



Can (Or Should) RP Serve as the Model for the Teaching of English Pronunciation in Cameroon?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the case for and against the continued adoption of RP, but argues that the spread of English to many parts of the world should change our perception of what constitutes Standard English – that the speech of a tiny minority in Britain can no longer be considered the norm by which all others must be judged. In presenting Cameroon Standard English as the most suitable model for Cameroon, the author's position is that we must recognize that English has become a cosmopolitan tongue and must cultivate a cosmopolitan attitude toward its various standard forms.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper poses a question which might have been considered unnecessary a few years ago (and may still be considered unnecessary in certain quarters today) as the answer was assumed to be emphatically and unquestionably in the affirmative. The goal for excellence in language it was believed was Received Pronunciation (RP for short). The realization that very few L2 users of English ever managed to achieve this only served to increase efforts to make the goal more attainable by more people, not to a modification of the goal itself.

But before addressing the question in the title of this paper, it seems appropriate to examine the linguistic situation and the role and status of English in Cameroon as a springboard for a better understanding.

The Linguistic Situation of Cameroon

The number of languages spoken in Cameroon is not known for certain. Chia (1983:23) proposes 123 mutually unintelligible languages, while Dieu et al (1983:164) suggest 236 natural languages belonging to many totally different families. What is certain is that there are hundreds of languages used in Cameroon. Superimposed on the national languages and transcending ethnic bounds are two official languages – French and English. These foreign languages were inherited from France and Britain who ruled the Cameroons when former German Kamerun became a protectorate territory of the League of Nations after World War I. Subsequently, French and English became the official languages of the Federal Republic of Cameroon at independence; French is OL1 for francophones and OL2 for anglophones while English functions as the first official language (OL1) for anglophones and as the second official language (OL2) for francophones. Besides the national and official languages, there exists in Cameroon a lingua franca, Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE). CPE is so widespread that Cameroonians who can speak neither French nor English do speak some CPE; But back to English, the language of education, at the sole Anglo-Saxon University of Buea.

On the future of English in Cameroon, it may be fair to say that despite the challenge from French, the national languages and Pidgin English, English remains a strong force to be reckoned with, for several reasons: First, English is enshrined in the constitution of Cameroon as one of the official languages of government business along with French. Second, there is a dynamic population of Cameroonians whose first official language is English and whose loyalty to the English language and culture is manifested in the existence of a variety of Anglophone movements asserting their linguistic and cultural identity. Third, the ascendancy of English as the foremost world language compels even francophones to learn English. Fourth, the absence of serious competition from CPE and the national languages (which are severely limited in the scope of usage because they are either not standardised or not encouraged for education by government policy) reinforces the status of English. Fifth, the existence of a parallel English-based education system alongside the French system is a sure guarantee for the future of English. In fact, “English has come to Cameroon to stay – in some form or other” (Schmied 1991: 198).

English is the language of education, law, administration at least in Anglophone Cameroon (NW and SW regions). It is taught and examined at all levels of education and is a requirement for matriculation and graduation at the sole “Anlgo-Saxon” University of Buea. Scholars and parents are anxious about its state (‘See Niba 1996, Jumbuin 1996, Lombe 1998, Mbufong and Tanda 2002, Esango 2009, etc...). These scholars have harped on the deleterious effects of Pidgin English on our students’ standard English – it is the case that these studies have been largely on written English. Perhaps it is time to address the absence of a spoken English component in

the “O” Level English examination. The present situation whereby spoken English is not available outside classrooms and is not examined at the “O” Level seems to send out wrong signals: spoken English is not important, with the unavoidable corollary being that anything goes – teachers teach anything; and learners learn anything. Is it not the case that we write what we speak? And that if you speak well you are likely to write well? Is it any wonder that our students cannot write well, when they know that their speech is not examined? Many of our students who are at the mercy of an educational system (which de-emphasizes spoken English) foisted on them are aware of the global importance of English and secretly aspire to speaking English with an RP accent and admire those who do. Approximative versions of RP phonetics are taught by non-RP speakers in English departments for one or two semesters on English degree programmes. The need for a conscious choice of a teaching model for English pronunciation especially in L2 environments like Cameroon is obvious. Gimson (1980:300) puts it thus:

This is a matter of special importance as far as English is concerned, because of the world-wide use of the language and because of the profusion of differing spoken forms existing not only in mother tongue areas as Britain, North America and Australia, but also in those vast regions of India and Africa where English is used as an adopted lingua franca. True, we need to have one model for our learners to copy. But, should that model be RP in Cameroon? Before presenting the case for or against RP, it is useful to explain the terms ‘RP’ and ‘Model’.

What is RP?

RP or Received Pronunciation is the name given to the regionally neutral accent in British English historically deriving from the prestige speech of the courts, the army, the church of England, the radio (BBC) Television and the public schools. A brief excursion into history reveals that RP came from the speech of London and the home counties specially of the shires lying about London within 60 miles an area which took in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

The present sense of the term owes its origin to Daniel Jones, though the supplement of the Oxford English Dictionary, Vol III, gives the honour of the first citation to Ellis (1869), Gimson (1984:45) gives a better citation than the dictionary from the same work:

In the present day we may, however, recognize a received pronunciation all over the country, not widely differing in any particular locality and admitting a certain degree of variety. It may be especially considered as the educated pronunciation of the metropolis, of the court, the pulpit and the bar (Ellis 1869:23).

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The initial part of the term, Received, probably came from H.C. Wyld, who has no inhibitions about class or connections. Wyld distinguishes Regional Dialects from Class Dialects. Regional dialects owe their distinctiveness to factors of geographical isolation, class dialects to social causes; Wyld makes no attempt to conceal his views when he points out that the English spoken by “the more sophisticated villagers” is not ‘identical with the English learned let us say in an Oxford common Room, or in an Officers’ Mess and goes on to say:

In large towns there are perhaps ten or even hundreds, of thousands of persons who have never themselves spoken, nor learned their usual associates speak, a country dialect, whose parents and forbears for several generations have never spoken a rustic dialect. These persons, representing various occupations and positions in life – errand boys, shop-boys, mechanics, shop-keepers, clerks of various grades and so on, have often what is called a vulgar accent. Their speech is not a provincial dialect, and again it is certainly not that of the politest circles. What is it? It’s evident that there are forms of English which are written pure local dialect nor pure standard English, although they may resemble the latter more than the former. Both the sophisticated rustic and the town vulgarian speak a form of the standard language, yet one far removed from the most refined and most graceful type. Wyld goes on to propose a term for the (Wyld 1927:48) latter:

It is proposed to use the term Received Standard for that form which all would probably agree in considering the best, that form which has the widest currency and is heard with practically no variation among speakers of the better class all over the country. This type might be called Public School English (op. cit. 1927:49).

After suggesting the term ‘modified standard’ for the ‘vulgar English of the towns and the English of the villager who has abandoned his regional dialect, Wyld concludes:

These facts are so patent that they have merely to be stated to command consent by all who consider questions of this kind (op. cit. 1927: 149).

Wyld’s dichotomy is quite clear : on the one hand there is ‘the most refined and the most graceful’ form of speech spoken in an Oxford Common Room and in an Officers’ Mess, and on the other hand, there is the vulgar speech of errand-boys, shop-boys etc... The source of the former is the Public Schools.

In addition to the identification with Public School English that Wyld emphasizes, Jones also is at pains to emphasize that RP is a form of Southern

Speech. This characteristic antedates the use of the term RP, as in the moderate observation of Walter Ripman in his volume entitled Good Speech:

Although repeated mention has been made of “standard speech”, it has not yet been defined. It is indeed not easy to define, but for the purpose of this chapter, it may suffice to describe it as a form of the spoken language that contains nothing that would jar on the ear of an educated speaker of southern English (my underlining).

The Concept ‘Model’

The 3 terms, ‘Model’, ‘Standard’ and ‘Norm’ are generally used as synonyms in literature related to pedagogy or in prescriptive texts on pronunciation and usage.

In pedagogical literature, the term model entails a prescription with reference to a specific variety of a language or a dialect; it’s therefore, a useful concept both in language acquisition and for language teaching. In a sense, then, a model implies a linguistic ideal which a teacher and a learner keep in mind in imparting instruction or in learning a language. (see Kachru 1982 c ‘Models for non-native English’ in Braj B. Kachru (ed.) 1982 pp 31-57).

It is generally the case that the underlying reasons for advocating a particular model are based on language attitude, language identity, and prestige factors. In practical terms it means acquisition of a language at various linguistic levels (phonetic, phonological, grammatical, lexicon) consistent with the model under focus. (Kachru (ed.) 1982 page 117 The Alchemy of English, Oxford: Pergamon).

The Case for RP

Several arguments (can and) have been advanced for the adoption of RP as the model for the teaching of English pronunciation:

1) Tradition

Traditionally, RP has been seen to be the teaching model abroad and indeed the obvious choice for that purpose (Christopherson 1987:17). RP is traditionally regarded as the target in the teaching of English pronunciation in both L1 and L2 environments. This tradition, which is not peculiar to the teaching of English appears to derive from a language teaching methodological universal, namely that the standard form of any language is normally the achievement target in the teaching of that language. Such a tradition applies not only to the teaching of pronunciation, but also to all other aspects of language. For example, in the teaching of syntax, no one would argue for the teaching of some other variant syntactic structures of English, though such variant structures are known to be used even for certain native speakers (Trudgill 1974:18).

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Shall we tailor the syntax to reflect more closely those of our mother tongues to make English more learnable? They are in the context of school education, normally stigmatized as deviant variants (Atoye 1987). There is need for a standard if we are concerned, as we are with the preservation of the syntactic morphological patterns of standard English, then we are equally duty bound to strive as hard as we can to preserve its pronunciation. There is need for a standard written English. We have something not far short of agreement on a standard practice which is followed world-wide with relatively insignificant variation, and few would wish to disturb that state of affairs. Without a written standard the language would lose its utility as a vehicle of international communication – the argument goes on. Should a similar argument not apply in the case of a spoken standard? If such a standard existed it would certainly be useful – and increasingly so in view of the growing volume of spoken communication in English the whole world over, it would reduce the risk of serious misunderstanding. A linguistic standard embodies values that are not just utilitarian, it symbolises a wider cohesion and loyalty, on a national or international basis, it indicates willingness to accept a norm that transcends the boundaries of one's local community. Although a linguistic standard (whether it is officially recognized or merely observed in practice) must inevitably lead to some degree of linguistic prescriptivism, linguistic democracy in the sense of everyone doing as he pleases will lead to linguistic anarchy (Christopherson 1987).

2) International Mutual Intelligibility

RP is said to be the most widely understood pronunciation (Jones 1950:4). It is neutral educated speech (Christopherson 1987). One of the attributes of that dialect is its international intelligibility. It is also theoretically supported by thinking on the relationship among the various dialects of any language. Such thinking postulates that the standard dialect of a language is intelligible to a user of any of its other dialects while in contrast, the other dialects are not necessarily mutually intelligible, nor are they necessarily so to a user of the standard dialect. By this token, RP remains that dialect of English for those who want to use it locally and internationally.

3) International Acceptability and Unity

RP is the most socially acceptable form of pronunciation. Intelligibility enhances acceptability but does not entail it. RP enjoys the widest degree of acceptability world-wide. Since it is not associated with any country or political group it functions as an objective dialect that hurts the feelings of fewer users of English world-wide than does say American English, Nigerian English, Indian English. While Cameroonians are more at home with Cameroon English than with RP as Nigerians are with Nigerian

English, for example, RP is more acceptable in any gathering comprising both Cameroonians and Nigerians than Cameroon English or Nigerian English.

Multiculturalism, like multilingualism breeds divisiveness; RP is helpful for greater unity. Although only 4% speak it naturally, non RP speakers do not constitute a uniform body whose speech would be a viable alternative. Even if such a rival alternative could be found, would it stand any better chance of acceptance than RP? It is easier to throw a standard overboard than to reach agreement on what to put in its place. RP is here now, it serves and exists as a standard. In the teaching of pronunciation it is difficult and costly to provide a choice of models.

4) Learnability

RP can be learnt even by 'Older' learners. The public schools often said to be the breeding grounds of the RP accent, usually take in their pupils at the age of 13. Where there is the will, there is no age limit.

5) Availability of Teaching Materials

RP boasts a gradual build-up of a formidable stock of books and other teaching materials like cassettes, wall charts etc. In contrast, no other variety of English boasts of a similar stock of materials. RP is 'by far the most thoroughly described of British accents' (Trudgill and Hannah 1982:3).

6) Achievement Target of Learners: British is best

Despite the availability of so many models, and the large numbers of speakers of them, British English holds quite a remarkable popularity. Even people who cannot tell the difference claim to prefer British to its serious rival, American English. Considering the power and influence of the US and the penetration of its films, TV, clothing, fast foods it is remarkable that American English has not saturated the markets of the world. One might have thought that British English should now be considered an old fashioned relic of some charm, but little utility, like steam engines. This has not happened. Why is this so?

For some it is a sense of nostalgia and belonging. British English is the variety they are familiar with, and they resist unnecessary changes. For many it is acceptance of a kind of cultural elitism. Britain has somehow managed to cultivate the notion that she is the guardian of good taste. For some it may be recognition of the very power of American influence, fear of being overwhelmed in it. Britain offers a less dangerous alternative.

The Case against RP

1) Complex Pronunciation System

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RP is not a very useful model of pronunciation – It has some very complex sound combinations, particularly diphthongs, and it is not very closely related to the spelling system. “Unlike other varieties, RP speakers make much the same noise saying pour paw, pour and pore and do not distinguish between ion and iron. So it is not the linguistic features of RP that give it such an appeal, but its social status, and above all its availability in the classroom” (Sinclair 1988:6).

Trudgill and Hannah (1998) agree that

The RP accent is probably rather more difficult to many foreigners to acquire than, say, a Scottish accent, since RP has a large number of diphthongs and a not particularly close relation to English orthography (1998: 9-10).

2) Hegemony of Minority

It is difficult to see why RP should serve as the model when there appears to be general consensus that RP is spoken by only a minority of people (4%) even in England (Trudgill 1979). Halliday et al (1964:106-7) had earlier pointed out the absurdity of speech therapists in England having to depend upon a phonetic description that is inappropriate for the majority of their patients.

Abercrombie points out that RP is not such an obvious choice as it might seem for foreigners to learn:

Its peculiar social position, which makes many people hostile to it should not be forgotten, particularly by learners outside Europe, where this hostility is likely to be strong. It is phonetically a difficult accent, moreover, and other accents – Scots for instance – are undoubtedly easier for most foreigners. (Abercrombie 1963:55).

3) Absence of a Homogenous RP Speech Community

The fact that RP speakers do not represent a homogenous community is quite problematic: Attempts have been made to identify varieties of RP. Gimson (1962: 84-5) distinguishes 3 types: conservative, general and advanced. The conservative type is used by ‘the older generation and traditionally, by certain professions or social groups. The general type is ‘typified by the pronunciation adopted by the BBC’. The advanced type is used by young people of exclusive social groups – mostly of the upper classes but also, for prestige value, in certain professional circles.

Wells (1982) distinguishes 4 types of RP: Mainstream, Upper-Crust RP, Adoptive RP and Near RP. Upper Crust RP is associated with the narrow sense of the upper class such as a dowager, duchess and demands a

‘pluminess’ of voice quality; Adoptive RP is ‘spoken by adults who did not speak RP as children’. Near RP ‘refers to any accent which while not falling within the definition of RP, nevertheless includes very little in the way of regionalisms’ (Wells 1982: 280-297).

It is doubtful that one homogenous model was ever introduced in the colonies. Colonial administrators, teachers and military personnel provided a confusing spectrum of varieties of English. Thus the native speakers of English never formed more than a fraction of English instructors in a majority of colonies, their numbers were insignificant and their impact on the teaching of English was negligible. The ‘norm’ provided by representatives of the king was not always the standard variety. In a number of cases, English teachers were not even native speakers of the language especially in convent schools, or in other missionary establishments using Belgian, French or Irish teachers. The native speakers were very rarely RP speakers; for instance a significant number of them came from Scotland, Wales or Ireland. (Kachru: 1986:88).

4) Myth of international acceptability & availability

RP has never served as a general standard for schools even in Britain except in the private sector. The emphasis on RP in phonetics textbooks has caused problems for many students:

The results of basing a phonetics course particularly or wholly on RP is to put at a disadvantage those students who do not have direct access to this accent of English. (Milroy (1981:ix).

5) The Sociolinguistic Environment – Unrealistic Achievement Targets

The pressure on both teacher and student from the overall sociolinguistic environment will always ensure that an RP objective remains unattainable. Like other aspects of language, pronunciation cannot be acquired by depending principally on books. And given the Cameroonian setting where standard English is hardly available outside the classroom, and where even some universities do not have language laboratories, and where the laboratories are not functional when available, it will be advisable not to kill whatever initiative can be taken in the teaching of pronunciation by setting unrealistic achievement targets. Given the recent emphasis on comprehension (Brown 1978, Krashen & Terrell 1983) probably the most important point is that learners should be taught to understand a wide range of varieties of English, British, American, Cameroonian. Obviously, a learner who has been exposed only to RP has not been prepared to understand the 96 % of the population of Britain, who do not speak RP, not to mention the entire population of the wider English-speaking world. Fortunately some information is now available on varieties other than RP (Trudgill 1979; Trudgill and Hannah 1998, Trudgill 1984, Bobda & Mbangwana 1998) and

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thus there is less justification for restricting learners to RP on the grounds that it is the only variety described, although more detailed studies are also needed. Efforts by phoneticians to provide accurate, data-based accounts of the speech in different countries would appear to be of greater social benefit to the wider speech community than yet another microscopic description of RP. In fact, an understanding of local standards of pronunciation is also important for teachers if they are to avoid creating feelings of linguistic insecurity in their pupils. To put it bluntly, there is no such entity as RP except as a prescriptive model for the upwardly mobile; or rather, RP exists in exactly the same sense as any other socially defined form of speech, and as such should, at best, receive equal, not favoured treatment.

6) The Decline in the Popularity of RP

RP has actually been in decline since 1945. The second world war caused the BBC to modify its policy and the advent of commercial radio and TV has further weakened the domination of RP over broadcasting in Britain, and more consideration is given to the reaction of all listeners, not only RP ones. RP is not the property of the native – English speaking world, nor is it that of the educated user of English world-wide. Nor even every educated British speaker of English speaks RP.

The status of RP has been controversial. The ‘social judgment’ that gave it a predominant position and prestige is now being challenged – after all it had no official status’

Even within the British context Abercrombie D. (1951) [“RP local Accent’ the listener 6, September 1951” [Reprinted in D. Abercrombie *Studies in Phonetics and Linguistics*. London: Oxford University Press 1965]’ has provided 3 valid argument against RP. First, recognition of such a standard variety is “an anachronism in present-day democratic society” (p.14); second, it provides an “accent bar” reminiscent of the colour bar; lastly, it is also debatable whether RP represents ‘educated English’ since RP speakers are “outnumbered these days by the undoubtedly educated people who do not talk RP. (Kachru 1986 p. 86, The Alchemy of English).

What comes out of the above discussion is surely that there is less and less justification for assigning a special status to RP in Cameroon. But it is not enough to object to the adoption of RP, without proposing an alternative.

CONCLUSION: WHAT MODEL FOR CAMEROON?

In examining the role of RP as a model in language teaching in Cameroon, it is somewhat paradoxical that RP should so frequently be proposed when most (if not all) teachers of English do not themselves speak RP. Thus they are forced either to modify their speech in the direction of RP or fall back on the formula "Do as I tell you, not as I do". Neither situation is likely to produce an optimal learning environment. It is more important for the teachers to be fully aware of their own form of speech so that they can avoid confusing the learner. It is only spies who need an undetectable accent. In practice, most educated Cameroonians will be able to make themselves understood, provided that the major phonological distinctions are observed. In such circumstances, it seems perverse to set as a target a non-rhotic variety of English, when probably the learner's first language and certainly the orthographic system are pulling in the opposite directions.

Particularly for adult learners the target should be broadly defined to include any form of pronunciation that will make the learner's speech generally intelligible. Fine-tuning can be left to the kind of intensive methods described by Acton (1984) though even then the failure rate is likely to be high. It is clearly unrealistic to set up high acceptability RP as the target in English pronunciation in an ESL situation like Cameroon. Apart from the problem of getting speakers to master it, there is also the fact that it will be most difficult to find teachers who can teach it.

It is not uncommon for Cameroonians even university students to ridicule those or other Cameroonians who try to speak English with a native accent. Many educated Cameroonians actually believe that we pronounce English well enough in this country and that we do not need to pronounce English like native speakers. Kachru, (1986:22) notes that while language deficiencies made the colonized an object of ridicule, the acquisition of native-like competence, made them suspect.

Christopherson, (1973:83) had earlier asserted that to some British people a non-native speaker whose pronunciation sounds too British is considered to be intruding into British privacy. "It is as if an uninvited guest started making free of his host's possessions."

Bobda and Mbangwana (1993: 199-214) present an exhaustive analysis which shows unambiguously that Cameroon English is significantly different from RP. But more importantly, "it shows that Cameroon English has developed into a quasi-autonomous phonological system" (op. cit 214). It seems to me this is the model to be prescribed in Cameroon as it is neither feasible nor desirable to teach a variety of English that is indistinguishable from standard British English.

But the story does not end with the choice of a model. We must ensure that the essential features which will make for the intelligibility of the end result of our teaching with Cameroon English is not lost. And this is where linguistics comes in. We must then set out some minimum achievement

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targets to ensure just this. If we do not follow up our prescription with practical steps for achieving the set objective, our recommendations may never be given life. We need to have one model for our learners to copy. We need also to expose our learners to many different varieties of pronunciation, as they may visit other English speaking countries, the aim of course should be for our students to speak English which is both intelligible and acceptable to the recipients especially when so much emphasis is given to communication nowadays. The learner should aim for a pronunciation that does not draw unfavourable attention to itself. This does not necessarily mean using the so-called RP of South-East England. In our ESL situation, an educated variety (the English of University lecturers) would be more appropriate perhaps than RP. It may be fair to conclude that basing a phonetics course partly or wholly on RP is idealistic, dishonest, and unhelpful to Cameroonians who do not have access to this accent of English. And it is evident that teaching goals and standards of correctness suitable for one country may not be suitable for another.

We could not agree more with what Strevens (1980:90) had hinted earlier:

In ESL areas where local L2 forms have developed and where they command public approval it is these forms which constitute the most suitable models for use in schools, certainly more suitable than a British or American model... the native speaker of English must accept that English is no longer his possession alone: it belongs to the world and new forms of English, born of new countries with new communication needs, should be accepted into the marvellously flexible and adaptable galaxy of "Englishes" which constitute the English language.

Or indeed, what Ngefac (2008) says in his preface:

The promotion of Standard British English or any mother-tongue English in the Cameroonian classroom at this point in time to the detriment of Cameroon English is an indication that policy makers and curriculum designers have not taken into consideration the twists and turns the language has undergone in Cameroon. The English language in Cameroon is actually rooted in her historical, ecological, cultural and sociolinguistic realities. The obvious consequence of attempting to implant a western model of English in Cameroon or attempting to assess Cameroonian speakers in terms of their knowledge of a western model of English will always yield results that are significantly different from those reported in the West.

Instead of castigating Cameroon English as a concoction of mistakes and targeting features of a variety (such as British Standard English) that is psychologically, physically and practically far removed from many Cameroonians, Cameroonian English can be standardised and promoted in

the classroom as ESL/EFL teaching must be founded in the society in which it is being taught.

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