be sociolinguistically relevant. Regional and social background details are of particular relevance as far as EN respondents are concerned, whilst age and gender apply to both CZ and EN sets of respondents. Given the target respondents (see 5.2), age is expected to be more or less the same (i.e. the same generation).

The introductory page also contains a question in which respondents describe their own accent. Although this question is particularly relevant insofar as it influences EN respondents and their perception of the prestige accent, it might also be noteworthy when it comes to CZ respondents and their pronunciation preferences. Luckily for my research, only 10% of CZ respondents stated that their preferred accent was American English. These have been eliminated from the survey.

5.4.2 Samples and Accompanying Questions

Since there are more samples by one particular speaker, I made sure these samples do not follow one another but are instead separated by a number of samples produced by other speakers. The samples can be paused and listened to as many times as one wishes. Each sample is then accompanied by a set of questions.

I tried to limit the total number of questions, being fully aware that there are no fewer than 18 samples. In the end, there are four questions for native speakers, whilst their Czech counterparts are asked to answer five questions. Czech respondents thus answer as many as 90 questions, which is, to my mind, just about bearable and not too off-putting.

5.4.2.1 Question 1: What would you label this accent:

The first question in my research is a check-box question with a number of options to tick. My respondents were offered four options to choose from:

— RP
— Near-RP
— Non-RP
— Other

Naturally, I still consider RP, like any other accent, a 'more-or-less' phenomenon. As a consequence, it is generally much more fitting to ask to what extent a certain accent corresponds with the RP model, rather than to ask whether an accent is RP or not (i.e. to treat RP as an 'either/or' phenomenon).

In the present research, though, I only offer the four aforementioned options due to the fact that the samples are extremely short and contain only certain variables, most of which are pre-selected. It seems very difficult to assess the voices in a scale-like manner given the circumstances.

Although it might seem that the first three options (RP, Near-RP, and Non-RP) are exhaustive, the fourth one (other) was added, and it was used several times when respondents regarded the speaker not to be a native speaker of English at all.

5.4.2.2 Question 2: If the previous answer was Near-RP/ Non-RP, please indicate which features influenced your judgement:

This write-in question is included with the aim of eliciting more information about features that might potentially not fall within the range of RP. The question is open (it does not ask about certain variables directly, e.g. 'What is your view of the first vowel in *actually*?') on purpose. It was my intention not to put any ideas into my respondents' minds and direct their attention in any way. Moreover, questions about particular features would result in the survey being many times longer. Such a thing would without doubt put many potential respondents off. Also, if I had asked about particular features, I could possibly miss out on some other features that might catch respondents' ears.

5.4.2.3 Question 3: Why do you consider the features mentioned above (question 2) not to fall within RP?

This write-in question is a follow-up to question 2; it is included to induce respondents to provide more sociolinguistic information about the features they do not consider RP (especially the reasons why they cannot be accepted in the prestige accent).

What respondents react to combined with their explanations and justifications should enable a comparison between Czech and English respondents as to what constitutes the criteria of RP-ness. In other words, it should be revealed how RP is mentally constructed in their minds.

Admittedly, this question was often left blank. However, it is important that the survey contains this question since respondents often included the relevant information elsewhere (typically in their responses to Questions 2 and 5).

5.4.2.4 Question 4: Non-native speakers only: How intelligible do you find this speaker:

This check-box question is only aimed at non-native speakers, which is made clear by putting this important piece of information at the very beginning of the question.

When it comes to judging native accents, intelligibility is by far the most important criterion for non-natives learners of English (Ježek 2009: 103). In other words, for foreigners the degree of RP-ness is linked to a great extent with their ability to understand the native speaker. Since this criterion plays such an important role, this question has its firm place in my research again.

As in Question 1, I rejected a numerical scale in favour of a set of options, from which respondents were asked to choose one. The four options offered are:

— easily intelligible
— intelligible with minor difficulties
— not easily intelligible
— hardly intelligible at all

Furthermore, at the bottom there is a write-in box for respondents to indicate any difficulties they may have had understanding the speaker.

Since there are no strongly regional speakers in my survey, I did not think it necessary to include the negative end of the scale (not intelligible at all).

5.4.2.5 Question 5: Would you like to make any (more) comments?

This question was initially omitted from my research and it was only added later after the pilot study had been conducted. That is why it is given number 5, although it would have been more logical to assign it number 4 and to place the intelligibility question at the bottom. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to some technical reasons.

This question is designed to elicit more information about the samples, mainly information that is not linked with any particular variable.