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ESTUARY ENGLISH: SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND LINGUISTIC STATUS

The present article dwells upon the social as well as sociolinguistic aspects of Estuary English, which is approached by scholars differently. Some of them view it as a modern variant of pronunciation, while others believe it to be a new London-based dialect. The notion “Estuary English” appeared in the late 80s of the XX century and it rapidly attracted attention of the leading linguistic studios of Britain, while the term itself was coined in 1984 by David Rosewarne who named it so according to the territory of its spread (it appeared as a speech of working class people living in the estuary of the Thames).

Although the phenomenon of Estuary English was discovered about 40 years ago there is no ultimate viewpoint as for its status, the area of its spread and the degree of its influence over the standard of pronunciation – RP. Some authors have made an attempt of the surface analysis of the dialect, but to understand its true nature a profound study should be conducted by experts in various fields of a language study. So the aim of the present study is to outline the linguistic status of Estuary English and determine its position among other British dialects not just as of one more dialect, but proving the theory of language variations in modern communication.

Meanwhile, we are making an attempt to determine the factors that contribute to the sustained establishment of Estuary English in all spheres of public life of the British society. Within the present research it is evident that the accent has become attractive to many – the democratic-minded and those who pretended to be since it became a social marker drawing some line between the representatives of different classes of the British society. In the result of the present study we conclude that the sociolinguistic nature of Estuary English has the following characteristics: 1) the linguistic status of Estuary English has not been ultimately defined and the majority of linguists view it as a variant of pronunciation, that appeared in the result of modifications within the standard RP; 2) Estuary English is the result of the total democratization of the conservative British society on all its levels and on the level of the language in particular; on the one hand, while it undergoes a substantial influence of Cockney English and American pronunciation, on the other one; 3) it does not exist within the geographical boundaries it once appeared and has a tendency to spread over the remote places, manifesting its overwhelming popularity and influence with particular sociolinguistic complexity and considerable acceptability among the youth of different geographical regions and social backgrounds.

Key words: *Estuary English, pronunciation variant, dialect, Cockney, sociolinguistic nature, pronunciation standard, linguistic status.*

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АНГЛІЙСЬКА ESTUARY: СОЦІАЛЬНИЙ КОНТЕКСТ ТА ЛІНГВІСТИЧНИЙ СТАТУС

У статті розглядаються як соціальні, так і соціолінгвістичні аспекти англійської Estuary, до якої вчені підходять по-різному. Деякі з них вважають її сучасним варіантом вимови, в той час як інші стверджують, що це новий лондонський діалект. Поняття «Estuary English» з'явилося наприкінці 80-х років XX століття і швидко привернуло увагу провідних лінгвістичних студій Великої Британії, а сам термін був введений у 1984 році Девідом Роузворном, який назвав його так відповідно до території поширення (Estuary виникла як варіант мовлення робітничого класу, що живе у гирлі Темзи).

Незважаючи на те, що феномен англійської Estuary був відкритий близько 40 років тому, немає остаточної точки зору щодо її статусу, території поширення та ступеня впливу на вимовний стандарт – RP. Деякі автори зробили спробу поверхневого аналізу діалекту, але щоб зрозуміти його справжню природу, необхідно провести глибоке дослідження експертами з різних галузей вивчення мови. Отже, мета цього дослідження полягає в тому, щоб окреслити лінгвістичний статус англійської Estuary та визначити її позицію серед інших британських діалектів не просто як ще одного діалекту, а підтвердивши теорію мовних варіацій у сучасній комунікації.

Між тим, ми визначили чинники, які сприяють стійкому утвердженню англійської Estuary в усіх сферах суспільного життя британського суспільства. У межах даної наукової розвідки прийнятною є точка зору, що акцент став привабливим для багатьох – демократично налаштованих і тих, хто вважає себе такими, оскільки він став соціальним маркером, що проводить певну межу між представниками різних класів британського суспільства. У результаті дослідження ми дійшли висновку, що соціолінгвістична природа англійської Estuary має такі особливості: 1) лінгвістичний статус англійської Estuary остаточно не визначено, і більшість лінгвістів розглядають її як варіант вимови, що з'явився в результаті модифікацій вимовного стандарту RP; 2) англійська Estuary є результатом тотальної демократизації консервативного британського суспільства на всіх його рівнях, і на рівні мови зокрема, з одного боку, в той час як вона зазнає значного впливу кокні англійської та американської вимови, з іншого; 3) англійська Estuary не існує в тих географічних межах, у яких вона колись з'явилася і має тенденцію поширюватися у віддалених місцях, демонструючи свою високу популярність і вплив через її соціолінгвістичну складність та значну прийнятність серед молоді з різних регіонів та різного соціального походження.

Ключові слова: англійська Estuary, варіант вимови, діалект, кокні, соціолінгвістичний характер, вимовний стандарт, акцент.

Statement of the problem. Due to the process world community goes through the intensive stage of globalization the modern English-speaking of transformation and extension in all its spheres.

The number of people migrating around the world is increasing daily, the political, economic, cultural and educational bonds are being established and the sphere of communication is being seriously affected by all these processes. Since the English language is *Lingua Franca* and most of the world's developed societies use it in this status, it inescapably undergoes various alterations caused by the internal as well as the external social changes. Historically English has been modifying territorially and diachronically because of the colonial expansion of the British Empire, but profound tendencies to qualitative and quantitative shifts are still in progress in modern world. Consequently, a special attention of linguists and linguistic studios to the current changes in the English language connected with the social changes within the English-speaking communities is growing, while this subject matter remains in the focus not only of Linguistics, but sociology, psychology and demography.

Nevertheless, its primary significance lies in the study of the communication by means of the English language through the prism of the up-to-date transformations going on within its different systems. So, the subject of our present research is the innovative British London-influenced dialect – Estuary English. According to Prof. John C. Wells, only a thorough insight into the nature of modern accents of English and its regional varieties can reflect the genuine nature of English as it is, regarding several angles of the problem (historical, sociolinguistic and phonological) (Wells, 1997). Taking into account this quotation as the guideline for our scientific investigation, we will make an attempt to describe the most phonologically relevant peculiarities of Estuary English and trace its dynamics among other British dialects. We are also trying to scrutinize the historical, territorial and social preconditions of appearance of this dialect at some definite period and its position with respect to Received Pronunciation (RP) as well as other dialects. Meanwhile, we are aiming at summarizing the major scholar data concerning Estuary English, its linguistic nature in particular, since its significance in the system of the British dialects is undeniable as this very dialect is a pure manifestation of language variations which is the mainstream nowadays.

The notion “Estuary English” appeared in the late 80s of the XX century and it rapidly attracted attention of the leading linguistic studios of Britain, while the term itself was coined in 1984 by David Rosewarne, who at that time was a postgraduate student of Applied Linguistics at Birkbeck College in the University of London and at present the British methodologist, phonetician and specialist in the field

of applied linguistics. The scholar defines Estuary English as the variety of modified regional speech, a mixture of non-regional and local south-eastern English pronunciation and intonation and 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).

During the following few years, the idea was being picked up by the popular press, since there was a considerable public discussion over Estuary English and new and exaggerated claims were being made about it. In some 10 years the author Paul Coggle published his book “Do you speak Estuary?”, in which he asserted that the dialect could be heard in places as far away from London as north Norfolk, Dorset, the Kent coast, Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire. The book is still the most complete guide to the phenomenon of Estuary English, which explains what it is, shows how to test whether one speaks it, and explains what it means socially, culturally and linguistically.

Although the phenomenon of Estuary English was discovered about 40 years ago there is no ultimate viewpoint as for its status, the area of its spread and the degree of its influence over the standard of pronunciation – RP. Some authors have made an attempt of the surface analysis of the dialect, but to understand its true nature a profound study should be conducted by experts in various fields of a language study.

Purpose of the article. The *aim* of the present study is to outline the linguistic status of Estuary English and determine its position among other British dialects not just as of one more dialect, but proving the theory of language variations in modern communication. Thus, to achieve the set aim we need to realize the following *tasks* of the investigation:

- to scrutinize the bulk of all definitions and notions of Estuary English existing in modern linguistics;
- to determine the position of Estuary English in modern linguistics and prove the theory of the language variations with the data achieved in the present research;
- to conclude the linguistically relevant peculiarities of Estuary English and identify its linguistic status in this way;
- to delineate the area of spread of Estuary English;
- to retrace the co-existence of Estuary English with the neighbouring dialects.

Analysis of research. As a matter of fact, the appearance of a new phenomenon in the language, a dialect in particular, is a subject of numerous scientific

researches and discussions concerning its status and position in the language system. Estuary English, as a comparatively new variation of the British speech, has been inducing endless debates in the scientific circles. The linguists disagree as for the genuine status of it, as some share the view of David Crystal, the British linguist, academician and writer, who treats Estuary as a social dialect (Crystal, 1995), while the majority of linguists approach Estuary as a variant of pronunciation and doubt its definite linguistic status (Coggle, 1998-99; Gudlaug, 2006; Wells 1998-99). The polemics between these two groups has been in progress since the appearance of Estuary English and the number of its researchers is steadily growing.

Not only the number of those, who study this variant of pronunciation from linguistic point of view is growing, but the number of those, who choose this speech for everyday communication, is rapidly growing too. Some features of Estuary English speech, according to David Rosewarne (Rosewarne, 2000: 17), are already been noticed as far as in Liverpool and Glasgow, meanwhile, other scholars point out the spread of it in Hall, Newcastle and Derby (Wells, 1997). All in all they witness the intensive spread of Estuary English as well as its tremendous popularity and claim the appearance of a new term “estuarian” (Wells, 1997), describing a speaker who completely switches to speaking Estuary or just picks up some of its features. Trying to comprehend the pre-conditions for the appearance of Estuary English D. Rosewarne claims that he heartland of this variety lies by the banks of the Thames and its estuary, but it seems to be the most influential accent in the south-east of England. It is to be heard on the front and back benches of the House of Commons and is used by some members of the Lords, whether life or hereditary peers. It is well established in the City, business circles, the Civil Service, local government, the media, advertising as well as the medical and teaching professions in the south-east. “Estuary English” is in a strong position to exert influence on the pronunciation of the future (Rosewarne, 1994: 5). In other words, it may be considered as the most powerful and influential variant of speech that has the immediate impact on today’s RP and there is an evident prospect for such position of it in future.

A number of scholars, studying the social and sociolinguistic background of Estuary English, look for some connections between this variant of speech and Cockney dialect, but in its lexical and grammatical systems Estuary has only a few distinctive features borrowed from Cockney. On the other hand, it is still in the period of numerous modifications and, thus, can

be referred to as a variant of pronunciation rather than some separate dialect. Moreover, P. Coggle suggests viewing Estuary English only through the continuum: *conservative RP – advanced RP – Estuary English – Cockney*, where Estuary itself does not have certain boundaries for some of its speakers tend to approach one end of the continuum, while others are closer to the opposite end. Besides, all of them can migrate within this continuum, changing their pronunciation according to the communicative situation or circumstances of interaction (Coggle, 1998-99).

Presentation of the main material. For the scientific purpose it would be reasonable to determine the major conditions due to which Estuary English came into being and established itself as a variant of pronunciation in broad masses of the British population. In this regard we are sharing the standpoint of John Maidment, the British phonetician and sociolinguist, that fundamental reason for the wide spread of Estuary in the younger generations is in changes in the social meaning of formality and informality and a resulting tendency to mix accents in this “post-modern” age (Maidment, 1994: 9). Being the trendy usage of the younger generations in the South East based on the area of the Thames valley north and south of London, Estuary English has been widely considered to combine traditional South Eastern with fashionable London and RP characteristics in a “mixture of Received Pronunciation with Scarf London” (Muglestone, 1995: 96). Besides, the growing popularity of Estuary English among the representatives of the young generation manifest their desire to be different and move away from the conservative rules of the elderly generation as well as their intention to get rid of highfalutin non-regional RP. Combining features of RP and non-standard London English, Estuary English is the result of the combined influence of two social trends: the movement upward of the social ladder of Cockney speakers and the movement downward towards the “ordinary” (as opposed to “pompous”) pronunciation of the middle class (Altendorf, 1999: 11).

The acquisition and spread of the successful variant of Estuary English among young people was thoroughly observed by D. Rosewarne, who proves socially complex origins and connotations of the new variant of pronunciation. In his research secondary school students with local accent backgrounds were reported to adopt Estuary English, rating it more “sophisticated” and even envisioning RP for their later age, those from an RP-speaking background were aiming at “street credibility” through more popular speech in order to “fit into the group” and “appear tough” (Rosewarne, 1994: 7). Meanwhile, D. Crys-

tal, trying to comprehend such a rapid extension of Estuary English, states that this variant of speech became a current usage among middle-class speakers and the upper-class young, both moving “downmarket” to avoid the “establishment connotations” of RP, particularly those of what was still considered “conservative” or “advanced” in D. Rosewarne’s early time research and later more generally called “posh” (Rosewarne, 1994: 3).

By all means, the quick spread of Estuary English is primarily associated with active migration of residents in South East England (Maidment, 1994), as well as with significant media influence, including the BBC, which has recently ceased to be a stronghold of RP. The radical changes, sweeping modern British society, can be traced in many spheres and the media and telecommunication are the most flexible ones for the innovative transformations in the character of speech are immediately noticed and made public by their channels. For instance, some applicant for the position of a news presenter on one of the radio station was rejected as his speech was too correct (Kerswill, 2000: 27). On the other hand, some positions for which previously it was impossible to apply for non-speakers of RP are massively occupied today by those whose speech is abundant of Estuary English features. Thus, the official representative of NATO in the Kosovo conflict of 1999 was Jamie Shea, a native of London, or Greg Dyke, born in Middlesex, became the general director of the BBC television company in 2000, while both of them are typical speakers of Estuary English (Kerswill, 2000). The citizens of the UK reacted to the spread of Estuary English in different ways. Mostly, the reaction was negative, partially of the fear that Estuary English was a threat to RP, and if RP disappeared, being displaced by Estuary English, then “what would remain of that uniting all the British?”

In other words, at some point Estuary English became the social marker and the accent drawing some line between the representatives of different classes of the British society. Within this conception of the widening social validity of the variant as a linguistic reflection of the changes in class barriers in Britain and the development of less exclusive linguistic networks in Britain (Maidment, 1994: 8), D. Rosewarne himself had laid the foundations for recent claims to the accent’s correspondence with the new social atmosphere of gender equality, race relations and changing moral attitudes on issues like abortion, contraception and homosexuality (Kerswill, 2000:6). Irrespective of the social background and generation of its speakers, Estuary English has always been a compromise between social constraints

and the individual identities of those who were rising, falling or maintaining their position socioeconomically” (Maidment, 1994: 7).

So, concluding the factors that determine the sustained establishment of Estuary English in all spheres of public life of the British society, we unanimously support the idea of D. Rosewarne, that the accent has become attractive to many – the democratic-minded and those who pretended to be, the lower (middle)-class upstarts and the frustrated upper middle-class shunning “posh” for its social disadvantages – social motivations for its application were manifold, though frequently determined by the aim to exploit the possibilities the variant might offer to disguise one’s sociolinguistic identity in favour of a new and more favourable one. What was most significant was the ease with which top people adopted the accent which “obscured sociolinguistic origins” (Rosewarne, 1984: 29). So Estuary became current even among business circles of the city – formerly the preserve of RP – in order to be more “consumer-friendly”, and its fashionable attraction made it the “class-free” accent of stars, disc jockeys and sportsmen (Rosewarne, 1984: 31). Nevertheless, Estuary English is viewed as a possible way to unite the British society (Coggle, 1998-99:87) and its appearance is associated with “the processes of democratization of society, democratization of clothing, behavior, language... and even draw parallels with those social processes that indicate the increasing tolerance in society while there is another opinion: Estuary English is not a reflection of “any democratic trend in society, but the unrelenting result of another redistribution of power...” (Kerswill, 2000: 21).

Although Estuary English has been around for about 40 years, there are still lively debates over its status and the geographical boundaries of its spread. Many researchers consider the term “Estuary English” inappropriate due to the discrepancy between its original name and the area of distribution (Maidment, 1994: 10) since it got its name from the estuary of the Thames, the inhabitants of which were the first to speak it. Whereas, according to some scholars, Estuary English is not a new phenomenon at all. The features of Estuary English can already be clearly observed over a long period of time (Kerswill, 2000: 22), and as Prof. J.C. Wells claims, the features of the accent have been manifesting themselves for almost five hundred years (Wells, 1997: 24). It proves that Estuary English is only a certain stage of evolution RP, which, like all pronunciation variants, undergoes quantitative and qualitative changes. In other words, there is a gradual replacement of one standard by another (Crystal, 1995).

Alongside the analysis of sociolinguistic aspects of Estuary English, our present study focuses on the general observation of the phonological features of this variant of pronunciation as its phonetic aspect seems to be the most flexible in comparison with the lexical and grammatical ones. Since most of the scholars tend to view Estuary English only through the continuum “conservative RP – advanced RP – Estuary English – Cockney”, they suggest putting a particular weight on the features of Estuary common with those of Cockney. Moreover, in the above-mentioned continuum, Estuary is the immediate neighbour of Cockney and they are a sort of opposition to RP.

So, among the most phonetically relevant features, uniting these two accents, the glottal stop comes in the first place. It affects the sound /t/ in mid-word and terminal positions, like in the words: *statement, get it, football, water, take it* as well as sonorant /l/ before a consonant or word-finally is replaced by a kind of vowel-sound /ɒ/ like in words: *milk, bottle, kettle*. And while, in the former case, RP speakers might tap the most t's and Cockney speakers the fewest, Estuary speakers might find themselves “in the middle range”, tapping certain t's and dropping others (Coggle, 1998-99: 30).

Prof. J.C. Wells singles out a very typical feature of both Estuary and Cockney – Yod-coalescence, when sounds /tj/ is replaced by /tʃ/ and /dj/ is replaced by /dʒ/ like in words: *tune, Tuesday, last year, dew, dune, did you* (Wells, 1997: 3). According to D. Rosewarne, in Estuary English the wide diphthongs sound different. Thus /aɪ/, the diphthong in words such as *price, wide, try* has a backer starting-point, thus /aɪ/ and /aʊ/, the diphthong in words such as *mouth, loud, down*, has a fronter starting-point (Wells, 1997: 3). The next phonological feature typical for Estuary English is narrower diphthongs in words such as *face, day* and *goat*, and there is no tend to have an opener starting-point, thus /aɪ/ and /aʊ/. Meanwhile, in Estuary English the weak ending *-ing* tends to be pronounced with an alveolar nasal rather than a velar nasal, thus *runnin'* (= *running*). (This is characteristic of working-class English in most parts of the English-speaking world) as well as the /t/ tends to be omitted in the words *twenty* and *plenty*, and also in *want* and *went* when followed by a vowel sound. (Unlike Americans, Estuary English speakers do not omit the /t/ in words such as *winter* or *painted*).

On the other hand, it would be reasonable to demonstrate the phonological nature of Estuary English through its being different from Cockney. Thus, the paramount phonological features of Cockney that do not occur in Estuary English are:

- the sound h-dropping in word-initial position, thus Cockney speakers pronounce 'and, 'eart, 'edge for *hand, heart, hedge*.

- the interdental th-fronting, namely use of /f/ and /v/ rather than /θ/ and /ð/ respectively. Words like *think, both, bother* are pronounced as /fɪŋk/, /boʊf/, /'bʌvə/.

- an occurrence of the monophthong /a:/ rather than a diphthong /aʊ/ in words like *mouth, loud, down*, thus they are pronounced as /ma:f, la:d, da:n/.

Conclusions. Regarding the outcome of the present study we can conclude that Estuary English is the result of the evolution of RP under the universal impact of London-based tendencies as well as various degrees of mixing between Cockney and RP. Having appeared in the estuary of the Thames, it has rapidly gained a wide geography of its spread and tremendous popularity among the representatives of all social classes of the British society. On the other hand, a quick spread of Estuary English is primarily associated with active migration of residents in South East England, as well as with significant media influence. The radical changes, sweeping modern British society, can be traced in many spheres and the media and telecommunication are the most flexible ones for the innovative transformations.

Summarizing the sociolinguistic nature of Estuary English it seems appropriate to single out the following characteristics: 1) the linguistic status of Estuary English has not been ultimately defined and the majority of linguists view it as a variant of pronunciation, that appeared in the result of modifications within the standard RP; 2) Estuary English is the result of the total democratization of the conservative British society on all its levels and on the level of the language in particular, on the one hand, while it undergoes a substantial influence of Cockney English and American pronunciation, on the other one; 3) it does not exist within the geographical boundaries it once appeared and has a tendency to spread over the remote places, manifesting its overwhelming popularity and influence with particular sociolinguistic complexity and considerable acceptability among the youth of different geographical regions and social backgrounds.

All in all, it may well be assumed that owing to tremendous sociolinguistic advancement, Estuary English may well function as a new kind of Southern regional standard or even at broad scale: it may be accepted and incorporated into the speech of the younger generation across Britain. In other words, being a variant of pronunciation at the moment, it once will diffuse into ongoing process of democratization of the language and assimilate to the generally accepted norm of pronunciation.

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