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## How native-like do you want to sound?

### A study of the pronunciation target of advanced learners of English in Flanders.<sup>1</sup>

Ellen Simon

Ghent University / Fund for Scientific Research Flanders (FWO)

#### 1. Introduction

In many European countries, including Belgium, the pronunciation model for pupils and students has traditionally been British Received Pronunciation (RP). However, with the increasing influence from American media and the emergence of what has been called Mid-Atlantic English (i.e. a form of English which is based mainly on RP but which shares many characteristics with General American, cf. e.g. Van der Haagen, 1998; Söderlund and Modiano, 2002) the usefulness and the desirability of this target pronunciation are called into question<sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, attitudes towards the norms and models to be aimed at by learners of English in general have changed. The spread of English as an international medium of communication has led to uncertainty about the model. English is less and less felt to be the unique property of native speakers; there are 'Englishes' and so the question arises as to who has the right to lay down the norms (cf. Crystal, 1999; Seidlhofer, 2001). In her book *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (2000), Jenkins argues that, in the light of the growth of English as a means

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank four lecturers of English - Beverley Collins, Jim O'Driscoll, Mieke Van Herreweghe and Heidi Verplaetse - for filling in a questionnaire (cf. 5). Because their nuanced views had to be presented in a limited space, their opinions have been necessarily simplified. Thanks are also due to all 108 second-year students of English at Ghent University, who participated in the survey (cf. 6). I am grateful to Mieke Van Herreweghe and Jim O'Driscoll for their useful suggestions and insights into the topic and to Peter Flynn, whose comments as a native speaker of English have improved the text.

<sup>2</sup> Though Estuary English has occasionally been named as a candidate to replace RP on the British Isles, Rosewarne believes it is hard "to see it taking on an international role with anything like the current prestige of RP" (Rosewarne, 1994:3). The presence of RP as a model is still prevalent in most Western-European countries.

for international communication, it is unreasonable to ask learners to acquire a native-like accent. As the majority of non-native speakers of English are going to use English in communication with other non-native speakers, there is, the argument runs, no need to take native-English pronunciation as a norm. Rather, Jenkins proposes a Lingua Franca Core of phonological features that could be used in English as an International Language (EIL). Features of native English which are difficult to pronounce by a majority of non-native learners of English (e.g. the dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/) have been omitted from the Lingua Franca Core. Though a detailed description of a core set of phonological features for EIL is new, the idea of promoting a 'simplified' form of English to be used in international communication was expressed by Quirk in 1982, who dubbed the concept 'Nuclear English'.

There also seems to be a change in attitude towards accents which are imposed 'from above' and felt to be undemocratic, snobbish, alien and which are experienced as affecting one's identity (cf. Goossens, 2000, who reports on this trend in relation to the language situation in Flanders, where, since the end of the '60s, there has been a growing disinterest in teaching and learning *Standard Dutch*).

One may therefore wonder to what extent it is still useful to ask students to sound 'native-like', i.e. to produce sounds which are produced in native (British or American) English *and* to consistently use the pronunciation model that has been offered.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate what would be a realistic pronunciation target for advanced learners of English (at university level) in Flanders. Should the students be allowed to keep their own, foreign accent in English or should they try to sound as native-like as possible? One way of answering the question is to probe into the views of teachers and learners. I have therefore asked four university lecturers who are involved in the teaching of pronunciation to fill in a questionnaire. In order to find out about students' opinions, I conducted a survey involving 108 second-year students of English at a Flemish university. The results of this study will be compared with those of Mobärg (1999, 2002).

## **2. The status of English in Flanders**

Most people in Flanders are monolingual speakers of Dutch (just as most people in Wallonia, the southern part of Belgium, are monolingual French speakers) (Goethals, 1997: 105). Brussels is an exception, as it is officially bilingual and a considerable number of people living there are bilingual Dutch-French speakers. As to the use of English, Flanders is clearly situated in the 'extending circle' in Kachru's 1988 model of the spread of English: English is not used on a daily basis at home or in public life, but it is pervasive in the media. English-spoken films are subtitled rather than dubbed (dubbing is only used in children's programmes) and advertisements often use English because of its

positive association with being young, dynamic and trendy. English is also the preferred language for pop songs and pop culture in general.

As far as the role of English in education is concerned, most Flemish secondary schools offer two to four hours of English classes to pupils from the age of 14 to 18 (Goethals, 1997: 108). English is not usually used as the medium in other courses in secondary school and by far the majority of university courses are in Dutch, although some universities offer a number of courses in English.

The considerable input of English through the media, together with the teaching of English at secondary school has led to a situation in which the level of English in Flanders is very high (especially among the younger generations).

### **3. Setting the pronunciation target**

Different factors play a role in the setting of a pronunciation target for advanced learners of English.

The first factor is intelligibility. Gimson (1989) describes the continuum of pronunciation targets which can be required from learners to range from 'minimum general intelligibility' to 'high acceptability'. The intelligibility of the average student of English studying at a Flemish university is highly acceptable. Although there may be considerable differences among students as far as pronunciation is concerned, the overall pronunciation level of the students is advanced<sup>3</sup>.

The second factor that is often taken into account in the discussion of the pronunciation target of foreign learners is identity. Because language and pronunciation in particular is such an important way of expressing one's identity, it is sometimes argued that asking students to aim for a native-like accent in a foreign language is asking them to throw away one of the main ways of expressing their own identity. Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) express it as follows:

"Pronunciation is so much a matter of self-image that students may prefer to keep their accent deliberately, in order to retain their self-respect or to gain the approval of their peers" (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994).

However, it should be kept in mind that the target group discussed in this paper is formed by students majoring in English at university level. Their aspirations as far as the mastering of English pronunciation is concerned might be very different from those of students taking English as a minor subject.

The third factor to be reckoned with is credibility, i.e. the effects foreign pronunciation may have on the interlocutor. It is known that a strong foreign accent can be judged negatively by interlocutors as a sign of decreased overall competence (cf. Duppenhaler, 1991: 33).

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<sup>3</sup> Fraser (2001: 72) defines advanced pronunciation as "pronunciation [which is] easy for a person with moderate goodwill to understand, though with a noticeable foreign accent and the occasional mispronounced word".

It is also important to note that about 35% of the Flemish students who study English at university are future teachers of English. This factor may be decisive in the setting of the pronunciation target for these students. Gimson (1989) argues:

"The foreign teacher of English constitutes a special case. He has the obligation to present his students with as faithful a model of English pronunciation as is possible" (Gimson, 1989: 317).

This is necessary, because, as Gimson (1989) argues, pupils or students will imitate the teacher's accent, no matter whether it is 'good' or 'bad' (i.e. native-like or not) and if the teacher is "using illustrative recorded material, his own pronunciation must not diverge markedly from the native model" (Gimson, 1989: 317). However, here again we may wonder to what extent attitudes have changed over the past 15 years (i.e. since the publication of the fourth edition of Gimson's book in 1989).

#### **4. How to be consistent?**

The traditional view on pronunciation targets for English students at Flemish universities is that students can choose between RP and General American (GA) as a pronunciation model, but that they should be consistent in their choice. In practice this means that, for instance, students who produce RP (or RP-like) vowels should not have a rhotic accent at the same time. It should be noted that at Ghent University the phonology book the students use in the first year describes RP sounds and that the pronunciation sessions focus on RP (Collins and Mees, 1999; Collins and Vandenberg, 2000). As a result nearly all students 'decide' to opt for RP and take their pronunciation exam in RP. However, they often have difficulty in remaining consistent and usually mix British English and American English pronunciation features. This situation seems to be current in other Western-European countries as well, as is described by, for instance, Mobärg, 1999, 2002, en Westergren-Axelsson, 2002 for Sweden and by Van der Haagen, 1998 for the Netherlands. In a detailed study of the English pronunciation of Swedish school students, Mobärg showed that "RP, the traditional school accent, is dominating, but that a substantial minority of test words (just under a third) were pronounced in GA" (Mobärg, 2002:128). The production of the BATH vowel proved to be by far the most common GA feature in the students' English. Westergren-Axelsson questions whether it is still sensible to require students to be consistent in the pronunciation model they choose:

"It is clear that a one-accent-only approach is not the best alternative for the teaching of English in Sweden today, considering the close contacts with different English-speaking cultures that Swedish young people have today" (Westergren Axelsson, 2002: 129).

Similar views are expressed by Trudgill & Hannah (1982) and Söderlund & Modiano (2002) for instance, who argue that requiring students to be consistent hinders the development of a standard Mid-Atlantic variety of English, which combines features from British and American English.

## **5. Teachers' views on pronunciation targets**

In order to see whether the traditional view on teaching pronunciation is changing, I asked two native and two non-native speakers of English who teach English pronunciation to university students what they think about the target Flemish university students of English should aim for. All four have taught phonetics and pronunciation classes for several years. I presented the lecturers with a number of questions. Their views are discussed briefly below.

When asked what they thought should be the pronunciation target of Dutch-speaking students of English in Flanders, two lecturers mentioned intelligibility to native speakers as the first criterion. The learners' pronunciation should be "easily intelligible to a native listener without causing distraction or irritation" and students are advised to "adopt phonetic features which make their pronunciation native-like". One other lecturer (a native speaker) expressed a different opinion: he believes that what counts is intelligibility to the likely interlocutors of the students (who may be native or non-native speakers of English). The lecturers report that they do not generally have problems understanding the students because of their accent, though one native speaker notes that an accumulation of numerous pronunciation errors does not infrequently lead to a breakdown in communication.

Three out of four lecturers also believe that it is desirable that students are consistent in their choice of one variety of English as their model. One other lecturer, on the other hand, believes that there is no need for students to be consistent in the model they use (as, again, their likely interlocutors are probably going to be non-native speakers), but that they should be able to exemplify a pure accent, "for the purposes of demonstration only".

The lecturers were also asked to give their opinion on the following quote taken from Porter and Garvin (1989: 8):

"By requiring someone to utter strange sounds, etc. we are making them go against deeply rooted conceptions of what is desirable, correct, acceptable, dignified, etc. The teaching of pronunciation will therefore go against the grain, and may even constitute a humiliation."

The two non-native lecturers mentioned the fact that first-year students sometimes feel awkward when they have to produce the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ (which are usually replaced by stops in Dutch Learner English). However, all lecturers seemed to agree that, if the teaching of pronunciation is an embarrassing experience for the students, it is the result of bad teaching practices only. Collins (author of Collins & Mees, 1999, 2003 and Collins & Vandenberg, 2000)

points out that an appropriate teaching approach can to a large extent prevent or mitigate any such problems of pupil humiliation in the course of pronunciation training.

Another important factor to take into account is that a considerable number of students are future teachers of English (cf. 3). If their English pronunciation in front of the class diverges too much from a native model, this might lead to humiliating experiences (as a strong foreign accent will be associated by the pupils with a decreased knowledge of the language), which could be avoided if enough attention is paid to pronunciation in school and at university.

## **6. Flemish students' views on their pronunciation of English: results of a survey**

In order to investigate the students' views on pronunciation, a survey was conducted, for which 108 second-year students of English at Ghent University (age 19-21) were asked to fill in a questionnaire. The questionnaire contained nine questions which probe the students' views on pronunciation models of English. All questions but one were multiple-choice questions and the students were asked to tick off only one answer for each question. In order to ensure maximum understanding, all questions were in Dutch.

### **6.1. Perceived influence**

The students were asked who or what in their opinion influenced their English pronunciation most. 41% of the informants thought that their lecturers at university exerted the greatest influence on their English pronunciation. The next two popular options were the English pronunciation of their teachers at secondary school and the English of pop songs and films in general, each of which were ticked off by 19% of the informants. English-language films are thus experienced as an important input source of English and in this respect, subtitling is clearly a more useful strategy than dubbing.

### **6.2. Perceptions about their own accent and preferences**

The informants were also asked which accent they thought they themselves used and which variety of English they aimed for. Five possibilities were offered: (1) a variety which comes close to RP, (2) a regional variety of British English, (3) a variety which comes close to General American, (4) a regional variety of American English and (5) another variety. 89 of 105 students (i.e. 85%) thought they spoke a variety which comes close to RP and only eight students thought their English came close to General American. When asked which variety the students aimed for, the results were very similar: 101 of 107 students aim for a variety of English which comes close to RP. Only four informants preferred to have a General American pronunciation. The reasons most frequently given

by the informants for their preference for British English were that it sounds nicer, that it is the model used at university and that it is the most prestigious variety.

### **6.3. Perceived importance**

Two questions probed into how important the informants thought pronunciation was and why. In one of these questions the informants were asked to what extent they thought it was important for themselves to master the pronunciation of English. As a point of reference, the same question was asked with respect to the mastering of English grammar. The results for pronunciation and grammar appeared to be very close to each other: almost half of the informants thought it was 'very important' for them to master English pronunciation and grammar. The other half of the informants thought it was 'important'. Only a handful of students thought pronunciation and grammar were 'not so important' and none of the students thought they were 'not important at all'. When asked for the reason why they thought it was important for them to have (a) good ("native-like but, of course, not necessarily perfect") pronunciation of English, the most popular answer was that they felt it was their duty as students of English to master the English language as well as possible. The second favourite option was that English pronunciation is beautiful. It is remarkable that the two most frequently chosen reasons for striving for correct/native-like pronunciation are non-functional. I think two factors might explain these results.

Firstly, the English pronunciation of the informants is already very good, in the sense that - especially in conversations between non-native speakers - pronunciation is hardly ever the cause of communication problems.

Secondly, the fact that almost half of the informants think that it is their duty as students majoring in English to have native-like pronunciation can be explained through the language situation in Flanders. As the level of English among many young people in Flanders who are not students of English is very high (cf. 2), native-like pronunciation is one of the ways in which the informants can distinguish themselves as 'experts' of English.

### **6.4. The teaching of pronunciation**

Two questions dealt with the accent taught at school and university.

Almost all informants reported that the variety of English which was offered to them as the pronunciation model in secondary school was British English. Only two informants said that American English was offered to them.

The students were also asked to what extent they thought British English and American English were offered to them at university. They were asked to indicate the proportion between the different models in percentages. 78% of the informants indicated that between 80% and 100% of the English offered to them at university was British English. American English was thought to be offered to a more limited extent. Most informants thought that American English was presented between 10% and 30% of the time.

The students thus clearly have the impression that British English takes up a much larger space than American English both in secondary school and at university.

## 7. Conclusions

The main finding from the questionnaire filled in by the students is that 96% of them think it is important for them to have a native-like pronunciation of English. As a native-like pronunciation is what these students aim for, the opportunity to work towards this goal should not be denied to them. Jenkins notes that "there will always be learners of English who want or need to sound as 'native-like' as possible", but that "because of the international status of English, this group is not large" (Jenkins, 2000: 161). The students of English questioned in my survey apparently belong to this small group. As the level of English of people in Flanders is generally very high, students who graduate in English are expected to have an even better command of the language and their pronunciation offers them one way of demonstrating this.

Another finding was that Flemish students of English appear to be very RP-oriented. The fact that RP, rather than General American, is promoted at secondary schools and university apparently exerts a great influence. A survey conducted by Mobärg involving Swedish school students showed that among these students certain groups had a clear preference for General American (Mobärg, 1999). The difference between the attitudes of these Swedish students and those of the Flemish students could be due to the fact that the informants in Mobärg's study are all younger, secondary school pupils and are perhaps more influenced by the American media, while the Flemish informants are older and study English at university level. Another factor to be taken into account is that in a survey of the type I conducted the covert prestige which American English might have is perhaps not going to crop up (cf. Botterman, 1995). In other words, the Flemish students may have simply opted for the variant which still has 'overt' prestige and is perceived to be 'the norm' in their educational system. A matched-guise test conducted by Van der Haagen showed that Dutch secondary school pupils perceive Americans as being "statusful, dynamic and likeable people *who do not speak the norm*", while Britons are "statusful but not dynamic, less likeable than Americans but *speaking the norm variety*" (Van der Haagen, 1998: 76 - my italics). The perception of RP as the norm variety is clearly still very strong in the Netherlands and in Flanders.

Finally, it appeared that the lecturers' expectations about the pronunciation target match those of the students. Three out of four lecturers and 96% of the students believe that the aim should



be to achieve native-like pronunciation in English. This is of course not surprising, as the students' views are influenced by the lecturers' expectations and vice versa. Moreover, 94% of the students aim at a variety of English which comes close to RP, so that there does not seem to be any reason to change the tradition that maintains RP as a model, though other varieties should of course be allowed and students should be aware of the fact that RP is only one of a large number of possible models.

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