

Week 9. Comparing pronunciation differences

Can we have a typology of English accents? There are two general ways of approaching the classification of differences between accents:

- structuralist (system-oriented), and
- historical/generativist (rule-oriented).

1. Structuralist. First codified by Trubetzkoy 1931 (Phonologie et géographie linguistique. *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* 4.228-234).

1.1 Systemic (= phonological) differences: the phonemic inventory.

e.g. size and nature of vowel system; presence/absence of oppositions /ʊ - ʌ/, /ɔ: - ɒ/, /eɪ - e:/
— also 'subsystemic' (in some specified environment only) e.g. vowels before /r/

1.2 Phonetic (= realizational, allophonic) differences: details of articulation

e.g. (non-)aspiration of /p t k/; type of /r/ used; quality of DRESS vowel

1.3 Distributional ('etymological') differences: which phonemes in which words?

e.g. /i: - e/ in *zebra*, /æ - a:/ in *graph*, /s - z/ in *transition*, stress placement in *controversy*
— usefully divided into two kinds,

1.3.1 **phonotactic** (structural): restrictions on particular phonemes

e.g. (non)rhoticity: environments for /r/; (im)possibility of /hw/

1.3.2 **lexicophonetic** (selectional, incidental): particular lexical items

e.g. /f - v/ in *nephew*, /aɪ - i:/ in (n)*either*, /æ - a:/ in BATH

Disadvantage: this approach depends on the phoneme theory and shares its shortcomings: e.g. problems over neutralization (*happy*), indeterminacy (l-vocalization), items marginal to systems (/x/), no place for rules (t-to-r; details of assimilation).

2. Historical/generativist. Compares the historical sound-changes which the accents in question have undergone, or the synchronic rules they operate now. (It is sometimes hard to distinguish the diachronic from the synchronic.)

2.1. One accent has a rule (= has adopted a sound-change), another not.

e.g. r-dropping; g-deletion; split of M.E. short /u/ (FOOT-STRUT); t-voicing; diphthong shift

2.2. Details of a rule (especially, of its environment) differ in different accents.

e.g. yod dropping; preglottalization; smoothing

Disadvantages:

- tends to confuse diachrony and synchrony;
- no place to describe lexical transfers.

Read: *Accents of English* 1.3 (p. 72-93, How accents differ), 2.3 (p. 168-183, Systems; a typology).