

An Analysis of Regional Variation in English Intonation

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1. Introduction

English dialectology which is traditionally deeply rooted in the history of the English language has accumulated ample material on sound change in regional varieties of English. The specific regional features which manifest themselves at the suprasegmental level, however, on account of their complexity have been left, as a rule, beyond the systematic research of both phoneticians and dialectologists. The fact that mention was made of the phenomena in question by Ida Ward (1948) Roger Kingdon (1958) and Kenneth Pike (1965) is but a proof of their objective reality.

In the context of what has been said above, the papers on regional intonation, in which it is viewed either in the information aspect (Brown et al. 1980) or sociolinguistically (Trudgill, ed. 1978) are of great interest. After David Crystal who emphasized the necessity to correlate social factors with prosodic and paralinguistic features in speech analysis (Crystal 1975), John Pellowe and Val Jones (Trudgill, ed. 1978: 101-121) as well as Gerry Knowles (Ibid: 80-90) have made successful attempts at establishing such correlation in their study of Tyneside speech and Scouse, respectively. The results highlighted a few aspects relevant for our comparative intonation analysis of different regional varieties of English.

Our experiment is concerned with intonation peculiarities of Midland, Northern, Scottish, Irish and Welsh types of English as compared with the intonation of Southern standard English (RP). The material, 12 readings of an identical text containing 318 words was in part recorded at the Phonetic Laboratories of Edinburgh University and the the Experimental Phonetics Laboratory of Moscow Foreign Languages Institute by English students, aged 18 to 22, male and female, with various regional backgrounds, two speakers for each type. The corpus was subjected to auditory and acoustic analyses.

2. Results

The data obtained in the course of the analysis give evidence to the following:

1. Besides the nuclear tones which are generally considered socially and

regionally significant, configurations of the melodic contour and its pitch range characteristics, the inventory of heads, their variants and relative frequency prove to be relevant too. Thus, for instance, narrowing the pitch range is a typical regional modification of the contour, when compared with a similar realization in RP; another common feature is the descending character of the head which prevails in all regional types of English. Certain specifications, however, ought to be made here: In Scottish English, for instance, the descending head is mainly realized in the medial part of the range and is shaped wavy-like; in contrast with it high level and low level heads are more frequent in Midland English.

The importance of the inventory of heads employed by the speaker can thus be demonstrated: the informants from London and Edinburgh make use of 4-5 types of heads, while the Irish speakers limit the amount to three; the Hebrides Islands speaker makes it one.

2. Nuclear tones, which have always been the focus of attention in English intonology, reveal their regionally distinctive relevance in the inventory, distribution, choice of the structural variant and functional load. E.g. most of the regional speakers tend to use more level tones (compared with RP) in non-final tonegroups of statements. Hence, the level tones are equivalent to the rising tone in expressing non-finality. Alongside with this general observation the use of the level tone in special questions (the Irish speaker) may be treated as a specific feature.

It is common knowledge that falling tones are most frequent in the English language. But their configuration may be modified, levelled out and not reaching the lowest pitch level at the end. Besides that, an initial rise is commonly registered at the beginning of the tone in Scottish and Northern English. This variant is identified by phoneticians who have a long experience in listening to RP, as a rise-falling tone. Functionally, however, it is quite devoid of the connotations described for the RP rise-fall (O'Connor and Arnold, 1961). It is deemed necessary, therefore, to qualify the tone in question as a regionally marked structural variant of the falling tone. Thus we can conclude that phonetic variability, however great, may not be functionally supported: the process of communication, with the exception of the connotations mentioned above, appears to be in no other way impaired by these modifications.

3. Common to all the readings which represent different regional varieties of English are similarity of accentuation, the division into tonegroups and the location of pauses. The length of pauses and the rate of delivery, it may be assumed, is determined, to a great extent, by sex and individual variability. One cannot, however, make generalizations about the data from the limited amount of the material available.

4. The fact that in a number of national varieties of English, such as General

American and General Australian, for instance, similar tendencies have been observed, among them a narrow range of pitch, a mid-level wavy head and a rising- falling-to-mid terminal tone (Shakhbagova 1982) gives us grounds to believe that the latter constitute inherent English features, part of the prosodic system of English.

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