

Comparing RP with GenAm.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

There are different accents of English language. There are for example the British English, American English and more exotic accents like the Jamaican English. They have the same origin, British English, but have had a development of their own. America, a British colony, became independent in the end of the 18th century and has a great ocean between itself and Great Britain. These factors, and others, have made American English different from The British English. “It seems reasonable to fix the date 1750 as marking the end of the shared development of the fore-runners of present-day RP and GenAm” (Wells 1982: 211). It is interesting to see how these two accents differ from each other.

Later RP innovations either had no effect at all on American pronunciation, or had an effect that was sharply limited, geographically or otherwise. Likewise, later American innovations have had little or no influence on British pronunciation patterns. (Wells 1982:211).

General American is not a single unified accent but it is American without southern or eastern accents. You could say that it has no regional characteristics. About two thirds speak with this variety without a recognisable local accent. GenAm is also called “Network English” because this variety is the most acceptable in national television. The reason why GenAm is a non-eastern and non-southern variety is because the settlers who travelled west used this variety and spread it westwards. Some linguists want to divide the GenAm into more speech groups but in this essay I will deal with GenAm as a whole.

RP stands for Received Pronunciation and it is the name of the accent with the most prestige in England. It is also called “BBC English”. The name “BBC English” comes from the demand up until the 1970’s that the announcers had to speak with this accent. This variety has no locality, but can sometimes be referred as “Southern British Standard” (Wells, Colson: 1971). When it comes to social aspects, the upper class and upper middle class speak it. “There is nothing like RP in the United States, where regional standards exist in different parts of the country” (Romaine 1994:71).

1.2 Aim

The aim of this essay is to compare RP and GenAm to see what differences there are between these two accents of English language. The aim is also to see what is typical for each variety. What features do they have?

1.3 Method

To compare these two accents I will mainly use *Accents of English* (Wells: 1982), which is divided into three parts: one introduction part, one part about the British Isles and the last part is about the those areas of the world speaking English (e.g. USA). I will also use relevant fact from studies by Trudgill and Labov. These two linguists have studied different parts of English. Trudgill did his research in Norwich, England and Labov did his in New York, USA. Trudgill will therefore be a very important source in the part about RP and Labov, of course, in the part about General American (GenAm). Another source will be *Language in Society* (Romaine: 1994) and *Language, society and Power* (Thomas, Wareing: 1999). I will also use the book *Language is Power* (Honey 1997), which is about Standard English and other varieties. Last but not least I will use articles about Estuary English by various authors to describe this form of English. First I will write about the two large accents of English, RP and GenAm, where I will tell what is typical for each variety. Then I will do a comparison of these two. This will take place in my analysis part. I will show with figures, studies and literature what make these varieties differ from each other.

2. RP

This variety of the English language is the far most prestigious within Britain. "...in Britain... those who are at the top of the social scale speak RP, an accent which does not betray the local origin of the speaker, only his or her social status" (Romaine 1994:71). The phonetician Daniel Jones was the man who gave this accent its name. There is an old story when someone asked him by how many this accent was spoken. Daniel Jones is believed to have answered "two". He was one of them. Who the other one was no one knew. This prestigious variety is spoken by perhaps three percent of the population in England and is therefore not a very general variety. A very good definition of RP is the one in Thomas & Wareing:

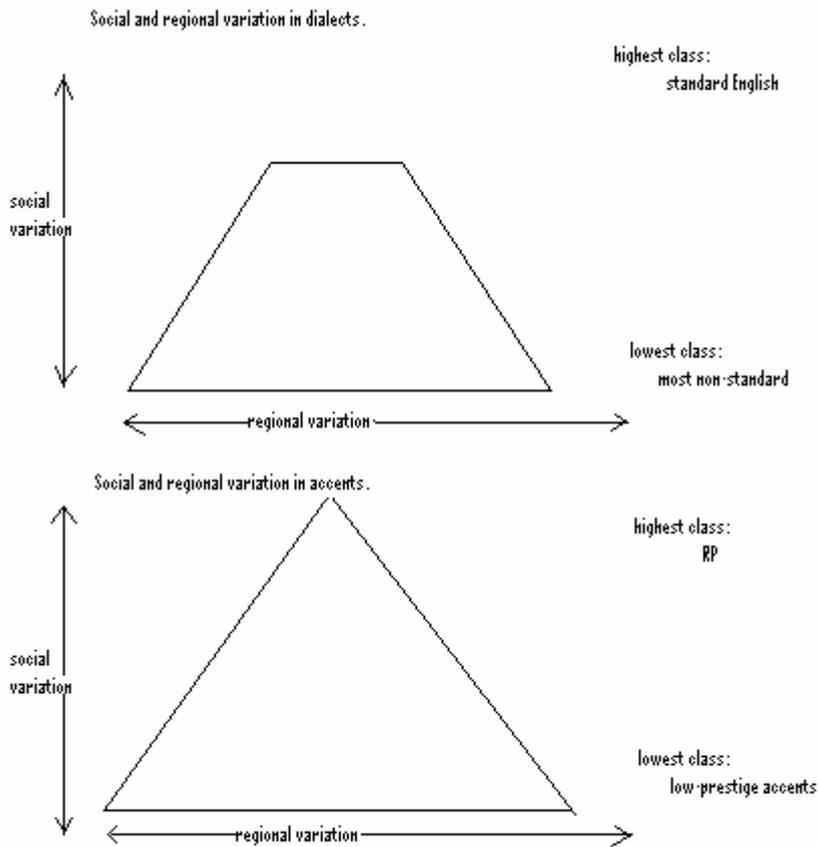
Received Pronunciation /RP the accent which is generally used by news readers on national television in the UK. Sometimes called a 'BBC accent' or an 'educated British accent'. An RP accent is not marked for a particular region of Britain, but is marked for relatively 'high' social class. It is thought that only three per cent of the British population usually use RP" (Thomas & Wareing 1999:195).

As I already mentioned, the people in the upper and upper middle class speak RP.

"Occupations perhaps most typically associated with RP are barrister, stockbroker, and diplomat" (Wells 1982:117). It has more to do with socio-economic factors rather than regions. "RP is the speech variety used by those educated at public (i.e. private) schools and is not tied to any particular locality" (Romaine 1994:20). Nevertheless, the Americans see this variety as the typical speech of an Englishman. They see it as a Standard English for the English people. In fact, people often tie a particular accent with a stereotype of someone. "It also seems that we commonly have stereotypical ideas about people on the basis of their accents... such as RP" (Thomas & Wareing 1999:182). This has got to do with how we form an opinion about someone based on how they speak. "We use the indexical information we collect from listening to a person speak in order to slot him into an appropriate stereotype" (Wells 1982:29). Geographically speaking RP has no base, but can be related to the southern parts of Britain. RP itself has different varieties. Wells mentions three and they are

mainstream RP, adoptive RP and U-RP. To understand this accent it is important to look at it on different levels.

In the following figure the relation between social class and language is revealed.



(Trudgill 1983a: 29-30)

This first figure shows that people in the higher class speak Standard English with very little regional variation. The lower you are on the social scale the greater the regional variation of a speaker's language is. The lower figure shows the variation in pronunciation. Speakers from higher class have no regional variation in their language. People from higher class pronounce the words with the same accent, regardless of their regional background.

This essay will mainly deal with the vowel system, standard lexical sets, phonetics and typical features in order to determine what the similarities and the differences between RP and GenAm are.

2.1 The vowel system

In the vowel system of RP, there are 19 vowels. There are six so-called *checked* vowels and 13 *free* vowels. *Checked vowels* are those who are subject to the phonotactic constraint that they do not occur in a stressed monosyllable with no final consonant, e.g. *fit*, *rent*, and *cat*. *Free vowels* are those vowels that occur free of any checking consonant e.g. *key*, *play*, *fear*. “The terms ‘checked and ‘free’ must be interpreted as applying to stressed syllables only...” (Wells 1982: 119). In RP both the vowel sound in words like *happy*, *city* and *coffee* and the vowel sound of words like *value* “... can occur with no following consonant in an unstressed syllable”. (Wells 1982: 119). Wells says that in RP both /I / and /Y / can occur with no following consonant in an unstressed syllable. In these two cases the opposition between the long and the phonetically corresponding short vowel have virtually no functional meaning in this environment. The use of lexical items in RP can be illustrated by using the list of keywords made by Wells (1982: 120). Not all words are used.

Kit	I	Goose	u:
Dress	e	Price	αI
Trap	{	Choice	OI
Lot	⊖	Mouth	αY
Strut	ς		
Foot	Y		
Bath	A:		
Cloth	⊖		
Nurse	3:		
Fleece	i:		
Face	eI		
Palm	A:		
Thought	O:		
Goat	≅Y		

This list will also be used to describe the vowels in GenAm in order to make a comparison.

These words stand “...for a large number of words which behave the same way in respect of the incidence of vowels in different accents” (Wells 1982:120). Wells also mentions words

like *sapphire* and *diary*, but in RP they are pronounced with a type of monophthong or diphthong and this can be treated as a realization of a phonemic sequence. This is instead of treating the diphthong or monophthong as a separate phoneme.

2.2 Varieties of RP

There are different varieties of RP. The most central variety is called **mainstream RP**. Then there is the **U-RP** and the **adoptive RP**. There are other ways of categorising RP, but this is the way Wells uses.

U-RP stands for **upper crust RP**. This variety refers to the one of upper class people, for example army officers. Wells talks about how difficult it can be to separate the stereotypes from reality in these cases. **U-RP** and **RP** share one important social characteristic and that is that they all are upper class.

Adoptive RP is the variety of **RP** spoken by adults who did not speak **RP** as children. They have learnt it after their “native” variety of English. This happens often when the social status of an individual is changed for the better. The reason for adopting RP can also be that the person starts to work in an environment of people speaking **RP**. A very good example of an occupation, which is often acquiring the person to speak **RP**, is actor. There are exceptions where a person learns **RP** as a native **RP** speaker and then speaks with **mainstream RP**-variety, but more often he or she speaks **adoptive RP**. This variety of **RP** is thought to be a more aristocratic variety.

Mainstream RP is what the name implies. This variety of **RP** is what Wells calls a central tendency (1982:279). People who speak this variety of RP are often born in an environment with this variety (exceptions: see above).

2.3 The British –ing versus –in’

In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s the British sociolinguist Peter Trudgill carried out a survey in Norwich, England (Trudgill: 1974). He wanted to find out the patterns of social class and language. One of the linguistic features he was interested in was how people pronounced the –ing in words like *running* and *singing*. He wanted to show that the higher social class a person belonged to the more likely it was that he or she would pronounce *singing* and *running* with an –ing. The less prestigious way of pronouncing the –ing was –in’, for example *runnin’* and *singin’*. This shows that RP, which is considered to be a very prestigious variety, means pronouncing it with –ing. It is important to say that this study also showed that people could change their pronunciation if they want to speak with a more prestigious variety. Trudgill also found out that there were differences between men and women. The women in Trudgill’s study were more likely to use a more prestigious variety than the men (Trudgill: 1974).

2.4 Estuary English

Estuary English is a new variety of RP. It is called Estuary since people living in the Southeast of England and especially by the Thames and its estuary speak it. It is a very modern variety and has similarities to RP and London English but it also differs from these two accents. The linguist David Rosewarne coined the name in the early 1980’s. Estuary English was formally recognized in 1995, when the Secretary of State for Education made it a form to be discouraged by all schools in England.

"Estuary English" is a variety of modified regional speech. It is a mixture of non-regional and local southeastern English pronunciation and intonation. If one imagines a continuum with RP and London speech at either end, "Estuary English" speakers are to be found grouped in the middle ground. (Rosewarne 1984)

It has a lot of influences from London speech and of course RP. It is considered to be a more modern English, a mix of old and new, here represented by RP and

London speech. "Estuary English is in a strong position to exert influence on the pronunciation of the future." (Rosewarne 1984). A very typical feature of the Estuary English is something called "word-final t-glottaling". Honey (1997: 167) talks about this in his book -the 't' at the end of a word is now tending to be replaced by a glottal stop [ʔ]. The 't' in words like *about* and *it* is a glottal stop (*abouʔ*, *iʔ*). Another feature of Estuary is the 'r'. It is almost the same as in GenAm, but it does not have a retroflexion. Rosewarne talks in his article about how the vowels in Estuary are constructed.

Vowel qualities in "Estuary English" are a compromise between unmodified regional forms and those of General RP. For example, vowels in final position in "Estuary English" such as the /i:/ in "me" and the second /ɪ/ in city, are longer than normally found in RP and may tend towards the quality of a diphthong. (Rosewarne 1984)

In another article, Ascherson (1994), shares his concern about how English is changing: "They say "ahm" for arm, "naa-it" for night, and "le'er" for letter. (The last is good for me, because a glottal stop is easier to hear than most consonants.)". He gives a possible explanation for the emergence of Estuary English in the fact that a lot of people in the Southeast of England move around a lot. The movement rate in this area is very high. Another fact is all migrants and commuters in this area of England.

In another article, Bex (1994) gives another explanation for forming new varieties of a language: "Different varieties of English develop precisely because their speakers wish to assert their cohesiveness as a social group". It is clear that a lot of linguists take this variety seriously. Wells says in an article: "There's a new buzzword going the rounds in England -- Estuary English (EE). It's supposed to be a new kind of English that's due to take over as the new Standard English" (Wells: 1997). He then tries to define what Estuary English really is:

Unlike Cockney, EE is associated with standard grammar and usage. But like Cockney it shows tendencies towards such phonetic characteristics as the following:

- l-vocalization, pronouncing the l-sound in certain positions almost like [w], so that *milk bottle* becomes [∇μΙοκ %βΘτο] (almost like 'miwk bottoo'), and *football* becomes [∇φΥ?βΟ:ο] ('foo'baw'). The l-sounds that are affected are those that are 'dark' [5] in classical RP, namely those which are not immediately followed by a vowel-sound, but rather by a consonant-sound or a potential pause.
- glottalling, using a glottal stop [ʔ] instead of a t-sound in certain positions, as in *take it off* [%τɛΙκ Ι? ∇Θφ], *quite nice* [%κωΑΙ? ∇νΑΙσ]. This is not the same as omitting the t-sound altogether, since *plate* [πλεΙ?] still sounds different from *play* [πλεΙ]. Nevertheless, authors who want to show a non-standard pronunciation by manipulating the spelling tend to write it with an apostrophe: *take i' off, qui'e nice*. The positions in which this happens are most typically syllable-final -- at the end of a word or before another consonant sound. London's second airport, *Gatwick*, is very commonly called [∇γ{?ωΙκ] ("Ga'wick").
- happY-tensing, using a sound more similar to the [ɪ:] of *beat* than to the [ɪ] of *bit* at the end of words like *happy, coffee, valley*. Many recent works on English phonetics transcribe this weak vowel as [ɪ], which can then be interpreted in various ways according to the speaker's accent. In strong syllables (stressed, or potentially stressed) it is crucial to distinguish tense long [ɪ:] from lax short [ɪ], since *green* must be distinct from *grin* and *sleep* from *slip*. But in weak syllables this distinction does not apply -- the precise quality of the final vowel in *happy* is not so important.
- yod coalescence, using [τΣ] (a ch-sound) rather than [τφ] (a t-sound plus a y-sound) in words like *Tuesday, tune, attitude*. This makes the first part of *Tuesday* sound identical to *choose*, [τΣυ:ζ]. The same happens with the corresponding voiced sounds: the RP [δφ] of words such as *duke, reduce* becomes Estuary [δZ], making the second part of *reduce* identical to *juice*, [δZυ:σ].

However, unlike Cockney, EE does not involve, for example,

- h-dropping, omitting [η], so that Cockney *hand on heart* becomes [%{vδ Θv A:}] ('and on 'eart); or
- th-fronting, using labiodental fricatives ([φ, θ]) instead of dental fricatives ([θ, ð]). This turns *I think* into [ΑΙ ∇φΙΝκ] and *mother* into [∇μςθ≡].

(Wells: 1997)

So you might say that this new variety of British English is a very modern one. This can be because common people have formed it and use it.

3. GENERAL AMERICAN (GenAm)

One important thing to know about GenAm, is that it is not a single accent. It is a compound of all the accents in America except Eastern and Southern accents. GenAm has had none, or very little, influences from these accents. The settlers who moved westwards in the US came from different parts and therefore a natural mix of various accents occurred. This accent, which was formed at this time, developed to be the accent, which today is called General American (GenAm). I have mentioned before in this essay the date when American English separated from British is 1750. After this, American English has developed in its own way. It has got its own vowel system, based on the one of British English, but different. It has its own innovations and phonetic systems. General American is what one might call the closest to the British RP that one can get. It is not an accent of its own. "General American. This is a convenient name for the range of United States accents that have neither an eastern nor a southern colouring..." (Wells 1982:110). GenAm is what we can call the standard accent of USA. "Certain accents have a special position in that they are regarded, whether tacitly or explicitly, as **standard**. In England it is RP which enjoys this status, in the United States the range of accents known collectively as GenAm" (Wells 1982:34). There are more people speaking American English with a GenAm variety than there are English people speaking British English with an RP accent. "General American is a term that has been applied to the two thirds of the American population who do not have a recognizably local accent" (Wells 1982:118). Although you cannot say that RP is spoken in a specific area of England, you can say that there are places in the US where people speak only GenAm: "...the type of American English which may be heard, with slight variations, from Ohio through the Middle West and on the Pacific Coast", quoted in Wells (1982:118). Other English speakers see on GenAm as the Standard English of the US. It is because "it corresponds to the layman's expectation of an American accent without marked regional characteristics" (Wells 1982:470). This has got to do what I mentioned earlier in my essay, that accents are often linked together with stereotypes. However, Romaine (1994:152) points out that it is important to remember that

GenAm is not an accent of its own, but lots of accents without regional marking put together as a whole. It is what one can call a compound of different regional units in language with a regional standard of pronunciation of their own. As I already have mentioned the name General American is the name of all American accents without accents with marked southern or eastern characteristics. It is not an accent itself but a concept of non-southern or non-eastern accents. When the settlers formed their colonies in the eastern parts of USA of today, a new accent of English was formed, a whole entire ocean from the British Isles. GenAm spread westwards along with the new settlements all the way to the Pacific Coast. This has made the GenAm to be the variety of the midlands and the western parts of the country. Of course, when settlers from the east, south and midlands met the accents mixed with each other.

I can point at three important factors for the differences from RP. The first is that they were separated from each other in 1750, when the settlers in Northern America wanted to become independent from the British Empire. GenAm has had a development of its own from that point in history. The second factor has to do with geography. America is a continent of its own and is separated by England and the rest of Europe by the Atlantic. The third factor is the huge population in the US. It can be compared with the population in all of the European countries. It seems that every nation has a standard variety of the native language. USA has GenAm.

3.1 The vowel system of GenAm

In the vowel system of GenAm there are fifteen vowels. There are ten *free* vowels and five *checked* vowels. Wells (1982:120) mentions some characteristics of GenAm's vowel system: "Vowel length (duration is not as important in GenAm as in some other accents...". This means that all vowels vary in duration depending on what phonotactic environment they occur. There are two classes of vowel "on the basis of phonotactic distribution" (Wells

1982:120). The five checked vowels /{,E,I,ɘ,Y /are not allowed to occur in a stressed monosyllable with no final consonant, while the free vowels /ɪ,εI,OI,αI,αY,o,ʊ,ɜ,O,A/are not a subject to this constraint.

Using the same keywords when looking at lexical sets as in RP this is how it looks in GenAm.

Kit	I	Goose	ʊ
Dress	E	Price	αI
Trap	ɘ	Choice	OI
Lot	⊖	Mouth	αY
Strut	ɘ		
Foot	Y		
Bath	ɘ		
Cloth	O		
Nurse	ɜ		
Fleece	i		
Face	εI		
Palm	A		
Thought	O		
Goat	Y		

(Wells 1982:121-22)

3.2 The post-vocalic ‘r’

An interesting American linguistic study is the one by William Labov about the post-vocalic ‘r’. He did his study in different department stores in New York City in 1962. The three

stores represented each class of the society: working class, middle class and upper class. He wanted to find out the differences in the use of post-vocalic 'r' between the "salesgirls" in each department store. He found out that people wanting to project a higher class used the postvocalic 'r' more frequently. This study is interesting since there is a remarkable difference between American English and British English, when it comes to the social patterns of the use of the post-vocalic 'r'. In the US people in the higher parts of the social class who speak with a prestige variety use the post-vocalic 'r', while it is the quite opposite in Britain. In Britain, the prestige variety is 'r'-less. "...that is, *mother* is pronounced muthuh and so on...". Labov's study, as Trudgill's, showed that people could change to the prestige variety when they are talking to people that use it.

4. COMPARING RP WITH GENAM

There are a lot of differences, and similarities, between RP and GenAm. First of all, there is a distinct difference in the percentage of speakers within the country. There are at most three per cent of the British population that speak with RP-accent, compared with two thirds of the American population that speak American English with a GenAm-accent. Next thing is the locality. RP has no locality. It has a socio-economic distribution rather than a regional one. Wells wants to call it "**Southern British Standard**" (Wells 1982:117), but that is not entirely accurate. People, who are at the higher part on the social scale in England, speak with an RP-accent, wherever they might live. They can live in the northern, southern, western, central or eastern parts of England. It is easier to relate it to different kinds of occupations. For example: it is more likely that a stockbroker speaks with an RP-accent than a cleaning lady from the working class doing it.

When I compared the two vowel systems I could see all the differences. First of all there is a distinct phonetic difference between the two accents. Wells mentions the i- sound in words like *creep, sleeve, key, people* etc. The i-sound in RP /i:/ has the corresponding /i/ in GenAm.

However there are a lot of examples when the sound in RP corresponds to the one of GenAm.

To show the differences in the lexical sets between GenAm and RP I will go back to the figures used earlier in this essay. The comparison will look like this:

The standard lexical sets

	RP	GenAm	keyword
1.	I	I	KIT
2.	ɛ	E	DRESS
3.	{	{	TRAP
4.	ə	A	LOT
5.	ʌ	ʌ	STRUT
6.	Y	Y	FOOT
7.	A:	{	BATH
8.	ə	O	CLOTH
9.	ɜ:	ɜr	NURSE
10.	ɪ:	ɪ	FLEECE
11.	ɛI	ɛI	FACE
12.	A:	A	PALM
13.	O:	O	THOUGHT
14.	≡	o	GOAT
15.	u:	u	GOOSE
16.	αI	αI	PRICE
17.	OI	OI	CHOICE
18.	αY	αY	MOUTH

(Wells 1982:123)

Wells uses another figure, which makes it even easier to spot the differences between GenAm and RP. (The whole figure is not used in my illustration).

	RP	GenAm	
<i>Father, bra</i>	A:	A	= PALM
<i>Stop, rod</i>	⊖	A	= LOT
<i>Cross, cough</i>	⊖	O	= CLOTH
<i>Mirror, spirit</i>	ɪp*	ɪp*	= KIT

* In this part an 'r' was added.

(Wells 1982: 124)

The differences in pronunciation are in words like *father, bra* are that RP uses a longer vowel while GenAm uses a short vowel. In words like *stop, rod*, RP-speakers pronounce the vowel closer to an 'o'-sound while GenAm-speakers pronounce it with a sound closer to 'a'. There are similarities in pronunciation between RP and GenAm, which the words *mirror, spirit* illustrates. This is interesting when looking at how these accents use the postvocalic 'r' and what the relationship with this and social factors.

This list clearly shows the differences between GenAm and RP considering the vowels. When it comes to the consonants, there are some differences. "Among the consonants, there is a notable difference between the two accents in the realization of the liquid /l/, which is in general 'darker' (more velarized) in GenAm than in RP..." (Wells 1982:125). Good examples of this are words where /l/ has an inter-vocalic position, such as *jelly* and *pillow*. The difference can also be seen in words when /l/ has an initial position where RP has a light 'l' and GenAm a dark 'l'.

Another difference in consonants between GenAm and RP is the realization of /t/ in inter-vocalic position. GenAm usually has a voiced tap. This pronunciation is rare in RP where /t/

remains voiceless in all environments. Still there are examples like *letter* and *putting*, where both accents pronounce the /t/.

A difference of phonotactic character is the liquid /r/. In RP it can only occur before a vowel. GenAm does not have this constraint. Where GenAm has /r/ followed by a consonant or finally, RP lacks it. Examples of this are the words *sharp* and *form*.

5. SUMMARY

In my essay I wanted to find out the differences between the two accents of English language, GenAm and RP. The two accents come from the same original accent but were separated from each other due to the colonization of Northern America around 1750. Ever since then there have been none or very few innovation taken from RP to GenAm or the other way around. That is the main reason for the differences between the two accents. Each accent has had a development of its own. Another important reason is the locality. There is an entire ocean, the Atlantic, between the two continents. GenAm was the accent that spread westwards along with the settlers. As I have mentioned earlier in my essay, GenAm is not considered as a real accent, but a name of all accents without any southern or eastern characteristics.

6. DISCUSSION

The greatest difference between the two accents is how many speakers they have. RP is spoken by maybe ten per cent, while GenAm is spoken by almost 75 per cent.

Talking about time or age, RP is the accent that is the oldest, which is natural, since former Englishmen who were colonists in the British colony in Northern America founded America.

When I compared the two accents to each other with the help of Wells, I found that there were not only differences between these two accents of English language. I found out, as

shown in my figures borrowed from Wells, that there in fact were some vowels that had the same sound both in RP and GenAm. The vowels were I (KIT), ɪ (TRAP), ʌ (STRUT), Y (FOOT), eɪ (FACE), aɪ (PRICE), oɪ (CHOICE) and ɔY (MOUTH). The other vowels in the standard lexical set do not correspond to each other. They sound different in the two accents.

When it comes to the consonants, the most notable difference is the one of the realization of the liquid /l/. It is in general much darker in GenAm than in RP, particularly in postvocalic position in words like jelly (GenAm [ˈdʒɛlɪ]; RP [ˈdʒɛlɪ]). There is also a difference in the realization of /t/ in intervocalic position, where GenAm usually has a voiced trap [ɾ], a pronunciation which is rare in RP. In RP the /t/ remains voiceless in all environments.

When it comes to phonotactical differences, the most significant are those relating to /r/. “In RP the liquid /r/ is subject to the severe phonotactic constraint that it can occur only before a vowel: the sequences /rC/ and /rɹ/ are excluded. GenAm is not a subject to any such constraint” (Wells 1982:125). Examples of this are found in words like *sharp* (GenAm [ʃɑrπ], RP [ʃA:π] and *form* (GenAm [fɔrμ], RP [fO:μ]).

When I compared the two accents with each other I found out that there were both differences and similarities. The differences have come because each accent has had a development of its own since 1750. The similarities are there because they come from the same root. The most significant difference is pronunciation. One can hear if a person is from the US or from England by listening to their pronunciation of words like tomato.

These two accents are considered to be the two most important accents of the English language, but I think it is important to look at other accents of English, such as Australian English, Jamaican English etc. This will take place in my next essay.

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