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LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE OF THE CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN: SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of linguistic variation within the United Kingdom, with a particular focus on the distinctions between Standard British English (SE) and Non-Standard English (NSE) varieties, including regional accents and dialects. It examines the sociolinguistic factors that shape language use and perception, exploring the historical and social prestige associated with SE, particularly Received Pronunciation (RP). The paper synthesizes existing research on public attitudes towards diverse accents and dialects, discussing the significant repercussions of these attitudes, especially linguistic prejudice and discrimination. Key areas of impact include adolescent identity formation, educational experiences, and employability prospects. Furthermore, the paper considers the implications of prescriptive attitudes towards NSE and the challenges faced by both native speakers of Vernacular varieties and learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Ultimately, it argues for a greater appreciation of linguistic diversity and a critical examination of the societal biases that devalue non-standard forms of English, advocating for a more inclusive approach to language in all societal domains.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, sociolinguistic analysis, Standard British English, Non-Standard English varieties, accents, dialects, Received Pronunciation, linguistic prejudice, language attitudes.

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ЛІНГВІСТИЧНА СИТУАЦІЯ У СУЧАСНІЙ ВЕЛИКІЙ БРИТАНІЇ: СОЦІОЛІНГВІСТИЧНИЙ АНАЛІЗ

Стаття надає комплексний аналіз лінгвістичної ситуації у сучасній Великобританії, приділяючи особливу увагу відмінностям між британським мовним стандартом та нестандартними варіантами англійської мови, включаючи регіональні діалекти. У статті розглядаються соціолінгвістичні фактори, що формують використання та сприйняття мови, досліджується історичний та соціальний престиж, пов'язаний із мовним стандартом, зокрема з нормативною вимовою (RP). Стаття узагальнює наявні дослідження щодо суспільного ставлення до різноманітних діалектів та варіантів мови, аналізує наслідки такого ставлення, особливо лінгвістичні упередження та дискримінацію. Ключові сфери впливу включають формування ідентичності підлітків, освітній досвід та перспективи працевлаштування. Крім того, у статті розглядаються наслідки прескриптивного ставлення до нестандартних різновидів англійської мови у Великій Британії та виклики, з якими стикаються як носії розмовних варіантів, так і ті, хто вивчає англійську як іноземну мову. Зрештою, стверджується необхідність більшого визнання лінгвістичного розмаїття та критичного аналізу суспільних упереджень, що знецінюють нестандартні варіанти англійської мови, та обґрунтовується більш інклюзивний підхід до мови в усіх суспільних сферах її застосування.

Ключові слова: лінгвістична ситуація, соціолінгвістичний аналіз, мовний стандарт, нестандартні варіанти, нормативна вимова, діалекти, лінгвістичні упередження, мовна політика.

The United Kingdom is characterized by a rich tapestry of accents and dialects, a linguistic diversity that can be both a source of cultural heritage and a basis for social stratification (Hughes, Trudgill & Watt, 2012). Language, as a fundamental aspect of human interaction, is inextricably linked with societal structures, cultural identity, and individual experience. The field of sociolinguistics investigates this intricate interplay, examining how language use is molded by social factors such as culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, gender, and geographical location (Coulmas, 1998; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014). Within the British context, the distinction between Standard British English (SE) – often epitomized by Received Pronunciation (RP) or Non-Regional Pronunciation (NRP) – and Non-Standard English (NSE) varieties is particularly salient. While SE has historically held a position of prestige and is considered the norm in formal, official, and educational settings (Crowley, 2003), NSE encompasses a vast array of regional accents and dialects spoken across the nation (O'Donnell & Todd, 2013).

This paper aims to synthesize existing research on attitudes towards these diverse linguistic forms within the UK and the profound repercussions these attitudes entail. It will explore the characteristics that define SE and NSE, the social and historical factors contributing to their perceived values, and the impact of prescriptive language ideologies. Specifically, it will address how attitudes towards accents and dialects affect adolescents' sense of identity, their experiences within the education system, their future employability, and the perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. By examining these dynamics, the paper seeks to underscore the argument that NSE varieties (accents and dialects) are not linguistically inferior to SE but are valid and complex systems of communication that reflect the UK's rich cultural and regional identities (O'Donnell & Todd, 2013).

To understand the complexities of linguistic variation in the UK, it is crucial to define key terms. Holmes and Wilson define an '*accent*' as "regional or social variation in pronunciation" (Holmes and Wilson, 2017 : 501). In contrast, a '*dialect*' is a broader concept, defined by Hughes as "a language variety distinguished from other varieties by differences of grammar and vocabulary" (Hughes et al., 2012 : 3). Thus, accent is a component of dialect. Varieties of dialect associated with specific geographical areas are known as '*regiolects*' (Hughes et al., 2012; Meyerhoff, 2018). These distinctions are fundamental to appreciating the diverse ways English is spoken within the UK.

Standard British English (SE) is the recognized and widely accepted form of English used in formal, official, and educational contexts within the UK. It provides a standardized framework intended to facilitate clear communication and mutual comprehension across different regions (Crowley, 2003). SE is characterized by standardized grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling.

Historically, SE has been closely associated with Received Pronunciation (RP), an accent traditionally linked with educated, upper-class, and metropolitan speakers, particularly those from the southeast of England (Roach, 2004; Hughes et al., 2012). RP is often described as a non-regional, "neutral" accent, serving as a benchmark for formal communication, including broadcasting and education (Roach, 2004). Key phonetic characteristics of RP include the non-rhotic /r/ (where /r/ is not pronounced at the end of words like "car," which becomes /kɑ:/) and specific vowel qualities (Trudgill, 2001). For example, RP maintains the /æ/ vs /a:/ distinction in words like '*trap*' /træp/ and '*bath*' /bɑ:θ/.

However, the status and perception of RP are evolving. While it once carried strong connotations of good education and wealth, it is increasingly associated with arrogance and coldness (Baratta & Halenko, 2022; Hughes et al., 2012). This shift has led to discussions about its appropriateness as the sole standard for teaching English as a Foreign Language (Baratta & Halenko, 2022) and the rise of what is sometimes termed Non-Regional Pronunciation (NRP) as a more contemporary standard (Wood, 2023). Despite RP being spoken by a small minority, its historical prestige means that SE, and RP by association, are often perceived as the "correct" forms of English, a perception that can fuel linguistic prejudice (Crowley, 2003).

Non-Standard English (NSE) encompasses the multitude of regional dialects and accents spoken across the UK that deviate from SE. While NSE is not typically considered standard, it has a significant impact on daily interactions and communication and reflects the linguistic diversity and cultural identity of different regions within the UK. Accents are a subset of dialects and primarily focus on pronunciation differences (Hughes et al., 2013). People from the same region or speaking the same dialect may still have different accents based on factors such as their age, social background, and personal speech patterns.

Accents can also result from the influence of other languages, historical migrations, and cultural interactions. For example, Cockney is a famous working-class accent from East London. It is known for its distinctive pronunciation which involves omitting the initial "h" sound in words, such as "*house*" being pronounced as "*ouse*" and the use of rhyming slang (e.g., "*apples and pears*" for stairs). Estuary English, which is a blend of Cockney and RP, is commonly spoken in the southeast of England, including London. It has become more prevalent in recent years and is characterized by a neutral accent with some Cockney influences. The other well-known varieties include Scouse in Liverpool, Geordie in Newcastle, and the dialects of the West Country (O'Donnell & Todd, 2013). These linguistic forms are deeply influenced by local history, culture, and geography, exhibiting variations in vocabulary, pronunciation (accent), and grammar (Trudgill & Chambers, 2017).

Phonological indicators are often the most salient markers of regiolectal difference. The linguists highlight several key distinctions:

1. The TRAP-BATH Split (/æ/ vs. /a:/): This is a major distinguishing feature between northern and southern English accents. Northern accents typically use the same short /æ/ vowel in words like '*trap*' and '*bath*', whereas southern accents (including RP) use /æ/ in '*trap*' but a long /a:/ in '*bath*', '*staff*', and '*grant*' (Hickey, 2015; Wood, 2023).

2. The FOOT-STRUT Split (/ʊ/ vs. /ʌ/): This vowel split also differentiates northern and southern English accents. Many northern English accents do not have the /ʌ/ vowel found in words like '*strut*', pronouncing it with the /ʊ/ vowel of '*foot*'. This split is absent in these accents, meaning '*putt*' and '*put*' might be homophones (Hickey, 2015).

3. Rhoticity (Post-Vocalic /r/): The pronunciation of /r/ after a vowel is a significant marker. Most accents in England are non-rhotic (like RP), meaning the /r/ in words like '*car*' or '*farm*' is not pronounced unless followed by a vowel (linking /r/). However, accents in the southwest of England, Scotland, Ireland are typically rhotic, pronouncing this /r/ (Hughes et al., 2012).

Beyond phonology, dialects exhibit lexical and grammatical variations. For instance, the term for a '*bread roll*' varies significantly: "*bap*" in parts of southern England, "*cob*" in the Midlands and North, and "*teacake*" in Yorkshire (O'Donnell & Todd, 2013). Schulz (2011) investigated grammatical variations, such as the use of '*had*' versus '*got*' for past possession and obligation, finding differing patterns between the Midlands and the North of England, suggesting different rates of grammaticalization. Such variations demonstrate that NSE dialects are not simply "incorrect" versions of SE but are systematic linguistic varieties with their own internal logic and history (O'Donnell & Todd, 2013).

As a distinct form of a language spoken by a specific group of people within a particular geographical area or social community (Trudgill & Chambers, 2017), dialects often develop over time due to isolation, historical influences, cultural factors, interactions with neighboring communities and may be influenced by the local history, migration patterns, and the mixing of languages.

Societal attitudes towards different accents and dialects are rarely neutral. Standard varieties, often originating from historically powerful societal groups, tend to carry prestige, while non-standard varieties can be stigmatized (Constantinou & Chambers, 2020). This phenomenon, known as linguistic prejudice, can have significant consequences.

Prescriptivism is the attitude or belief that one variety of a language is superior to others and that this variety should be promoted as the norm (Crowley, 2003). Prescriptive attitudes towards NSE often label it as "incorrect," "sloppy," or "uneducated," thereby

devaluing the linguistic heritage of its speakers. These attitudes can manifest in various settings, from casual social interactions to more formal environments like schools and workplaces.

The school environment is a critical space where linguistic attitudes can have a profound impact. For adolescents, whose identities are often closely tied to their peer groups and local culture, language is a powerful marker of belonging (Brady, 2015). Vernacular dialects and accents can thrive in daily social interactions among students. However, prescriptivist correction of these vernacular forms, especially in social spaces, can be damaging to students' confidence and sense of identity (Addison & Mountford, 2015). Brady in a study of a working-class London school, found that while students understood the need for SE in formal academic contexts, the constant correction of their natural speech in informal settings implied an invalidity of their language and, by extension, their identity (Brady, 2015). This can lead to resentment towards standardized forms and those who enforce them.

Alderton explored attitudes towards T-glottalling (pronouncing /t/ as a glottal stop, e.g., "bu'er" for "butter") among adolescents in southeast England (Alderton, 2020). This feature, though vernacular, is growing in prevalence. Alderton found that T-glottalling was associated with "chavviness" but could also evoke "coolness" or act as a form of rebellion against standardization, depending on the social context and the speaker's background (Alderton, 2020). The use of vernacular features can foster a sense of exclusivity and solidarity among peers (Brady, 2015 : 154). The ability to code-switch between standard and non-standard forms can, in fact, strengthen an individual's constructed identity (Alderton, 2020; Brady, 2015).

While fostering acceptance of linguistic diversity is crucial, a level of proficiency in SE is generally expected for academic success. Constantinou and Chambers conducted a diachronic study on the frequency of non-standard English forms in UK students' academic writing between 2004 and 2014 (Constantinou and Chambers, 2020). They found an increase in non-standard usage, from 19% in 2004 to 29% in 2014. Notably, the lowest-attaining students in 2014 used significantly more instances of vernacular forms than their 2004 counterparts, suggesting a possible decline in the prescriptive correction of non-standard language in academic writing, or perhaps a greater assertion of linguistic identity. This highlights a tension: while overzealous correction of spoken vernacular can be harmful, a lack of guidance on SE for academic purposes may disadvantage students. The challenge lies in valuing students' home dialects while equipping them with the linguistic tools needed for broader communication and academic achievement.

Attitudes towards accents and dialects extend into higher education and the workplace, where they can significantly impact employability. Subconscious biases against certain accents can lead to discrimination, limiting opportunities for speakers of non-standard varieties (Addison & Mountford, 2015). Morrison (2014), investigating university students' views on employability, concluded that desirable transferable skills "come heavily raced, classed and gendered" (Morrison, 2014 : 195). Language, as a primary means of expressing identity, is central to these perceptions. An individual's accent and dialect are often the first linguistic cues an employer receives, potentially triggering biases. Studies in other countries, such as the USA (Carlson and McHenry, 2011) and Canada (Trofimovich et al., 2023) confirm that accent bias is a widespread issue in employment. Employers and institutions need to actively work towards unlearning subconscious discriminations against vernacular Englishes to ensure equal opportunities.

The diversity of British accents also has implications for EFL learners. Many learners are primarily exposed to SE, often RP, during their studies (Baratta & Halenko, 2022). Consequently, encountering the wide array of regional accents upon visiting or moving to the UK can be daunting (Hughes et al., 2012). Baratta and Halenko argue that the changing perception of RP (sometimes seen as arrogant) makes it less suitable as the sole model for EFL teaching, and advocate for a "broader range of accent exposure" ((Baratta and Halenko, 2022 : 3) for L2 learners. This not only prepares learners for real-world linguistic encounters but also implicitly validates vernacular varieties, potentially increasing the confidence of non-standard speakers. While a standardized form is essential for global communication and accessibility for L2 learners, recognizing and including vernacular Englishes in educational contexts can foster linguistic awareness and intercultural understanding.

The assertion that NSE is linguistically inferior to SE is a social construct, not a linguistic reality (O'Donnell & Todd, 2013). NSE dialects are complex, rule-governed systems with rich vocabularies and grammatical structures. They are not "simpler" or "less sophisticated" than SE; they are merely different, reflecting diverse historical and cultural heritage (Trudgill & Chambers, 2017). The UK's linguistic landscape is a testament to this diversity, with numerous NSE dialects serving as vital tools for communication and markers of regional and social identity. Some features of NSE have resisted standardization precisely because they hold significant cultural and historical value for their speakers (Crowley, 2003). Recognizing this inherent value is crucial for fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

The accents and dialects of the United Kingdom are a vibrant reflection of its diverse population and history. However, societal attitudes, often rooted in prescriptivism and historical power dynamics, create a hierarchy where Standard English is privileged, and Non-Standard English varieties are frequently stigmatized. This linguistic prejudice has tangible and often detrimental repercussions, impacting individuals' sense of self, their educational experiences and workplace opportunities.

The research synthesized in this paper underscores that NSE varieties are not linguistically deficient but are legitimate and complex linguistic systems. The negative attitudes towards them are socially constructed and can lead to discrimination and the erosion of cultural heritage. For adolescents, the invalidation of their natural speech can be particularly harmful, affecting their confidence and identity. In educational settings, a balance must be struck between valuing students' home linguistic varieties and equipping them with proficiency in SE for academic and professional advancement. Furthermore, in an increasingly globalized world, exposing EFL learners to a broader range of British accents can enhance their communicative competence and foster greater linguistic tolerance.

Moving forward, a societal shift towards greater awareness and acceptance of linguistic diversity is essential. This involves challenging prescriptive norms, educating the public about the nature of language variation, and promoting policies in education and employment that actively counter linguistic discrimination. By recognizing the inherent worth of all accents and dialects, society can better appreciate the richness of its linguistic landscape and ensure that language serves as a tool for inclusion rather than division. Embracing linguistic variation is not merely a matter of tolerance but a recognition of the multifaceted identities and cultural contributions that make up the fabric of the nation.

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