

Lecture 10. Phonological and phonetic dimensions for accent description / comparison

Plan.

1. Segmental differences between accents.
2. Social and communicative dimensions of an accent.
3. Ukrainian accent of English.

1. Segmental differences between accents.

A most complete set of segmental differences between accents includes differences in:

- 1) Phoneme inventory;
- 2) Phonotactic / structural specifications;
- 3) Phoneme lexical distribution / incidence / selection;
- 4) Phoneme realization / production.

Phoneme inventory involves the number and type of word-differentiating phonemes available to the accent [Abercrombie; Laver].

At the segmental level of consonants and vowels, the overall inventory of consonant phonemes of a given accent makes up its consonant system and the vowel phonemes its vowel system.

Consonant systems are quite uniform in accents all over the English-speaking world. In fact, it is possible to speak of a “general English consonant system”, which is the same for all Standard English speakers, with the occasional omission or addition of an item. For example, RP has 24 consonants [Gimson]; most Scots accents have 25 or 26 consonants, there is at least one additional consonant in their consonant systems compared with RP: in that where RP has only the consonant [k], Scottish English has [k] and [x], for ex. *lock* [lɔk] and *loch* [lɔx].

Vowel systems are certainly not uniform over the English-speaking world, and most scholars hold the view that is hardly possible to speak of a ‘general English vowel system’. For example, RP has 20 vowels in its vowel system; GenAm has 15 or 16 vowels [Laver]. Most Scots accents have 13 or 14 vowels [Laver]: their typical vowel system involves the loss of the RP distinctions between [a:] and [æ], between [u:] and [u] and between [o:] and [ɔ]. Scottish English, like GenAm, has no [iə], [eə], [uə], [ʌ] [Gimson]. Both in Australian English and Cockney there are no differences of phonemic inventory from RP.

A survey of systemic vowel differences between the so-called ‘old’ accents (which are better documented than ‘new’ Englishes) shows that more than 75 percent of vowels employed by them comprises the same segments, with [iə], [eə], [uə], [ʌ], [ɔ] ([a: (a)]) constituting a variable subsystem.

Phonotactic / structural specifications concern the freedom which specific phonemes have to combine with other phonemes to form structures, such as syllables of words.

Every language has specific phonotactic rules that describe the way in which phonemes can be combined in different positions (initial, medial and final). For ex., in English “stop + fricative” cluster [gʒ] can only occur in the medial position “exhibit”, or final position “legs”, but not in initial positions; [h] can only occur before, never after a vowel; long vowels and diphthongs do not precede final [ŋ]; [e, æ, ʌ, ɔ] do not occur finally; [ŋ] does not occur initially, no combinations of it are possible with [dʒ, tʃ, ð, z] [Gimson].

There is one structural aspect of English which makes all the accents of Standard English in the world fall into two classes: **a restriction on the occurrence of the phoneme [r]**.

The type of accent where [r] can be pronounced just as well before a consonant or a pause as before a vowel is called **rhotic** (ерний), this technical term was suggested by Dr. John C. Wells of University College, London, or **r-full**, the term was used by Dr. Martha Pennington.

The other accents, which do not allow this, are **non-rhotic** or r-less (безерний). It is probably true to say that the majority of Standard English speakers in the English-speaking world are rhotic [Abercrombie].

Phoneme lexical distribution / incidence / selection concern the way phonemes are distributed in words [Abercrombie]. It is possible for there to be two accents which have the same consonant and vowel systems, and which have no structural differences, but which nevertheless have different phonemes in the same words, for ex. In Northern English accents [ɔ] is used instead of RP [ʌ] in *one, among* though the opposition [ʌ - ɔ] exists [Gimson].

The difference between accents concerning 1) the number, 2) sequence and 3) lexical distribution of phonemes are differences at the phonological level characterizing a given accent.

Phoneme realization / production. It means differences in allophonic variation or differences in consonant/vowel production between the accents. They are much more extensive than the differences in their phonemic inventories. Such differences between accents are at the **phonetic level**.

The most salient differences of realization among the vowels include the realization of the RP diphthongs [ei] and [əu] as monophthongs [e:] and [o:] in GenAm, Scottish English and Northern English [Gimson]. Australian English differs considerably from RP and other accents in realization of many of its diphthongs, for ex. In having [ei] = [ai] and [ai] = [ɔi], and in having the convergence of quality of [əu] and [ɔu]; however diphthongs in [ə] are monophthongized, so [iə] = [i:], [eə] = [ə:], [uə] is either replaced by [ɔ:] or becomes disyllabic [u:ə] [Gimson].

Major inter-accent allophonic differences concern certain segments – among consonants; [r, l, t], among vowels: the subsystem of diphthongs with [ei] and [əu] having variant realization in most of the accents.

Prosodic differences between accents include:

- 1) Word-level stress patterns inventory and their distribution regularities;
- 2) Utterance-level stress and placement of prominence regularities;
- 3) Intonational specifications.

Word-level stress belongs to the prosodic domain. It is common knowledge that placement of stress within a word in English is dictated by the word's etymology and other factors such as affixation, the word's syllabic structure and its grammatical category.

According to M. Pennington English accents differ in their lexical stress patterns according to:

- 1) the placement of stress on one or other specific syllable;
- 2) the stability or variability of stress placement within a particular word or set of words.

The pattern of non-initial stress on words of more than one syllable seems relatively widespread in accents of English, with second-syllable stress being a particularly common

pattern. Another example of a typical pattern is a four-syllable word: a sequence of two pairs of syllables such as:

- 1) in each pair, the strongest syllable is first,
- 2) in the word as a whole, the most prominent stressed syllable is in the rightmost pair.

Speaking about the variability of stress placement, a shift of final to initial stress occurring in RP pronunciation of originally French words, such as *ballet*, *debris*, *chauffeur*, *magazine*, *cigarette* can be mentioned. Main pronunciations of these words have initial stress, whereas variant pronunciations exhibit final stress. In GenAm, these loanwords are all pronounced with the stress on the final syllable in their main pronunciation, as in the original French [English Pronouncing Dictionary]. Across accents of English, a primary stress can be found on either the first or the second syllable of *address*, *adult*, *inquiry*, *laboratory* [Wells].

Utterance-level stress/accent in English accents is related to:

- 1) information,
- 2) rhythm.

Utterance-level stress or prosodic highlighting serves a deictic function (дейктична функція). It signals important information to the interlocutors. The focusing through the utterance-level stress on content words and affixes is probably universal for all languages. But the mechanism for accentuation of linguistic elements in utterances in English is that in the unmarked or usual case utterance-initial position is reserved for shared or known (given, backgrounded) information – the theme/topic – while new or focused information – the *rheme/comment* – is introduced in utterance-final position. Consequently, **the least marked stress pattern for an English utterance contains the main stress (or tonic accent) on the last content word** [Pennington].

The main stress rule is the nucleus placement [Gruttenden] which may be overridden because of consideration of information focus, i.e. any word is to be taken as the new or focused information.

Another aspect of utterance-level stress is that **emphasis or contrast** can be increased by placing increased stress on a particular portion of speech, even normally unstressed syllables of words or function words.

These aspects may vary in different accents of English:

- 1) the nucleus placement may not be so moveable in some accents than in the others. It may generally be fixed on the last stress and there may be no de-accentuating for old information [Gruttenden], e.g. in some of New Englishes the main stress rule is overgeneralized. For ex., in Hong Kong and Singapore-Malaysian English the main utterance stress tend to be on the last word, whether or not it is a content word [Pennington].

- 2) Contrast or emphasis may be indicated by pitch height or through grammatical means rather than using a different nucleus placement [Trudgill, Hannah].

2. Social and communicative dimensions of an accent.

The language of any speaker displays variation within many types: region, social group, field of discourse, spoken or written medium, formal or informal type of verbal interaction etc.

The markers that serve to identify a person's affiliation with a particular language variety or their membership in a given social group have been in the focus of many research studies in the field of sociolinguistics (J. Chambers; L. Milroy and M. Gordon; W. Labov; P. Trudgill; G. Trousdale; R. Wardhaugh and others).

Alongside with various *lects*, currently, an *idiolect*, or “a person’s individual speech patterns”, is becoming a popular topic in sociolinguistic discourse, due to the fact that “linguistic impressions” created by a given speaker/writer “could be usable just like a signature to identify them”.

Pronunciation features of an idiolect constitute the speaker’s most accurate “linguistic fingerprint” (the term coined by Coulthard) as it can be measured instrumentally (e.g. acoustic or prosodic characteristics). In spite of this, the concept of “pronunciation idiolect” remains elusive as many ontological and methodological aspects of its research need clarification.

One of “the idiolect problems” consists in finding the answer to the question of the priority: language over idiolect or idiolect over language.

W. Labov’s opinion about the central dogma of sociolinguistics: “the community is conceptually and analytically prior to the individual”, i.e. “in linguistic analysis, the behavior of an individual can be understood only through the study of the social groups of which he or she is a member of”.

When the speech of a given speaker is viewed as a group marker of the speaker’s membership of a certain social group, it is termed *sociolect*. The speech of a given speaker viewed as an individuating marker uniquely identifying the speaker against the mass of other members of the wider group is termed the speaker’s *idiolect*, whereas an accent without specific implications for its sociological or idiolectal status is termed *lect*.

Alongside with expressing semantic information by using language means, the speakers use signs in speech which are treated as the basis on which to attribute their personal characteristics. According to John Laver, such attributes fall into three groups: **physical markers** - those that indicate physical characteristics; **social markers** - those that indicate social characteristics; **psychological markers** - those that indicate psychological characteristics of personality.

It is common knowledge that in communication practice, speakers are aware of underlying features/attributes of language use functioning within the speech community they are affiliated with:

- 1) the existence of language use norms and expectations;
- 2) the existence of standards or rules of speaking which are not entirely fixed, or absolute, but rather varying according to different types of circumstances/factors.

At the same time language users having an identical regional and social group can communicate in more than one regional and social variety and can switch varieties (consciously or subconsciously) according to the context/situation of communication (**code-switching**).

In the non-prescriptive linguistic approach no one way of speaking is seen as inherently superior to any other; nevertheless, an actual fact of language use is that the way of speaking received by the speakers who are most educated and/or who hold social and political power is often viewed as the most prestigious variety and the one of the greatest social advantage.

G. Yule draws attention to one particular interaction between social values and language use in general: there are implicitly recognized ‘better’ or positively valued ways of speaking in social communities typically understood in terms of overt prestige, and there is, however, an important phenomenon called covert prestige - ‘hidden’ type of positive value often attached to non-standard forms and expressions of certain sub-groups, e.g. members of

some youth sub-cultures seem to attach covert prestige to forms of ‘bad’ language (swearing and ‘tough’ talk) that are not similarly valued in the larger community. Above-mentioned research findings are relevant for establishing a framework for a pronunciation idiolect description.

Paraphrasing W. Labov, we can tentatively claim that the starting point for idiolect research is **the concept of an accent**, namely, a unified entity of pronunciation patterns used for communicative interaction by members of a speech community sharing a relevant social or geographical attribute and successfully maintaining a uniform set of phonological (systemic and structural) characteristics, despite a certain amount of limited phonetic (realizational) and lexical-incident / selectional variation between the speakers. An accent as a collective mental representation of pronunciation used by the speakers of the same speech community is a construct, while an idiolect is a material individual realization of an accent by a definite speaker, the speaker’s “pronunciation” passport.

The pronunciation variables of an idiolect can correlate with four groups of markers:

- 1) *anthropological* (the physiology of the speaker’s vocal tract, his/her temperament, affective state or mood, age, gender, ethnicity);
- 2) *social* (education, socio-economic status);
- 3) *linguistic* (the speaker’s choice of phonological and phonetic means of expression);
- 4) *communicative* (field of discourse, communicative situation, mode of interaction).

The problem whether the above-given parameters constitute any kind of hierarchy remains a perspective for further research, but an obvious fact is that they can be structured into two larger groups: 1) those relating to the language user - anthropological, and social; and 2) those relating to language use - linguistic, and communicative.

We will briefly characterize them in that order.

According to our understanding, some of the anthropological markers in case of pronunciation idiolect can serve signs of the speaker’s immediate identification, especially in face-to-face communication. Our claim is that, from the perceptual point of view, the speaker’s voice defined by the individual structure of their vocal tract can be “a number one” marker of the speaker’s “pronunciation passport”. Voice quality is the auditory impression made by certain mechanical setting of the speech organs over stretches of speech. The tongue, jaw opening, lip shape and vocal cords may have different physical postures; due to this an individual voice quality is achieved, e.g. tense voice, nasal voice, back voice, front voice, labialized voice etc. Voice quality can be thought of as the most global and longest-term aspect of prosody, because intonation and stress, as well as the articulation of vowels and consonants, are produced within the limits of the voice quality set by the articulators and the breath stream coming from the lungs. Moreover, voice quality is an important aspect of the geographical, the social and the personal identity of speakers, e.g. a pervasive nasal quality is often said to characterize American and Australian speech; the American English voice setting is described as combining apico-alveolar articulation with uvularization, nasalization and lax voice.

The speaker’s temperament, mood can also define features of pronunciation idiolect, e.g. individual speech tempo, accurate or casual pronunciation of speech sounds, etc. Such an attribute as age can correlate with definite pronunciation features: variation according to age is most noticeable across the grandparent - grandchild time span. Young people are “more susceptible than older people to adopting innovations spreading into a local speech community from outside”.

So an idiolect can reveal pronunciation features of an *annolect*, a choice of pronunciation patterns typical of the age group the speaker belongs to.

A set of features in pronunciation ascribed to the speakers on the basis of their gender - *sexolect* - can also be phonetically distinctive in the pronunciation idiolect. Surveys of research data show that female speakers tend to use more prestigious forms than male speakers with the same social background, and males generally orient their speech more to localized norms than do females.

In the process of socialization speakers acquire the communicative norms of their native culture, and in intercultural verbal interaction they can reveal signs of *xenolect*, pronunciation features which can help identify their ethnicity.

Within a group-identifying sociolect, finer details of idiolectal pronunciation can be associated with such speakers' social attributes as education and socio-economic status. *Acrolect*, *mesolect*, and *basilect* are sets of pronunciation distinctions differentiated on the basis of the speaker's educational level.

Acrolect describes the accent with the highest prestige mostly because of its associations with the speaker's high level of education and socio-economic status. On the contrary, *basilect* (the 'broadest' form of speech) enjoys the lowest social prestige. *Mesolect* is placed between *acrolect* and *basilect* in its prestige.

Examples of less prestigious pronunciation forms as a stable indication of lower class and less education throughout the English-speaking world are as follows: the occurrence of [h] - dropping, which results in 'ouse (house) and 'ello (hello) and associated with uneducated pronunciation.

The social network of people that the speaker spends time with and the speaker's socio-economic status are attributed with the following distinctions within the same sociolect: speakers who are less socially mobile and who have a relatively homogeneous network of friends and associates tend to be more conservative and more oriented to localized speech norms than those who are more socially mobile and who associate with a more diverse network of people.

J. C. Wells suggests **a set of distinctions within RP/BBC English correlated with the speakers' education and social status:**

Mainstream RP (the accent of middle class educated speakers),

U-RP (upper-crust, aristocratic RP),

Adoptive RP (the accent of the adults who did not speak RP as children),

Near-RP (the accent of the speakers preserving strong regional features).

But some scholars claim that there is no any longer so straightforward a correlation between social background and profession or type of education, especially in mobile urban speech communities, thus it is quite unrealistic to try to label the accent as belonging to a particular section of society. But in case of an idiolect, certain clusters of features can be identified as markers of the speaker's group-membership and education.

All of the factors we have considered so far can serve as markers correlating with pronunciation distinctions according to the *user* of an idiolect.

The impact of linguistic and communicative factors determining pronunciation variables in idiolectal language *use* include: definite patterns of segmental and prosodic means as a speaker's preferential choice out of those typical of a certain accent, a field of discourse /sphere of communicative activity.

All accents have characteristic phonological and phonetic features which can be divided into *segmental* and *prosodic* (*prominence, pitch, loudness, speed of utterance*), the latter are superimposed on the segmental chain of sounds and carry the information which the sounds do not contain. Idiolectal pronunciation can reflect distinctions in the speaker's use of segmental and prosodic means.

The language/speech correlates of the sphere of communicative activity are called speech functional styles. Part of linguistic behavior signals the speakers' assessment of the relative formality or informality of their relationship with other participants in the conversation. The appearance of particular features in speech both on the segmental and prosodic levels is conditioned by a particular extra-linguistic situation in which an idiolect is functioning (co-occurrence of two or more interlocutors related to each other in a particular way, having a particular aim of communicating etc.).

Phonetically relevant parameters of a communicative situation incorporate:

- 1) Social relationship between the speakers (social distance vs. social proximity);
- 2) Psychological relationship between the speakers (personal, polite vs. impersonal, casual speech);
- 3) Spatial setting (public speech vs. private speech) which can be collectively subsumed under the dimension of *formality vs. informality*.

The degree of formality-informality enhances physical alterations in idiolectal pronunciation: the closer the speaker is (in terms of relationship, membership of the same micro-lect, social group, shared background knowledge and assumptions) to the other speaker(s), the less obliged they are to maintain clarity and articulatory 'fine tuning', there is an option for producing a rather blurry message from which the listener will have to extract the relevant material using the skill in 'resynthesis'.

According to J. Laver, speech style in English relies on at least three different types of manipulation of the pronunciation material of the utterance:

- 1) re-organization of the phonemic structure of individual words;
- 2) modifications of speech rate;
- 3) associated prosodic changes of pitch and loudness behavior.

The variations in the pronunciation of a single speaker which are attributable to pronunciation style used in different circumstances testify to the fact that the phonological rules underlying informal speech are often different from those applicable to formal speech.

In summary, a pronunciation idiolect should be viewed as part of a corresponding accent, a speaker's "share" of that accent, an individual creative use of the accent repertoire. An accent and a pronunciation idiolect correlate as a whole and its part, as a mental construct and an individual's material realization of it. Similarly to an accent, a pronunciation idiolect is a multidimensional continuum which is made up of sets of clusters of features correlating with anthropological, social, linguistic and communicative markers which can be singled in the pronunciation of an individual speaker at the background of an accent of a definite speech community. Each group of these markers incorporates further subdivision of factors correlating with idiolect phonological and phonetic variables.

3. Ukrainian accent of English.

The notion of accent is used in present-day linguistics in several ways:

- 1) It refers to prominence given to a syllable usually by the use of pitch;

2) It denotes a particular way of pronouncing, e.g. there are number of English speakers who all share the same grammar and vocabulary, but pronounce what they say with different accents, such as Scots, Cockney or RP [according to Peter Roach];

3) It means a dynamic system of violations of the accepted pronunciation norms of a foreign language in the speech of nonnative speakers. It appears as the result of interference of the first language (L1) pronunciation habits into foreign phonetic realizations.

Violations of English pronunciation norms in the speech of speakers of one and the same language community have a number of common features which distinguish their speech from that of other nonnative speakers who use English as a lingua franca.

Thus by **Ukrainian accent of English** we understand a set of specific pronunciation features which are peculiar to the English pronunciation of Ukrainian speakers and distinguish them from other English-speaking people.

Some phonetic differences between languages may be localized at the level of phonetic **segments**. The fact that phonetically similar sounds in two languages might be transcribed with the same IPA symbols should not obscure the fact that these sounds may be realized differently at the phonetic level, for ex. English [t] and Ukrainian [τ].

Voice quality settings for British English, American English and Ukrainian

Voice quality settings	British English	American English	Ukrainian
Jaws	Loosely closed (not clenched)	Open	Closed
Lips	Spread, moderately active	Spread	Neutral, intermittently rounded
State of oral cavity	Relaxed	Relaxed	Tense
Tongue	Tip tapered, slightly concaved to root	Tip slightly raised, retroflex position, palatalized tongue body position	palatalized tongue body position
Nasality	Nasal voice	Nasal voice	Absence of nasality
Larynx	Relaxed	Lowered	Faucal constriction
Main consonant articulation	Tip-alveolar articulation	Retroflex articulation	Fronted (palatal) articulation
Overall voice quality and tenseness of articulation	High pitch range, weakening of the contact, “slipshod speech”, tense articulation	Creakiness (low pitch range), tense articulation	Mid-level pitch range, lax articulation