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**THE IMPACT OF CURRENT TRENDS IN BRITISH SOCIETY ON THE PHONOSTYLISTICAL PECULIARITIES OF THE MEDIA DISCOURSE**

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# INTRODUCTION

In the light of the current sociopolitical situation in Great Britain, the state that finds itself in the process of finalising BREXIT, a country led by the Conservative Party, there is a noticeable change in the common perception of Received Pronunciation (RP)[[1]](#footnote-1) and its contemporary varieties, predominantly among those of opposing political opinions. The given phenomenon is supported by the negative connotation of a word ‘posh’, which in many ways not only characterises the social status of those who currently rule the country, but also is commonly associated with the accent they speak.

 RP was indeed praised in the previous century, some even aspired to acquire it for career purposes. It was commonly spoken by BBC broadcasters and admired by many for its understandability and sophistication. Nevertheless, in the given circumstances, speaking with a previously admired and universally acclaimed Received pronunciation, also commonly referred to as “The Queen’s English” (all strongly associated with ‘poshness’) can be much less beneficial than assumed by English language learners.

The aim of this study is to analyse the contemporary media discourse in terms of its phonostylistical peculiarities and identify the deviation from RP canons. Consequently, the research questions are:

1. Are the regional accent-speaking newsreaders and reporters represented in contemporary media industry in Great Britain?
2. If so, how significant is the deviation from RP standards in their discourse?
3. Do the regional accent-speaking newsreaders and reporters tend to ‘soften’ their accents within the more conventional environment?

The hypothesis is the following: there is a phenomenon of a ‘preference shift’ in terms of accent democratisation, which was strongly influenced by the common disdain towards the Conservative party’s opinions and political moves. Hence, the new generation of broadcasters and newsreaders are expected to embody more regional accents, which was previously considered to be ‘inappropriate’ within media institutions such as BBC.

The paper consists of two main parts: the first part, theoretical one, is concerned with the analysis of existing literature on the given matter, including the subjects of sociolinguistics, accents, political, socio-cultural setting in Great Britain, historic contexts as well as discourse competences; the second part – a practical one, where methods and results are described. The method is a phonetic analysis of the two transcribed speeches taken as examples of contemporary media discourse: one – extracted from BBC Breakfast; the other one – from YouTube, defining a less formal environment. In both cases, the same speaker is analysed. The analysis is visualised in two tables. The results are then discussed and followed by the conclusion that is based on the obtained data.

# Part 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

## **The essence of Sociolinguistics**

### **1.1.1 Accents and dialects from the Sociolinguistic point of view**

In a broad sense, sociolinguistics is concerned with language in terms of its social significance, language patterns development within the society; how the latter influences the former, consequently. As a matter of fact, why and how language changes are the questions that lie within the core of sociolinguistics, hence demanding an in-depth diachronic research in regard to language patterns in different societies as well as synchronic research concerning the current state of affairs.

As a descriptive study, it is quite commonly associated with anthropology and pragmatics, pointing out the demand for a particularly complex approach. Interestingly, as mentioned by R.A. Hudson in *Sociolinguistics (1980)*, a significant increase in interest towards sociolinguistics in terms of both “nature of language and nature of society” that considerably affected its growth, began in the 1960s. What is more, according to Hudson, sociolinguistics is indeed of particular interest to those who see and recognise its practicality rather than those who simply aim to understand the theory of language. Hudson also covers the overlap between linguistics and sociolinguistics explaining the difference between the two main perspectives on how those two interact. According to his evaluation, the ‘structural’ school of linguistics, which has been seen as the dominant one in the twentieth century, prioritises the prior familiarization with ‘language X’ in terms of its rules, only after which its relationship with the society may be identified and studied. On the other hand, one might also see language through its social significance perspective, thus, arguing that linguistics is essentially nothing without the reference to the social behaviours. According to this view, ‘language X’ itself cannot be identified without the social context it belongs to (Hudson, 1980). That does to a great extent resemble the nowadays’ growing appreciation of interdisciplinarity.

When it comes to accents and dialects in terms of sociolinguistics, both have very particular definitions. In *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2015), 9th edition, “accent” is defined as *“a way of pronouncing the words of a language that shows which country, area, or social class a person comes from”.* Accents typically have several distinctive features, among which are: quality of voice, distinction of vowels and consonants, pronunciation, prosody, stress (Crystal, 2008). “Dialect”, however, stands for a broader set of linguistic peculiarities, including vocabulary, grammar etc. Consequently, the main focus of the given paper will be on accents.

### **1.1.2 Factors that influence accents**

William Labov was one of the pioneers in Western Sociolinguistics. He is widely known for introducing social class as one of the most profound realms in terms of applied linguistics. That was accomplished by applying to Joseph Kahl’s US social stratification definition, which originally presented several universal class categories: upper class, upper middle class, lower middle class, working class and lower class (Kahl, 1957). As later pointed out by David Block in the article *Social Class in Applied Linguistics* (2015), Labov’s ground-breaking research has been followed by many scholars globally ever since.

In terms of accents, Labov’s 1961 MA research on Martha’s Vineyard[[2]](#footnote-2) discourse peculiarities contributed greatly to linking pronunciation shifts to social identities, marking insider/outsider boundaries within communities. In the given case, the difference between how locals and tourists tend to pronounce different vowels was pointed out by Labov (Block, 2014).

In the Volume 2 of his *Principles of Linguistic Change: Social Factors*, Labov explores the social motivation behind linguistic development. From the author’s point of view, when it comes to linguistic change, of particular importance are social class, neighborhood, ethnicity and gender (Labov, 2001). What is more, in *Social Stratification of English in New York City* he emphasises the importance of social aspirations in regard to influencing one’s speech patterns. As an example, he points out the ‘profound insecurity’ common for the lower middle class American English speakers, which resulted in their striving to ‘sound’ above their class when tested (Labov, 1966). His qualitative research contributed greatly to applied linguistics studies.

*“For a working-class New Yorker, the social significance of the speech forms that he uses, in so far as they contain the variables in question, is that they are not the forms used by middle class speakers, and not the forms used by upper-middle class speakers. The existence of these contrasting units within the system presupposes the acquaintance of speakers with the habits of other speakers. Without necessarily making any conscious choice, he identifies himself in every utterance by distinguishing himself from other speakers who use contrasting forms.”*

 (Labov, 1966)

The above-mentioned quotation by William Labov was also mentioned by David Block in *Social Class in Applied Linguistics* (2014), the author whose contribution I’ve already touched upon earlier in the given section. He managed to redefine social class from the linguistic point of view, reintroducing it as something even more instrumental than race, ethnicity, nationality, gender etc.:

*“Is it even possible to develop a thorough understanding of the apparent choices made by people with regard to speaking one language or another, or speaking one variety or another, without acknowledging and exploring how ongoing communication is always enmeshed in the material existences of those making these choices?”*

(Block, 2015)

David Block also refers to Ben Rampton’s *Language in Late Modernity* (2006), agreeing with his opinion on the presence of social-class boundaries in accent variations. Having studied London secondary school students’ everyday communicative activity, Rampton came to the following conclusion: when exaggerating both “Cockney” and “posh English”, they did so to impersonate working class and upper-middle class speakers, accordingly. That does, to a great extent, demonstrate a certain degree of sociocultural awareness. Interestingly, as mentioned by Block himself, those students generally spoke “Multicultural London English”, later defined by Cheshire, Kerswill, Fox and Torgersen in *Contact, the feature pool and the speech community: The emergence of Multicultural London English* (2011).

*“For Rampton, the students performed Cockney (and mock Cockney) to convey working-class youth subjectivities, and they used mock posh to voice the other, as something akin to an anonymous middle or upper class...”*

(Block, 2015)

Among Labov’s most well-known followers in Great Britain, there is Peter Trudgill. In *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society* (1983), he stated: “As society is reflected in language in this way, social change can produce a corresponding linguistic change”. It is important to note that Trudgill’s long-term research activity covers the linguistic change in the English language, in regard to the British variations, in particular (see section 1.2.4).

## **1.2 Sociolinguistic analysis of a contemporary British society**

### **1.2.1 Political factors**

The current state of affairs in British politics can be straightforwardly defined by one significant event. At the time of this paper being written, as of the beginning of 2020, the Conservatives (Tori) remain the leading political party, most significant when it comes to making decisions regarding the future of Great Britain. Having gained the majority of seats in the Parliament after 2019 United Kingdom general elections (12 December 2019), they proceeded to implement the Brexit strategy, previously supported in a referendum held on 23 June 2016, when the majority of voters chose to leave the European Union. Boris Johnson indeed kept his promise to ‘get Brexit done’ by 31 January 2020. (Walker, 2020)

The decision to leave the European Union was shaped under the influence of the given factors also referred to as the causes of the vote in favour of Brexit:

* The desire to reclaim the status of a self-governing nation
* The immigration crisis

Analysing the given reasons does help with understanding the core issues that currently bother the people of Great Britain. To begin with, when it comes to understanding Brexit, and how the idea managed to divide a whole country into two massively opinionated sides, commonly referred to as “leavers” and “remainers”, it is essential to consider the globalization phenomenon. In his 2016 TED talk Alexander Bett argues that the “fault line of contemporary politics is between those that embrace globalisation and those that fear globalisation”. That being said, Brexit is commonly seen as a way of ‘escaping’ the phenomenon due to being simply intimidated by its democratic tendencies. Though the statement may seem overly emotional, it does, to a great extent, depict those of remainers. A common belief is that Tories (The Conservative Party, pro-Brexit voters, Brexiteers) and, most importantly, their actions mainly stem from anti-globalisation and anti-democratisation opinions, while those in favour of remaining a part of the EU, Labourists (Labour Party, anti-Brexit voters, anti-Brexiteers), rely on liberal tendencies of a “globalizing” society. Those do include such substantial social matters as supporting LGBTQ+ community, Women’s rights, Racial and Faith diversity etc.

When it comes to defining the Conservatives, understanding who they are and how their opinions have been shaped through their endeavours, one of the most significant points lies within education.

### **1.2.2 Socio-cultural factors**

The author I’d like to mention is Robert Verkaik*.* In the book *Posh boys: How the English Public Schools Ruin Britain* (2018), he describes Britain’s peculiar sociocultural experience, the way public schooling to this day defines what we may put as “privilege” and “poshness” and, most importantly, the way that schools’ upbringing “nourishes” the Conservative political elite. Calling such politicians as David Cameron and Boris Johnson " insiders and products of the establishment”, Verkaik studies how those institutions contribute to the country’s imperial history, social and economic inequality, and how social immobility is one of the reasons Britain finds itself on the edge of a massive political crisis.

In terms of British education system, as pointed out by Alan Weedon in his article *Brexit is indebted to Boris Johnson and David Cameron's former schools — here's why, “*refers to the independent boarding schools that stretch back centuries — home to global royalty, and the offspring of political and business leaders”.

According to Verkaik, schools like Eton provided a very particular perspective on the history of Great Britain and its imperial significance:

*"There was a direct link between the schools, the government, and the Empire."*

(Verkaik, 2018)

Consequently, the conclusion shall be the following: such educational institutions as Eton, Oxford and Cambridge do contribute to raising generations of the conservatives due to their “traditional” approach to education and morality, and there are several means of doing so that can and should be defined to enhance the overall understanding of a current socio-cultural climate in Great Britain. However, of particular interest for the given paper is that the students of the aforementioned institutions are, in fact, most commonly referred to as “posh”.

To begin with, the word “posh” itself, which is often used to describe the way one speaks, in its broadest meaning defines those born into privilege, class, therefore, pretentious and of particular mannerism. Essentially, the word is mainly used by working class people, predominantly with derogatory meaning and towards people, things and events linked to the privilege.

 Defining “Poshness” in terms of sociolinguistics as well as phonetics is crucial. When it comes to the word’s etymology, there are a few significantly different points of view in regard to its origin.

One of the most popular theories, though unfortunately only supported by anecdotal evidence, is in POSH being an acronym for “*Port Out, Starboard Home*”, reportedly written on the wealthy passengers’ ship tickets (travelling between England and India), indicating “the most desirable cabins”, which provided shelter from the sun. Due to the peculiarity of the journey itself, such cabins were on a port side when going to India and on the starboard side when going back to England. It was even suggested that the companies would print P.O.S.H. on the tickets linked to the aforementioned privilege, though, as it was already mentioned, there is no direct evidence to support the theory whatsoever. The myth was debunked in the video provided by *OxfordDictionaries.com*.

Another theory claims that there are two possible origins: coming from “posh” in the sense of money as a noun or posh in the sense of “dandy”. It is also of great possibility that both of those are true. The closest to its contemporary meaning, *smart, stylish,* the word “posh” was first recorded  in The British army from within (1914), by the British author Charles Henry Cannell (1882-1947), writing under the pseudonym of Evelyn Charles Henry Vivian (Tréguer, 2016). It was used in the collocation with “clothing”.

In his article *The Probable Origin of the Word “Posh”,* Pascal Tréguer mentions *Adventures of a Despatch Rider* (1915) by William Henry Lowe Watson who, presumably, was the first to use the noun “posh” in regard to “affected upper class behaviour or language”:

***“Posh may be defined, very roughly, as a useless striving after gentlemanly culture.*** *Sometimes a chauffeur or an H.Q. clerk would endeavour to speak very correct English in front of Spot.”*

(Watson, 1915)

In the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2015)*, 9th edition, one of the definitions of the informal adjective “posh” is “*typical of or used by people who belong to high social class”*. What is more, it is marked as “*sometimes disapproving*” – at times used in a negative connotation. One of the examples of a word usage mentioned in the dictionary is *a posh accent/voice*.

In terms of British English phonetics, the word “posh” refers to how much of an upper class one sounds. It is commonly associated with Received Pronunciation (RP), also known as “Public School Pronunciation” (Jones, 1917). Cambridge *English Pronouncing Dictionary* uses the collocation «BBC Pronunciation» when referring to RP. What is more, RP is sometimes called “Oxford English” and “Queen’s English”. Therefore, we have several dimensions, in which “poshness” (in terms of speech) can be identified through common associations. Those are: public school education, Oxford and Cambridge University education, Royal family and 20th century BBC broadcasting.

Considering the aforementioned facts, it still is rather difficult to predict the future of “poshness” and its connotation, though the cultural and social background of the term in a way “dictates” the occurrence of conflicts. As of 2020, the given political setting in Great Britain has intensified the sociocultural clash within the society. The conflicts in that case are based on sociopolitical issues, though affect the way speech and manners are perceived regardless. It does, to some extent, demonstrate that the liberal society is shifting towards becoming more biased when it comes to one being or even sounding “posh”.

The common dissatisfaction with “poshness” in speech was sustained by the cultural shift in the late 20th century, when a linguistic monoculture (RP dominance) was replaced by linguistic multiculture, meaning more accent varieties were suddenly introduced and “a palliative care nurse from Norwich, a chemist from Wrexham and an undertaker from Gateshead became mutually comprehensible” (Meades, 2018).

### **1.2.3 Before democratisation: how it used to be 40 years ago**

In *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language in Society* (1983) Peter Trudgill identified the at-the-time state of affairs in terms of language preference. According to the author, RP, favoured by aristocracy and upper-middle class, remained the most prestigious accent. Trudgill, however, points out that it is not required to speak it to speak Standard English, which can as well be (and often is) spoken by those with regional accents. What is more, even though Standard English allows the variety of regional accents to adapt it and, linguistically speaking, cannot be considered to be better than other accent varieties, there still was a massive degree of bias towards all speakers who didn’t use it. In other words, according to Trudgill, Standard English was frequently considered THE English language, the ultimate one, often making some English native-speakers seriously self-conscious by persuading them that they ‘cannot speak English’. That being said, non-prestige English varieties were often considered ‘lazy’, while their speakers – not making enough effort and uneducated.

Interestingly, even nowadays RP is most fully represented in English as a second language (ESL) textbooks. That does to a great extent nudge English learners to aspire for the accent that does not necessarily grant them success in contemporary social situations. Most of those aiming to study English to further engage with Great Britain do prefer career opportunities offered by big cities, the capital city in particular. According to *trustforlondon.org.uk*, “net migration figures account for slightly more than a quarter (27%) of London’s population growth” from 2004 to 2015. That being said, RP as a universal standard for ESL phonetics acquisition (commonly represented, for instance, in Oxford University Press ESL textbooks) might not be as advantageous for those who are aiming to establish connections in “liberal” and “progressive” cities in Great Britain.

Geoff Lindsey’s *English After RP: Standard British Pronunciation* Today (University College London, London, UK) is a great example of contemporary British phonetics-oriented textbook. The author himself claims that “around the world, knowledge of British pronunciation is still rooted in RP” and that the contemporary teaching in this regard is still indeed “out of date” internationally: *“The social prestige which RP once enjoyed, and the scholarly prestige of the classic works describing it, have left a legacy of conservatism…”* Though the textbook essentially covers the significance of accent “preference shift”, it is still quite hard to follow without some general understanding of phonetics, therefore, can’t actually serve as a practical guide on how to speak.

Of a great interest is the extent to which the phenomenon of democratization contributes to what could be called “preference shift” concerned with ‘popular’ accents. Affected by the common dissatisfaction with the Conservative Party’s engagements, people in big cities (London in particular), more commonly now than before, are expected to express disdain towards accents they claim to be “Posh”, which had for many years been the definition of success and advantage in most of the social situations in Great Britain. Therefore, the popularity of regional accents is increasing rapidly, which can be mainly seen through media discourse. The more recent article by Peter Trudgill taken as an extract from *Sociocultural Variation and Change* (2001) addresses the sociocultural aspect of a phonostylistical features of the Received Pronunciation (RP) in contemporary Britain. In a broad sense, RP does have an undeniable correlation with the higher-class window of opportunities. However, as the author argues, in terms of being as beneficial as before, the accent seems to have faced a completely new phase of sociocultural development – it may not be as beneficial now as it was 50 years ago. In other words, the rise of democratic ideals did affect the social picture, with RP as a sign of ‘poshness’ rapidly becoming less and less advantageous. People who speak with “Posh” accents are now expected to be discriminated on the language basis, and even restricted in certain social interactions.

## **1.3 Media discourse**

### **1.3.1 Discourse**

To begin with, it is crucial to define discourse in terms of linguistics, which is indeed a challenging task due to the common associations with the term being complex and broad. “Discourse” is rather abstract, though does commonly refer to written and oral speech. It was, however, pointed out that discourse “challenges the concept of ‘language’”, signifying mainly the historical, social and political aspects (Fiske, 1994). What is more, it never, in fact, functions independently, not carrying social meanings and being free from the sociocultural influences. On the contrary, it not only depends strongly on both global and ‘local’ interests, but also relies on ideology that includes such representations as: semantics, narratives, images, concepts etc. Discourse is about how language is used socially to “convey broad historical meanings”. Consequently, “it is language identified by the social conditions of its use, by who is using it and under what conditions” (Henry & Tator, 2003).

In Chapter 2 of his book *News as Discourse (1988)* Teun A. Van Dijk covers the significance of discourse analysis in terms of linguistics:

*“And although many directions of current linguistics and grammars are still focusing on sentence strictures, it becomes more and more accepted that a systematic description of language, whether in abstract grammatical terms, or in terms of theories of language use, should also incorporate discourse forms.”*

 (Van Dijk, 1988)

### **1.3.2 “Understandability” as competence in media discourse**

In Chapter 16 of *Sociolinguistic Variation and Change* (2001) called *The Sociolinguistics* *of Modern RP* Peter Trudgill states:

*“The relationship between social and regional accent variation in Britain has often been modelled as having the form of an equilateral triangle (following Daniel Jones, as reported in Ward (1929) where, however, the diagram takes the form of a cone). The base of the triangle is broad, implying considerable amounts of phonological variation between the different regional accents spoken by the lower social classes.”* (See Figure 1 in Appendix).

(Trudgill, 2001)

The given point does, to a great extent, contribute to the overall understanding of what RP dominance actually means. It is not only dominant in terms of social-class variations and privilege, but also represents a particular degree of desirable understandability, which is essential for news reporters to embody. News are for everyone to watch, understand and, consequently, reflect on. Hence, for a while, RP has been one if the main requirements for those who aimed to work for British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), for instance. Not associated with any geographical peculiarities, RP serves as a perfect example of the most ‘phonetically neutral’ and, hence, universally understandable accent. Though, in spite of being so, it still represents social inequality.

Through the experiment described in *Attitudes Across Language Boundaries* (2014), Christoph Rotter proves the aforementioned point regarding RP being seen as the most appropriate news reader accent. Elaborating on the reasons behind the preference bias, the author mentions the policy change within BBC (linked to democratisation), which influenced the decisions in terms of employing more broadcasters with regional accents. What is more, he referred to “propagated abandonment of the term RP” being called “inappropriate” by John Wells (1999).

It is important to note that, despite being as in-depth as it is, the paper was written before the 2016 Brexit referendum (see section 1.2.1), which means that the sociopolitical tension was not as distinct as it is of today.

Currently, among the regional accent speakers employed by BBC are:

* Stephanie Rose McGovern (born 31 May 1982, from Middlesbrough, England) worked as the main business presenter for *BBC Breakfast (2010-2019),* BBC. Known for her “North-East twang”.

*“…I'm talking about what's going on in the financial world on national TV on the BBC. And, you know, as a Northern woman with an accent doing that… there was a lot of shock when I first went on TV…”*

She started working for BBC on the *Tomorrow’s World* programme, then worked for the *Radio 4* and, finally, went on to become the lead producer of business news on the *BBC’s One, Six* and *Ten O’clock bulletins*. She is best known as the business presenter on BBC Breakfast, where she has worked until October 2019. She left to join Channel 4 (BBC News [https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-50123720 )](https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-50123720%29).

Her popularity among BBC viewers and the estimated $6 Million net worth do demonstrate the journalist’s success, which is in many ways linked to her and the way she speaks being more “relatable”.

* Zoe Louise Ball (born 23 November 1970, from Blackpool, North-West England) host of *The Radio 1 Breakfast Show* and *The Radio 2 Breakfast Show*, BBC. (Zoe Ball was even called “the voice of the moment” due to not speaking “posh” by *Independent (Morrish 1999)).*

Considering everything that was mentioned in the given literature review, it is of great importance to note that there hasn’t been any research conducted on the phonostylistical peculiarities of media discourse in Britain influenced by the current state of political affairs (post-2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum).

# Part 2 METHODS AND RESULTS

## **2.1 Methods**

To prove the hypothesis, a **phonetic analysis** of the two transcribed speeches taken as examples of contemporary media discourse has been carried out. Both belong to the same speaker and were studied in terms of the speaker’s accent peculiarities, including articulation of vowels and consonants. The results were then compared with the canons of Received Pronunciation to evaluate both similarities and differences.

The speaker is Steph McGovern (born 31 May 1982), an English journalist and television presenter. Originally from Middleborough, she moved to London to attend UCL (University College London) to study Science Communication and Policy in the Department of Science and Technology Studies (University College London official website <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/about/node/31/tabs#steph-mcgovern)>.

The transcribed media discourse examples are:

1. *Steph McGovern’s post-leaving BBC Breakfast ‘goodbye’ appearance as a guest on a show (YouTube* [*https://youtu.be/TBeUBSyN920*](https://youtu.be/TBeUBSyN920) *) as an example of how a TV presenter with a Northern accent present themselves within the contemporary BBC environment.*
2. *“Steph McGovern: discovering her unique selling point” (YouTube* [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SaKE8HTeRY*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SaKE8HTeRY) *) video as an example of a more ‘relaxed’ discourse, outside BBC environment.*

The empirical base was obtained online, through researching into the currently employed BBC reporters with regional accents. At that point, it was crucial to focus on those who:

1. were more recently employed by BBC (not more than 20 years ago)
2. had a distinct strong accent, which could be easily recognised by viewers due to sounding ‘different’ from what conventional BBC broadcasting has been embodying for decades
3. did not represent a “posh” background

Steph McGovern was a perfect candidate due to not only complying with all given criteria, but also representing a brave new image of a contemporary news reader – liberal, straightforward, natural and very spontaneous.

The two chosen media discourse examples were then transcribed; the most phonetically significant and vivid parts (those which help to identify the Northern accent) were then extracted and further analysed to define the most common similarities and differences when compared to Received Pronunciation (RP).

## **2.2 Fragment 1 analysis**

In **Table 1** similarities in terms of sounds are highlighted in pink, differences – in blue.

 **Table 1**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Steph McGovern’s BBC Breakfast guest appearance fragment** | **RP variation for the same vowels/consonants** |
| **00:43** |  |
| typical things we all hear like eat f**i**ve *(In such regions as Middlesbrough, the phoneme /aɪ/ before a voiced consonant**is commonly substituted with a monophthong [aː] (Williams & Kerswill, 1999), which doesn’t happen here due to accent softening)*  | [f**aɪ**v] |
| **00:51** |  |
| relieve p**ai**n *(pronounced with a monophthong [ɛː])* so we go to like a garden  | [p**eɪ**n] |
| **02:52** |  |
| might have started *(glottal stop, /ʔ/)* n**o**ticing *(has a monophthong [ɔː])* them in the | [ˈst**ɑː**tɪd] (*no glottal stop*)[ˈn**əʊ**tɪsɪŋ] |
| **02:55** |  |
| becoming quite p**o**p**u**la**r** *[ˈpɒpjʊlə]* and it's got all | [ˈp**ɒ**p**jʊ**l**ə]** |
| **02:57** |  |
| these live b**a**ct**e**ri**a** *[bækˈtɪərɪə]* so basically my | [b**æ**kˈt**ɪə**rɪ**ə]** |
| **02:59** |  |
| bacteria and my g**u**t *(takes [ʊ])* wasn't very diverse | [g***ʌ***t]  |
| **03:05** |  |
| improved my d**i**versity *(the phoneme [aɪ] in such regions as Middleborough tends to become a monophthong [aː] (Williams & Kerswill, 1999), though in the given example it is more or less similar to RP variation, however,* ***exaggerated****)*  | [d**aɪ**ˈvɜːsɪti] |
| **03:25** |  |
| now and als**o** (takes [ɔː])it was great *(pronounced with a monophthong [ɛː])*in the run-up *(takes [ʊ])* | [ˈɔːls**əʊ]**[gr**eɪ**t][r**ʌ**nʌp] |
| **03:27** |  |
| to bec**o**ming *(takes [ʊ])* pregnant yes getting health**y** *(takes a final [eɪ])* | [bɪˈk**ʌ**mɪŋ][ˈhɛlθ**i**] |
| **03:31** |  |
| pregnanc**y** *(takes a final [eɪ])*so that made a big difference | [ˈpr**ɛ**gnənsi] |
| **05:01** |  |
| this is my h**o**metown *(takes a monophthong [ɔː])*Middlesbrough and I | [ˈh**əʊ**mˈtaʊn] |
| **08:21** |  |
| best oh I remember one of my funniest*(takes [ʊ])* | [ˈf**ʌ**nɪɪst] |

## **2.3 Fragment 2 analysis**

In **Table 2** similarities in terms of sounds are highlighted in pink, differences – in blue.

 **Table 2**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Steph McGovern’s monologue in *“Steph McGovern: discovering her unique selling point”* video** | **RP variation for the same vowels/consonants** |
| **00:00** |  |
| As a woman on **TV** *[*ˌ*t****eɪ****ˈv****e****ɪ]* doing what has | [ˌt**iː**ˈv**iː**] |
| **00:06** |  |
| f**i**nancial *(takes [ɪ])* world on national **TV** *[*ˌ*t****eɪ****ˈv****e****ɪ]*on the | [faɪˈnænʃəl][ˌt**iː**ˈv**iː**] |
| **00:13** |  |
| lot of shock when I first went on the **TV** *[*ˌ*t****eɪ****ˈv****e****ɪ]* | [ˌt**iː**ˈv**iː**] |
| **00:17** |  |
| this woman doing on **TV** *[*ˌ*t****eɪ****ˈv****e****ɪ]* I felt a real | [ˌt**iː**ˈv**iː**] |
| **00:19** |  |
| responsibilit**y** *(takes a final [eɪ])* to do that job well and | [rɪsˌpɒnsəˈbɪlɪt**i**] |
| **00:26** |  |
| when I first *st****a****rted (Commonly, there’s no distinction between [a] and [ɑː] in different varieties of Yorkshire accent (Petyt, 1985), though in the given example the speaker does pronounce the sound [ɑː] + no glottal stop)* | [ˈst**ɑː**tɪd] |
| **00:29** |  |
| my god I need to b**e** *(takes [eɪ])*like how other | [b**iː**] |
| **00:31** |  |
| people have d**o**ne *(takes [ʊ])* this job so you know I | [d**ʌ**n] |
| **00:33** |  |
| need to b**e** *(takes [eɪ])*like a BBC person and do | [b**iː**] |
| **00:35** |  |
| all th**a**t *(takes [ɑː])*and be quite natural but | [ð**æ**t] |
| **00:43** |  |
| normal **pe**rson [ˈ**pɜː**sn]and being authentic has | [ˈ**pɜː**sn] |
| **00:47** |  |
| go**t** *(glottal stop, /ʔ/)* me my success and I think that's a | [gɒ**t**] (*no glottal stop*) |
| **00:52** |  |
| up to me happened on the tr**ai**n *(pronounced with a monophthong [ɛː])*on the | [tr**eɪ**n] |
| **00:57** |  |
| l**o**ve *(takes [ʊ])*you because you're so normal and | [lʌv] |
| **00:59** |  |
| it's like m**a**de *(pronounced with a monophthong [ɛː])* | [m**eɪ**d] |
| **01:09** |  |
| get where you want in l**i**fe *(a monophthong [aː] before a voiceless consonant)* | [l**aɪ**f] |
| **01:10** |  |
| yes that is k**ey** *(takes [eɪ])*if you learn nothing | [k**i**ː] |
| **01:12** |  |
| else for m**e** *(takes [eɪ])* I don't care if you don't | [m**iː**] |
| **01:21** |  |
| d**o**ne *(takes [ʊ])* my job and I really definitely feel | [d**ʌ**n] |
| **01:23** |  |
| a w**ay** (*takes [ɛː])*to that until and I say that to | [w**eɪ**] |
| **01:25** |  |
| young *(takes [ʊ])* people all the time whenever I've | [j**ʌ**ŋ] |
| **01:26** |  |
| talked to young *(takes [ʊ])* girls about what they | [j**ʌ**ŋ] |
| **01:32** |  |
| great *(pronounced with a monophthong [ɛː])* personality you know you've got | [gr**eɪ**t] |
| **01:35** |  |
| you you're clearly *(takes [iː])* | [ˈkl**ɪə**li] |

## **2.4 Results**

The two tables in sections 2.2 and 2.3 embody several significant points:

1. *There is indeed a serious deviation from Received Pronunciation standards in terms of Steph McGovern’s accent in both analysed examples.*

To begin with, out of 16 studied instances in the first example (see Table 1), only ¼ is in compliance with RP. In the second example (see Table 2), out of 25 – only 2 instances represent common RP characteristics. That being said, Steph McGovern definitely does, to a great extent, ‘embrace’ her local accent, quite proudly establishing a new TV persona and promoting diversity on British television:

*“…He [McGovern’s BBC colleague] was like: “You know, I know you've got an accent but maybe you should say ‘poor’ like we say it” and I was like “I'm absolutely not saying “poor” ([*pʊə*]) because I'll never be allowed back in Middlesbrough…”* (Taken from YouTube <https://youtu.be/TBeUBSyN920> )

1. *The deviation is much more significant in the second example (see Table 2), while the BBC breakfast example (see Table 1) can be characterised by a subtle ‘accent softening’.*

The second analysed discourse example represents a less formal environment, which is certainly reflected in McGovern’s accent.In the video, she is making a statement regarding her “unique selling point”, which, as she herself claims lies in her being “a normal person” and “authentic”:

*“I get lots of women coming up to me. Happened on the train earlier, this lady said to me: “I love you because you're so normal…”* (Taken from YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SaKE8HTeRY> )

As mentioned above, only 2 of the 25 analysed instances resemble RP canons. One of the most vivid deviations is the sound [ʊ], which frequently substitutes [ʌ] in different varieties of Yorkshire accent (Stoddart, Upton & Widdowson, 1999)*,* a Northern accent spoken by Steph McGovern (Middlesbrough variety, to be more precise). For example, that occurs in such one syllable words as ‘d**o**ne’, ‘l**o**ve’ and ‘y**ou**ng’. It also occurs in the pronunciation of a word ‘f**u**nniest’. What is more, in words like ‘**TV**’, ‘b**e**’, ‘responsibilit**y**’, ‘k**ey**’, the [iː] and [i] final sounds are substituted with [eɪ]. Additionally, a monophthong [ɛː]is taken in words like ‘tr**ai**n’, ‘gr**ea**t’, ‘m**a**de’ – instead of a diphthong [eɪ], which in the same cases an RP speaker would use.

When it comes to the BBC Breakfast fragment, the speaker tends to pronounce more words in accordance with the RP standards. Among the analysed utterances, the list of such words includes: ‘five’, ‘popular’, ‘bacteria’ and ‘diversity’. Interestingly, the word ‘d**i**versity’, in which a Yorkshire accent speaker is likely to use a monophthong [aː] instead of the diphthong [aɪ] (Williams & Kerswill, 1999), is pronounced similarly to RP. However, McGovern exaggerates the sound.

The aforementioned analysis brings us to the following conclusion: BBC environment, to this day, establishes a particular set of requirements in regard to their newsreaders and reporters. That does, to a great extent, apply to accents. Subconsciously, Steph McGovern might be ‘softening’ her regional accent due to the desire to ‘fit in’, be recognised, taken more seriously, heard and, most importantly, understood (understandability was covered in section 1.3.2 as one of the main competences in media discourse). However, consciously, the speaker does not in any way attempt to hide her origin, instead, making Middlesbrough roots as well as the accent her distinctive characteristics within the media environment.

1. *The speaker’s accent goes through subtle changes so that the same word can be pronounced differently in different utterances.*

For example, the word ‘started’ that is highlighted in both Table 1 and Table 2 is in the first case (on BBC) pronounced with a glottal stop [ˈst**ɑː***ʔ*ɪd], and in the second case (YouTube video) – without the glottal stop [ˈst**ɑː**tɪd] (how an RP speaker would pronounce it). Interestingly, despite the second fragment being extracted from a much less formal environment discourse example, the pronunciation of a given word is more traditionally ‘formal’ in it. That could be explained by the speaker subconsciously establishing her uniqueness in terms of accent within the conventional television setting in the first case, and at the same time ‘reminding’ the audience of her success in the second case, where she is giving a motivational speech.

In the BBC Breakfast fragment, where the word ‘started’ was pronounced with glottal stop, what Steph McGovern said was:

*“You might have* ***started*** *noticing them in the supermarket's now because they've becoming quite popular…”*

The utterance is informal, even though the context itself is quite formal.

In the *“Steph McGovern: discovering her unique selling point”* fragment, where she pronounced ‘started’ similarly to an RP speaker, she was, however, talking about her career on BBC specifically, which makes the utterance more official:

*“When I first* ***started****, where I thought oh my god I need to be like how other people have done this job, so, you know, I need to be like a BBC person and do all that and be quite natural…”*

Hence, it could be concluded that even though, being aware of her local accent peculiarities, the speaker tends to ‘embrace’ it in formal contexts, she, however, frequently ‘softens’ it either in regard to the environment or depending on what exactly she is talking about.

# DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of the given study was to analyse contemporary media discourse in Great Britain phonetically to further evaluate the democratization tendency in terms of accent preference. The existing literature on the subjects of sociolinguistics, accents, political, socio-cultural setting in Great Britain, historic contexts as well as discourse competences was studied and then evaluated (see Part 1).

At some point, the necessity to further investigate the influence a current political setting (Conservative government and Brexit, in particular) on the phonostylistical aspects of discourse was recognised. Subsequently, it was crucial to focus the attention on one particular aspect of discourse that could be both vivid and representative in regard to the hypothesis.

The hypothesis itself revolved around the existence of a ‘preference shift’ in contemporary British society in terms of accent democratisation, which was strongly influenced by the common disdain towards the Conservative party’s opinions and political moves. That being said, the correlation between the Conservative party leaders, social class issue in Great Britain and accent peculiarities was identified. The phenomenon of ‘poshness’, which could be defined both through privileged background and the accent one speaks, was then carefully considered. It was estimated that Received Pronunciation (RP), commonly referred to as ‘posh accent’, is often associated not only with upper-class discourse, but also with conventional BBC broadcasting accent features. Hence, it was decided that contemporary media discourse should be studied.

The phonetic analysis of the two media discourse fragments (see Part 2) confirmed the hypothesis: the speaker, Steph McGovern, consciously ‘embraced’ her regional accent in both examples, shaping a completely new, fresh perspective on what is to be considered ‘appropriate’ in terms of accent diversity on TV. However, it is important to point out that a few cases of ‘accent softening’ were also recognised in her discourse (in both examples). As it was estimated, that could be either due to McGovern’s subconscious desire to be accepted within the traditionalist environment, or depending on what exactly she is talking about in any setting. Nevertheless, Steph McGovern’s case is indeed one vivid example of how the accent democratisation, affected by the liberal tendencies in the society, is reflected in media discourse. It might take a long time for the climate within such media institutions as BBC to change completely as there is still a noticeable tendency for conservative preference when it comes to newsreaders’ speech characteristics. Still, the deviation from RP standards, which was unacceptable in the twentieth century media discourse in Great Britain is definitely becoming more and more common.

In terms of further development of the subject, obtaining more qualitative data could be of great use: a more in-depth phonetic analysis of everyday communication in Great Britain could be suggested. As much as media discourse is indeed efficient when aiming to prove the existence of a ‘preference shift’ in the society, the most precise evaluation of the current socio-cultural climate in Great Britain in regard to accents is only possible when considering personal aspects and day-to-day communication.

The issue is indeed much deeper than as far as common phonostylistical preference shift goes: it lies in the regional accent speakers’ desire to be represented, their opinions heard and acknowledged. That is confirmed by the ‘silent revolution’ that is currently taking place within such previously traditionalist environments as BBC.

The given research could be of great use not only in terms of evaluating the current political and socio-cultural climate in Great Britain, but also when it comes to actualising the more beneficial and up-to-date English-teaching practices. Language changes, and so does the language preference. Hence, the development of an approach to teaching pronunciation could benefit greatly from the ‘preference shift’ acknowledgement.

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# APPENDIX



**Figure 1**

Taken from: Rotter, C. (2014). *Attitudes Across Language Boundaries*. The University of Vienna. 59-60.

1. The accent commonly used in public schools and universities like Oxford and Cambridge, in the South of England: RP studies revolve predominantly around phonetic peculiarities of the Standard British English [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An island located off the Northeast, USA [↑](#footnote-ref-2)