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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

A Sociolinguistic Approach to Vernacular Varieties

Stigmas and Prejudices in the Case of the West Country Dialect

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

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Abstract

This dissertation is concerned with the field of sociolinguistics, which is the study of language in relation to society and how the former is conditioned by the latter. More specifically, the aim of this piece of writing is to explore the relationship existing between accents and stereotypes, noting that every speaker of a language projects an image of themselves, purely based on extralinguistic reasons and determined mostly by the way they speak. Furthermore, this thesis will present a case study on how the social connotations attached to a speaker of a non-standard accent – in this case, a West Country one - were generally perceived as more negative to speakers of other dialects, in contrast to a speaker of Received Pronunciation, commonly abbreviated as RP, the socially-established standard accent. This accent received a more favourable social response and was on the whole associated with more positive qualities. This thesis will also show the stages of the study, namely how participants were selected and how data were collected, and it will also include some final conclusions.

Key words: RP, West Country, stereotypes, covert prestige, social prejudices, accent, dialects.

Resumen

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado se enmarca dentro del campo de la sociolingüística, que estudia la lengua en relación con la sociedad y cómo la primera se ve afectada por la segunda. El objetivo específico de este trabajo es explorar la relación existente entre acentos y estereotipos, resaltando el hecho de que todos los hablantes de una lengua proyectan una imagen de sí mismos basada puramente en factores extralingüísticos y mayoritariamente determinada por el modo de hablar. Además, este trabajo presentará un estudio sobre cómo las connotaciones sociales asociadas a un hablante de un acento no estándar – en este caso, un acento del West Country -, fueron percibidas de forma más

negativa por hablantes de otros dialectos, en contra de lo que sucedía con un hablante de Received Pronunciation, comúnmente abreviado como RP, el acento estándar por convenciones sociales. Este acento recibió una respuesta social más favorable y en conjunto se asoció con cualidades más positivas. Por último, este trabajo describirá las etapas del estudio, incluyendo cómo se seleccionó a los participantes, cómo se recogieron los datos, y también recogerá algunas conclusiones finales.

Palabras clave: RP, West Country, estereotipos, prestigio encubierto, prejuicios, acentos, dialectos.

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1. Introduction

A recent survey carried out in Britain by the Independent Television Company (ITV) in November 2013 showed that more than a quarter of British people feel discriminated against because of the way they speak (Dathan). In the same document, it was reported that eight in ten employers admitted to making discriminating decisions based on the accent of potential employees, or that in order to improve their employability children in a school in the West Midlands are highly discouraged to speak with their regional accent (*idem*). These are just a few examples which may well lead to the assumption that, in fact, accents are to do with the image a speaker gives of themselves, and that an accent-based image can exert a substantial influence on the general impression other speakers will form of them. This view is also acknowledged by Dennis Freeborn, who asserted that “it is a fact that our judgement of what a speaker says is influenced by his or her accent” (19). Thus, it seems fair to recognize the connection between speech and social image.

The aim of this piece of writing is to explore the relationship existing between accents and stereotypes in British English. More specifically, this thesis will provide detailed information on the different social connotations associated to a West Country accent in contrast to the assumed standard dialect of British English, which generally corresponds in pronunciation to the so-called Received Pronunciation (RP), a non-regional accent. The information will be organized as follows: first, I will provide a theoretical basis for such a claim, defining fundamental concepts such as accent, dialect or stereotype, outlining also the connection between social class and speech; secondly, I will present a small-scale fieldwork which I undertook in order to compare the reception that a standard and a non-standard accent had on a random sample of native British English speakers. To do so, I will provide some information about the study, namely how participants were

selected, how data were collected and which conclusions were drawn. This passage will be followed by a section in which results will be delivered and discussed; lastly, I will try to demonstrate the influence a West Country accent, and all its associated stereotypes, can have on the overall image projected by its speakers. In this final part, I will conclude by restating the main research topic, which is that speakers of non-standard accents tend to be associated with more negative stereotypes, contrary to speakers of the standard accent who are generally associated with more positive connotations, as can be seen in the comparison of a West Country dialect with an RP accent.

2. Theoretical Framework

From a linguistic point of view, the term “accent” could be defined as “those features of pronunciation which identify where a person is from, regionally or socially”, in contrast to “dialect” which also includes variation in grammar and vocabulary (Crystal 3). The definition offered by David Crystal in *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* already provides us with an interesting clue: the close relationship existing between speech and the projected social image, a view which has been widely held in the field of English sociolinguistics. One of the most influential English sociolinguists, John Wells, recognised the significant role of the accent as a means of asserting one’s own identity, which may or may not coincide with that of the interlocutor, and at the same time, as a feature which provides the interlocutor with enough information about one’s regional origin and social position. This constitutes thus an important part of what is generally conceived as a stereotype, or, using the author’s own words, “conceptions which we share with other members of our community” (29). Wells displayed this relationship between speech and social class very graphically in his well-known pyramid of social and regional variation, which clearly shows that those at the bottom of the social scale are far more likely to display regional variation in their speech than their upper-class counterparts (Wells 14, see Appendix 1). Therefore, this may be sufficient to conclude that social position and individual’s speech are closely related.

In the United Kingdom, the term Standard English (SE) and its counterpart, Received Pronunciation (RP), relate to the variety of English that is considered the most acceptable and widely understood by the vast majority of speakers in terms of grammar structures, vocabulary and orthography. SE is considered a dialect of English, but of a special kind, as it has no specific geographical area within the UK where to be attached. In the process of standardisation of English English, a crucial fact should be remarked: the

establishment of the monarchy and the court in the City of Westminster resulted in the language used by these educated people becoming the prestigious variety as it was associated with political and economic power (Knowles 3). Furthermore, the growth of London as the most important economic centre also contributed to placing this dialect in a superior position which would then spread to the rest of the country and imitated (Knowles 64). Every other variety then became non-standard, restricted to a specific area, and therefore, to cultural stereotypes attached to the region where it was spoken. This view is also supported by John Edwards, who outlined that

Evaluations of different language varieties are not based upon intrinsic qualities but rest, rather, upon social conventions and preferences. These, in turn, are most obviously related to the prestige and power possessed by speakers of certain “standard varieties (68).

The variety that concerns us here is the West Country dialect, spoken in the region of the South West of England, one of the nine regions of England (see Appendix 2 for maps), reaching a population of approximately five million people. This region corresponds roughly to the ancient kingdom of Wessex and its largest city, Bristol, is also the economic centre. This region also includes other major urban centres such as Plymouth, Exeter or Bath. The traditional sources of economic gain are agriculture, mining and tourism, favoured by a remarkably mild weather (Wakelin 3). From a linguistic point of view, the unique feature of the West Country accent is the rhoticity, that is, the pronunciation of [r] in all environments, a distinctive element which corresponds to older versions of the English language and has been virtually lost in Standard British English (see Appendix 2 for maps). From a historical point of view, this region took on great importance during the time Winchester was the political heart of the country, until this role was assumed by London after the Norman Conquest (10).

The history of English seems to indicate that in the same way as the status given to the dialect spoken in the City of Westminster matched the social status of its speakers, other non-standard dialects became to be associated with those at the bottom of the social scale, and therefore acquired a negative connotation. Arguably, this was the case of the West Country dialect, which may have enjoyed equal status as any other dialect of English in the Middle English period, when diversity was the norm. However, by the time Westminster gradually took over Winchester as the seat of government, the political importance of the West Country declined, and the prestige of West Country dialects declined with it (Knowles 3). Thus, it is possible to conclude that the establishment of a variety as the standard has little to do with linguistic reasons, but rather it is the variety spoken by those at the top of the social rank.

Indeed, the present-day use of SE in areas such as education, politics or the mass media has bestowed the notion of sophistication and refinement upon their speakers in detriment of other varieties, including the West Country dialect, which are associated with a wide range of stereotypes such as lack of manners and rustic simplicity. Hence the conclusion that the relationship between language and social stratification is a fact and the use, whether conscious or not, of a certain variety of English by a given speaker can immediately provide the hearer with his or her geographical origin and position in the social scale.

3. Case Study

3. 1. Methodology

In order to confirm or deny the authenticity of the association between speech and social image, I carried out a small-scale study in the form of a questionnaire in the city of Cambridge during the month of January 2015. In this section, I will provide a brief outline on the method used to collect the data.

Firstly, around twenty participants were selected at random from the main body of students of the University of Cambridge, irrespective of their subject, year or previous knowledge of linguistics. The two essential conditions for participating in this survey were to be native speakers of British English and to be roughly of the same age, in order to constitute an age group as homogeneous as possible. Thus, the age bracket was established 18-25, the gender distribution was fairly balanced - nine males and twelve females -, and the regional origin, diverse. This randomly-selected group resulted, however, quite uniform in terms of background, all of them pertaining to middle-class environments, and occupation, all of them being or having been students at Cambridge University.

The main instruments of my research consisted of two recordings and a self-designed, multiple-choice questionnaire. Both recordings were produced by a young female Cambridge student aged 20, originally from Cheddar, a small village in North Somerset. She recorded herself reading aloud a short text written in Standard English, which contained neutral, everyday vocabulary and simple syntactic structures. She used first an RP and then a West Country accent. The questionnaire was then developed accordingly, containing a set of questions especially designed in order to bring out the main social prejudices which might conform to a West Country accent. The test included examples like “Rate on a scale from 0 to 5 the degree of formal education this person has received” or “What type of

job you think this person might have?”. Some questions focused on rating in increasing order on a 0 to 5 scale, whereas others allowed for a more open answer. The questions posed after hearing each recording were the same, with the aim of prompting different answers to the same question. This would then reveal the different attitudes towards the standard and the non-standard variety. Another important variable which was manipulated is that of prosodic features, or suprasegmental elements, which include rhythm (the stress placed on certain syllables) and intonation (changes in pitch). According to Wright 1996, these prosodic features are indeed part of the language and therefore can have a certain influence on the social evaluation of an accent. Thus, in choosing a single speaker to put both a standard and a non-standard accent, what interviewees were being asked to do was, irrespective of suprasegmental elements, to judge indirectly the social status of the unknown speaker relying solely upon the way she spoke.

The main steps of the survey were taken as follows: first, I visually selected potential interviewees which could fit in the age bracket, occupation and gender balance intended for this research. Secondly, I approached them and, provided that they were willing to participate, showed them each recording, after which they had to answer the survey I had prepared for them. The questionnaire was answered anonymously, in order for participants to be as honest as possible. The sole exception to this was their age and region of origin in the UK, collected with the purpose of constituting a homogeneous age bracket and a varied geographical origin as possible. It is interesting to remark here that none of the interviewees came from the West Country, but some of them were already familiar with the characteristic phonic features of its accent. Thirdly, after having collected a sufficient number of responses, I proceeded to analysing the data in keeping with the assumed connection between speech and social status. In the following section I will present the results obtained for each of the questions.

3.2. Results

At first sight, the results obtained seem to comply largely with the expected. However, on closer analysis, after contrasting the data with more recent sources, it appears that the dichotomy between the social response towards RP and West Country dialect has become blurred in certain aspects which will be later evaluated.

In the following chart (see Table 1 below) I will expose the average answers given to each question, after which a more in-depth analysis will follow. In this chart, the information has been displayed as follows: first, the questions asked to the participants have been exposed separately in a horizontal bar, below which are, in vertical bars on the left margin, the accents subject to questioning and, to the right of this section, the average response. This section is further subdivided in the percentage of males and females who gave the average response. In order to make the results clearer to the reader, I have used colours to distinguish the average response, in green, from the corresponding male and female proportions, in blue and pink respectively.

Questions asked to the participants																		
	Level of sophistication		Level of formal education		Level of intelligence		Social position		Type of job		Social influence		Reliability on reading		Employability on reading		Likelihood to rent her a room	
RP	4	55%	4	50%	4	37%	Middle class	40%	Qualified job	45%	3	50%	3	<u>43%</u>	4	40%	4	<u>38%</u>
		45%		50%		63%		60%		55%		50%		<u>57%</u>		60%		62%
West Country	3	45%	2	55%	3	46%	Working class	45%	Manual worker	50%	2	60%	4	<u>62.5%</u>	3	50%	4	<u>50%</u>
		55%		45%		54%		55%		50%		40%		<u>37.5%</u>		50%		50%

Table 1: Relationship between accent and stereotype on a 0-5 scale or open questions according to participants

4. General Discussion

In a first approach, the data seem to comply largely with the main assumptions provided in the theoretical framework and reinforce further the claim that, as has been shown in previous studies, there are differences in the attitude shown towards the standard and non-standard accents. Indeed, the overall evaluation given to the RP accent – and consequently, to its speakers -, has proved to be more positive in terms of formal education, social position or type of job presumed for these speakers, according to the table shown above. Conversely, the West Country dialect was much lowly rated in these same aspects. Nevertheless, the results of the survey have also displayed some subtleties worth noting here.

It is of special importance to remark here that not all the qualities associated to the RP accent were positive. This accent was also linked to other less positive qualities such as lack of humour or seriousness, conforming to Wells 1982, whereas the non-standard dialect fared better in terms of credibility and reliability. Although none of the participants came from, had lived in or had a special inclination towards the West Country, it appears that male participants were far more likely to be persuaded by a person speaking in a West Country accent rather than in RP, and they were also more likely to rent her a room. This is what sociolinguists have termed “covert prestige”, according to which a speaker of a given accent tends to show more solidarity to, or value more favourably, those features of speech which are more similar to their own speech or make them part of the same social group (Yule 260). On the other hand, RP may enjoy “overt prestige”, that is, its features are perceived as more desirable for upward social mobility or are simply associated with a higher social status (idem). Therefore, it seems that while RP, being the standard accent, has a considerable overt prestige, non-standard dialects can, on the one hand, be attached to negative connotations but on the other hand, they can also enjoy a covert prestige among its speakers.

Another important aspect is the different assessment of accents depending on the gender of the hearer. Contrary to what Wells 1982 had previously stated there *are* differences in the way men and women speak and evaluate non-standard accents. Following Professor Nikolas Coupland from Cardiff University,

It is very well known that women tend to use ‘more standard’ speech than men do for a given social class and speaking context. Our new finding shows that women nevertheless afford more prestige and, as we shall see, social attractiveness to most regional varieties, but not to their own speech. (80)

Furthermore, he stresses that

There is a reliable tendency for women to afford a given accent more prestige – with only two accents where men are significantly more positive: An accent identical to my own and West Country English. (idem)

Admittedly, this claim matches the findings of this case study. Although gender-specific differences in the evaluation of a West Country dialect were largely anecdotal, in the collected data men showed a much stronger tendency to rate more positively than women the reliability on reading or the likelihood to rent a room to a speaker of the vernacular in detriment of the standard. This would confirm Professor Coupland’s claim stated above. Thus, on the basis of the data provided, it can be concluded that, in general terms, an RP accent enjoys overt prestige and is as such positively rated in terms of social position, level of formal education or social influence, in keeping with Wells pyramid, but the West Country dialect has a covert prestige which involves in-group loyalty and solidarity. This leads to a final section in which the main points will be restated and some final conclusions will be drawn.

5. Conclusions

Drawing from the theoretical and empirical framework provided above, the relationship between speech and social position appears to have been demonstrated. Indeed, an RP speaker was generally presumed to have a higher level of formal education, a better social position and a more prestigious job. On the other hand, the social evaluation of a West Country dialect speaker was in the overall more negative in these same aspects. However, it would be senseless to make clear-cut statements about this issue. First, there are differences in the assessment provided by women and men, the former showing a potential bias towards non-standard varieties, the latter displaying a predisposition towards the West Country dialect and an accent similar to their own. Secondly, concepts like overt and covert prestige come to light as they seem to have influenced the results of this case study. Overt prestige seems to play a role in that the use of the standard variety is highly encouraged in the public domain, the media and education and is desired for social advancement. Covert prestige is also present since those people whose accent is similar to the unknown speaker will identify with vernacular varieties and will show an unconscious tendency to favour them.

Therefore, by means of conclusion, it can be argued that standard varieties such as RP may enjoy overt prestige and be highly encouraged for upward social mobility, but non-standard varieties, such as the West Country dialect, may as well have covert prestige and elicit in the speakers feelings of solidarity and in-group loyalty. In addition to the conclusions drawn by this small-scale study, and with the aim to shed more light on this issue, it would be desirable to carry out further studies with an increasing number of participants, a wider age bracket and a more diverse geographical origin.

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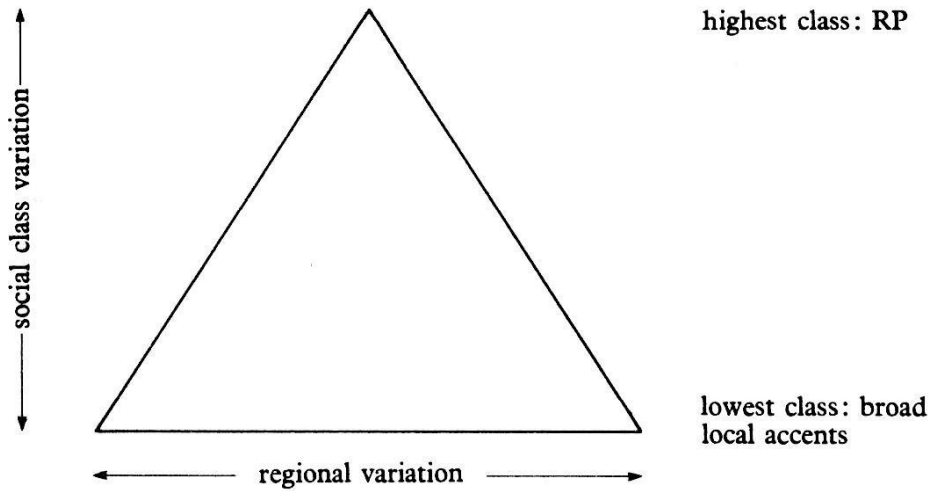
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7. Appendices

Appendix 1

Image 1



Wells, John Christopher. *Relation between social and regional accents in England*. 1982.

Photograph. *Accents of English 1: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1982. 14. Print

Image 2



South West England region in England. Photograph. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. *Wikipedia*,

The Free Encyclopedia. Web. 10 July 2015

Appendix 2

Image 3



Trudgill, Peter. *Rhotic areas at the end of the 20th century*. 1984. Photograph. *Language in the British Isles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.