W(h)ither the /r/ in Britain?

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Weighing up a new style of pronunciation

Introduction

In sound recordings of British English from the first part of the last century we can hear some speakers whose pronunciation of the letter r, in words such as *ring*, *bread* and *around*, sounded just like a /w/. We know, too, from literary texts, that it goes back further.[1] This article is about another, newer, pronunciation of /r/ in British English, close to /w/, but distinct from it, that has increased in frequency and prominence in the last decade. In it, the lips are less pursed than for a /w/ and you sense there is less muscular tension than for what we might call the 'traditional' /r/ of speakers of standard English. In ambiguous contexts it could still cause confusion, as between *real* and *wheel*, or *crack* and *quack*. It may occur less in Scottish, Welsh and Irish accents than in ones from England.

There have been studies of this pronunciation going back to the 1970s. A recent work, *The Handbook of Clinical Linguistics* (Ball *et al.*, 2008), refers to such studies, such as those of Trudgill (1974, 1988, 1999), and describes the development of the phenomenon and the changes in attitudes towards it. The authors note (37.6.3) the descriptions of this pronunciation as a 'labio-dental approximant' or 'hypolingual /r/' (neither of which seems to me very helpful). They also observe that, whereas in the last century, up to about 1990, this 'w-for-r' might have been professionally assessed as a speech defect in British adults and as needing treatment, nowadays its greater frequency has made it less remarkable.

As often, when the topic is pronunciation, explaining things in writing has its obvious drawbacks. If, then, you are still unsure of the sound I mean, I doubt it would help if I tried to define it further. The best thing, clearly, is to hear it. For that, if you have access to the BBC television news, you will find plenty of examples. Nearly half the newsreaders and reporters have it, and practically all the weather-forecasters. It is easily spotted. There is evidence, such as that cited by the authors mentioned above, that this way of pronouncing /r/ was rare in Britain in the 1970s, was present in a significant minority by the last decade of the century, and is now a substantial feature of British pronunciation, though still a minority one. My own view of its development comes mainly from memory, but I tried to verify that impression by listening to about three hours of recordings of television and radio programmes, particularly news broadcasts, from the 1970s and 1980s, involving numerous speakers. You can find examples on the BBC's archive web sites. Although the 'w-for-r' I have described here was not completely absent, the proportion of speakers who had it was much lower than you would find nowadays from similar programmes.

Origins, ambiguity and aesthetics

Where has the increase in this pronunciation come from? As far as I know, there has never been a movement in the opposite direction, that is to say,

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that no one has ever pronounced the letter w so that it sounds similar to /r/, making *twice* sound like *trice*, for example. This is probably to do with the greater ease of movement from the initial position of the traditional /r/ to that of a /w/-like sound than the reverse. As for non-phonetic influences, one possibility that springs to mind is children's television. The 'w-for-r' is a common feature of young children's speech and in children's television in Britain about 25 years ago the adult presenters began to be less paternalistic, seeking instead to ingratiate themselves with their audience. Whether it was done deliberately or not, the 'w-for-r' seems to have been part of that process. If, then, some children took the presenters as models to imitate, that may partly explain why the pronunciation is found nowadays more often in young adults than in the over-40s. As a random check, while I was planning this article, I switched on a children's television programme and found the presenter saying 'Ask a grown-up' and 'That's right' in such a way that *grown* sounded like the non-word **gwown* and *right* like the real word *white* (BBC2, 'I can cook', 27 September 2012).

You might think this pronunciation would cause confusion, yet it seldom does. Once you are aware someone has it, your ears adapt and you are instinctively prevented from thinking the speaker is going to whisk it rather than risk it. The only example of ambiguity I can recall was in a weather-forecast, when it was announced there would be rain (no problem realising it wouldn't be Wayne) in the west – or was it the rest? – of England. Is there anything more to say, then, about this development in British English pronunciation other than to report its existence? I think there is, but it means treating the issue from an aesthetic viewpoint. Such an approach may not find favour with everyone, particularly those many linguistics professionals who, while accepting that aesthetic judgements may be made about language as literature, think they have no part in the study of language *per se*. I do not take that stance. Language is, among other things, an aesthetic medium some of the developments in which have been influenced by considerations of taste. I would say, then, that if you exclude its aesthetic aspect, you are not being objective about language, but are misrepresenting it.

This reminds me of a television programme, 'Think of England – Yo! Mrs Askew', made by the novelist, Howard Jacobson, for the BBC in 1991, about the state of the English language. At one point, he sat in on an English lesson with a class of 11-year-olds. The teacher, having asked the pupils about different styles of speech, rounded things off with the officially recommended viewpoint: that everyone's individual language is equally valid. As she put it, 'If we think one person's speech is better than another's, we are making a kind of impossible aesthetic judgement.' Addressing the viewer afterwards, Jacobson disagreed, saying '... aesthetic judgements cannot be wished away. We are aesthetes or we are nothing.' I go along with Jacobson.

Linguistic uncertainty

I suggested, above, a comparison of literary criticism and linguistics. In the former, the critic might, for example, present an analysis of the structure of a poem and although that, in itself, will be purely factual, it will normally be integrated into a judgement of the poem's literary quality. In language study, it depends on the topic. In many cases, there will be no judgements that could be made and you need do no more than present the facts. Yet, in a study of words as communication, rather than as objects, you should not give the impression that the facts are autonomous. Language as communication, whether a lyric poem or an order for a pizza takeaway, is not a natural phenomenon. It is created by humans, with all their subjective individuality. Even a development such as the great English vowel shift, that began in the 14th century and went on to the 17th, should not be discussed as if it were something that happened of its own accord. It will have begun with some people starting to speak in a certain way and others imitating them. Nothing about it was naturally inevitable.

Language, then, is something that we do and about which we can make decisions. It is legitimate, therefore, to treat the 'w-for-r' pronunciation in that way: not as something that is happening, but as something some people are doing. We can ask, then, how they should feel about it, whether they would think their speech would be better, or worse, if they had a 'traditional' /r/ instead. I hope that doesn't sound too shocking for a language journal.

How might it change?

We see fashions in pronunciation come and go and it is not always clear what the influences are. In the early 1970s, for example, some Britons in the public eye began pronouncing *involve* as if it were spelled *invove*. It caught on for a while, but is now not heard at all. Something similar seems to

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have happened with upspeak, the style of pronunciation where an assertion ends with a rising intonation in a similar way to that of a question. Some people find it irritating for that reason. A discussion of upspeak in Britain can be found in Barbara Bradford's article 'Upspeak in British English' (Bradford, 1997), in which she casts doubt on the popular theory that its increased use by Britons in the 1990s was due to certain Australian television soap operas. Nowadays, you find upspeak regularly discussed in the mass media, and it is not unusual to find it mocked, as in the newspaper article 'Does speaking like an Aussie make you sound insecure?' (*The Guardian*, 14 January, 2014). My impression is that upspeak has declined in the last ten years in Britain and, if I am right, that may have been partly due to the ridicule to which it has been subjected.

If, then, the pronunciation of the letter r in words like *ring*, *bread* and *around* became a public talking-point, as has happened with upspeak, that very publicity could be one of the influences that decided how it developed: whether it increased, died out or changed in some way. In such a discussion, I would certainly speak against it. Whatever brought it about, I find it an unwelcome addition to the general sound of British English. On a purely phonetic level, it has narrowed the distinction between two phonemes and it is hard to see how that change could provoke a further shift to restore the spacing, so to speak.

Another comparison we could make is with the fate of the old-fashioned British English RP pronunciation of the vowel in *bat*, represented phonetically as [æ]. One disadvantage of it was that it was close to the vowel of *bet*. It was a pronunciation that flourished in the middle half of the 20th century, but began to fall away from the 1970s onwards. Nor was it, by any means, the general British version of that phoneme at that time. Contemporary with it was a pronunciation, found among many Britons, that was similar to the first vowel in the Italian *amico* (phonetic symbol [a]). That pronunciation is now treated as the standard British English one by the Oxford English Dictionary for what it calls the 'TRAP vowel' (3rd Edition, in progress online since 1990). An explanation of this change of approach by the OED can be found in the article '[hat], [hæt] and all that' by Weiner & Upton (2000). What, then, led to the near extinction of the [æ] pronunciation in British English? Perhaps it was not only the potential confusion between pairs of words like *bat* and *bet*, but also because it became tainted by its association with a pretentious imitation of upper-class speech, so that it was abandoned even by those who might, by their social position, have been expected to continue it.

A childish sound?

Could, then, the 'w-for-r' fall out of favour similarly for social reasons? If so, it might be from its association with childish speech. This is not to say there is anything intrinsically childish about the normal /w/ sound, as in *wing*. We do not say that *wing* sounds childish and *ring*, pronounced in the standard way, does not. It is a question of context, of hearing a /w/, or something very similar to one, in the wrong place. Before the arrival of this new pronunciation, the substitution of /w/ for /r/ by very young children was regarded as normal, even charming, but as something they were expected to grow out of, though a few retained it into adulthood. In its adult form it was also thought typical of foppish aristocratic young men.

One must suppose that those who have the 'w-for-r' do not hear themselves as speaking childishly. That, though, is how they sound to many others, including me, and in some contexts it can seem particularly out of place. To give an example, there was an item on the BBC television news in July 2012 about a police officer who had been shot dead in the line of duty. The news reporter, a young woman, told viewers that the Chief Constable of the county had read out a tribute to the officer's bravery. If I had had to explain how the reporter had spoken, I might have been tempted simply to write '... wed out a twibute to his bwavewy.' At the time, that pronunciation struck me as infantile and as demeaning the topic. Could this idea, then, that the 'w-for-r' is not a grown-up way to speak, become persuasive?

At this point, it may be worth asking whether the pronunciation of /r/ exactly as or similar to /w/ could, with some people, come from physiological causes. That might be the case. I do not know. But, if so, you would expect the distribution to be fairly constant worldwide. There are other languages that have a similar contrast of sounds, where this approximation of /r/ to /w/ is found in few speakers. The same can be said of some other varieties of English throughout the world. In American English, for example, the 'w-for-r' is rare and can be happily ridiculed, as in the Bugs Bunny cartoon, *Kill the Wabbit*. It seems improbable, then, that if there were a physiological cause it would affect a larger proportion of people in Britain than in other countries.

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Making it public

What exactly am I proposing here? That British youngsters should be dissuaded from adopting the 'w-for-r'? That those who have it should be pressed to drop it and given remedial elocution lessons? That it should be banned from the airwaves? Nothing like that, really. I am just suggesting that the topic should be brought into the public arena, as has happened with upspeak, so that people may decide for themselves. You can, as I have said, make decisions about your language, but until you know what the choices are, you can't really decide. In such a publicising of the issue, personalities in the public eye who had or had not the 'w-for-r' could be pointed out to see which pronunciation people preferred. I myself would certainly be interested to know how far my feelings were already shared and how those who had been unaware of the issue would react.

Can people deliberately adapt their pronunciation? Yes, of course. In some cases, the change is permanent and the new version becomes second nature. In others, it may be temporary for the occasion, as between a regional accent and the standard form of the language. It might be useful for someone to add the standard form to their repertoire, but the issue here is not one of wholesale replacement. You wouldn't suggest that someone who already spoke English well with a Lancashire accent should replace it with a Devonian one. The 'w-for-r' is not part of any particular accent, but a feature of some speakers in many varieties. Should one suggest to people, then, how they should pronounce certain words? I don't see why not. I myself was persuaded to change my pronunciation of the vowel in words like *world* and am glad I did. If you count language as a social activity, it seems reasonable to want to influence the way others practise it, as you might their politics or the way they prepare food.

Prescriptivism

Usage is usually thought of as referring to vocabulary and grammar, but it can include pronunciation, too. As I have been expressing a preference here about pronunciation, some readers, as I hinted earlier, may accuse me of 'prescriptivism'. This is a concept deriving from the view, widely held in professional linguistic circles, that usage is not open to judgement. Some writers even condemn those they see as 'prescriptivists' on social grounds, suggesting there can be a tyranny of the 'well-spoken'. James Milroy and Lesley Milroy (1999: 1.1), referring to linguistic habits they say those in authority stigmatise as faults, write that '... political power favouring certain élite groups is exercised in part through these shibboleths'. Would I be guilty, then, of that sort of 'prescriptivism', if my deprecation of the 'w-for-r' pronunciation were to arouse prejudice against those who had it? Perhaps so, but it would mean that, if the anti-prescriptivists were right, an ideal world would have to be one in which not even an opinion about some linguistic usage would be expressed, let alone an argument for or against one. That would make language exceptional among the things we do. I would rather say it was the anti-prescriptivists who would be guilty of paternalism, if they thought people should remain ignorant of the choice of usage I have proposed here.

What cannot be disputed is that there are different attitudes towards language. Some people seem to want to be good users of it, others seem not to care, and I would even go so far as to say that a few want to use it badly. We may disagree whether some particular usage is better than another, or whether such judgements can be made at all, and there may seem to be no objective criteria to decide it, but that does not invalidate the wish to use language well, any more than ethical uncertainty invalidates the wish to act virtuously. How, then, to regard those attitudes towards language? One way would be to remain neutral; another, to take sides. I side with the first of the above three groups and am unashamed about wanting to make it the largest. Wishing to speak well and write well and encouraging others to have that attitude need not imply any prejudice against those whose practices differ from one's own. Good usage is not to be imposed, but interpreted by the well informed.

The dangers of objectivity

Many linguistics professionals reject the concept of responsibility towards one's language, as if whatever you said or wrote, while perhaps affecting other things, could not affect the quality of language itself. Their assertion would be that language was qualitatively neutral, like some natural phenomenon. It is a conclusion that I think has been mistakenly arrived at from the idea that linguistics should be regarded as a science. As the authors of *Authority in Language* put it, '... scholars usually take the view that linguistics is a *descriptive* 'science' which has no place for value judgements' (Milroy & Milroy, 1999, 1.3). When writers on language claim to be presenting an accurate view of some topic, we certainly hope they are being

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disinterested and not cherry-picking facts that support a personal preference. If, however, they see themselves as scientists, they may conclude that they must deny themselves, as individuals, any preferences when it comes to linguistic usage. This, I think, would be a mistake, and might even be a harmful one, if it resulted in a distorted view of language. It, at least, raises some contradictions, as when authors will try to write well in order to persuade their readers there are no differences of quality in language use.

It seems to me more accurate to regard the language around us as man-made. That being so, we are justified in evaluating it. Indeed, whereas there are certain aspects of the man-made environment on which we may feel we can have little effect, we all contribute to the linguistic part of it. That is where a sense of responsibility to the language may come in. I do not, of course, mean that we should be primly on our best linguistic behaviour all the time or forever judging what we hear and read for its style; simply, that we should be aware that our language is what we have made it.

The academic study of language, then, should be not be conducted as a natural science, but more as a humanity, like history. In writing here about what I have called the 'w-for-r' pronunciation, I could have just presented the facts and stopped there. The topic is such, however, that it would have been unrealistic of me to have imagined that readers would go no further and make no judgements. It would be as if a historian, having written an objective account of the abolition of slavery, were to think the readers of it would not have any opinion on the moral aspect of the topic. It is rare simply to accept that something is done. We naturally have a reaction towards people's behaviour – approval, disapproval, admiration, dislike – and those reactions influence our own behaviour in turn. It is like that with language: our experience of language today makes it what it is tomorrow. In this article, I went beyond the facts, as a reader might, and gave my reasons for judging the increase of 'w-for-r' in British English speech to be an undesirable development.

Do the foregoing remarks mean, then, that I am encouraging those linguistics professionals who see themselves as scientists to change their way of writing and make it more personal? No, that is not it at all. The objectivity that is an ideal of science is also a virtue in the humanities. My suggestion is, rather, that they should change their view of their subject. The principle of objectivity in the treatment of it need not be affected. When, however, the subject-matter lends itself to it, there is nothing wrong in principle if authors offer reasoned judgements, including aesthetic ones. We want linguistics to give us the facts and explanations of them. For that, objectivity is essential and, in many cases, will be sufficient and correct, but that objectivity must always be tempered by the knowledge that the topic, language itself, is not neutral.

Note

1 In *Pickwick Papers*, for example, Charles Dickens has Lord Mutanhead saying '... it's the newest, pwettiest, gwacefullest thing that ever wan upon wheels—painted wed, with a cweam piebald.' 1838. Vol. 2, Ch. 35.

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