

An Investigation of Accent Neutralisation in British 90's Songs: A case study of Popular Music

Sunattha Krudthong

Sunattha Krudthong, Department of Business English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science

E-Mail: sunattha.kr@ssru.ac.th

ABSTRACT

Abstract—this study explores the pronunciation of British singers in the 90's hit popular music and how British singers lose their accent and sound American when singing to understand the language style shifting. This research provides a review of phonetic and phonological insight of British English pronunciation (Received Pronunciation) and American English pronunciation and analysis of the two varieties in respect of their phonological differences as a comparative research method is used to collect and observe data from the selected songs sung by British singers in the 90's which is considered as a peak age of music popularity. The songs include those from 1994-1998 released both in the Britain and the U.S.A. The research revealed that most British pop singers in the 90's sing with neutralised/americanised accent. This is resulted from vowel and syllable shifting which cause speech articulators adjusted. Other factors include ethnic identity, language accommodation, and music genre motivation.

Keywords— English pronunciation, English phonetics and phonology, British accent, Speech articulators

I. INTRODUCTION

Language plays an important role in communication among human beings. When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the “human essence,” the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man said by Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, 1968. We live in a world of language. The possession of language, perhaps more than any other attribute, distinguishes humans from other animals. Language is perceived as a means of communication of thoughts, feelings and ideas through a system of codes or symbols, such as voice sounds, gestures, or written symbols which is used by the population of each nation, or other community between individuals and society (Yordchim, et al., 2015). For many social groups, language has been considered to be an important characteristic of ethnic identity, more important even than cultural background (Fromkin, et al., 2011). Speakers of a language have understanding of both linguistic and social structure and combine this knowledge systematically in communication. The field of language and society – sociolinguistics – is proposed to show how a language is impacted by such factors as class, gender, race, etc. Speech or 'language' varies from person to person, from place to place and the same person is seen to speak differently in different. Since a system is dynamic and shows movement, there is change (Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2015).

When it comes to singing, the question of why and how British singers have American accent when they sing (Americanisation) regardless of original region they are from is emerging significantly. The study of this phenomenon has especially been interested by many researchers such as Trudgill 1983, Simpson 1999, Beal 2009, Gibson and Bell 2012 among others that the singers adopt strong regional speaking accents but neutralize singing. The sociolinguistic discussion of popular music sung by the British singers (Britpop term will be used interchangeably) involves some investigation; 1) the reason of accent modification and 2) accent neutralization or, generally speaking, Americanized singing style (Gibson, 2015).

This research aims to present an analysis of in what phonetic and phonological features British singers modify their pronunciation in musical context compared to regular spoken accents by using Wells' standard lexical sets (1982a) in order to critically understand the phonological shifting as well as reason for it. So, this brings me to the focus of the study on examining the 90's British pop music which personally attracts the author's interest and is

considered the greatest success of the industry both in Europe and the U.S. as the music charts were dominated by male and female Britpop bands. The result will assist to demonstrate the style-shifting of pronunciation when singing including their motivations.

II. LITERATURE & THEORY

Sociolinguistics involves the relationship between language and society and how they affect each other. The term 'society' has been defined broadly as any group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes while a language is what the members of a particular society speak. It is seen that our definitions of language and society are attached. Even the definition of language includes society in it. (Wardhaugh, 2006). Language and society are intertwined because a society moves with language (Halima, 2012). A society may be plurilingual; that is, many speakers may use more than one language. We use the term language to mean a system of linguistic communication particular to a group; this includes spoken, written, and signed modes of communication (Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2015) and a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication" (Wardhaugh, 2006). Since a system is dynamic and shows movement, there is change. Labov (1972) offers three stages of language change 1) An origin period in which alternative variants for established variants begin to appear. 2) Propagation the stage at which the new variants establish themselves to the detriment of the older ones which are sidelined. 3) Conclusion the stages at which the remaining variants are (i) replaced completely by new variants or (ii) remain as a residue after the change has terminated.

The study of language considers its variations based on different factors. People speak different varieties of the same language distinguished by features of phonology, grammar and vocabulary (Hosseinzadeh, et al., 2015, Halima, 2012). A dialect is a structurally uniform variety. One or more mutually understandable dialects comprise a language while accent is a structurally uniform sound variety. Accent is the term which linguists use when they refer to the pronunciation features typical of people who belong to the same geographical region or social class. Regional variation is the most noticeable variety in language. We are almost certain to see differences in pronunciation in a wide geographical area in which a language is spoken. Those distinctive regional varieties are usually called *regional dialects* of the language. In England each region has its own regional dialect. One study by dialectologists is that 125 regional dialects quite often overlap with geographical barriers like mountains or rivers. The more the geographical distance between two dialects, the greater the linguistic variation (Giegerich, H., 1992). There are many differences between British and American English dialects which concern pronunciation.

The characteristics of British dialect sound system make it specifically English, and different from French or Welsh or Quechua. In Britain the standard is called Received Pronunciation. The term refers to the pronunciation of English which is accepted in English society. BBC English, Oxford English, Queen's English (formerly King's English) are alternative terms. The accent, in which Southern Standard British English is typically spoken, sometimes called 'BBC English', is usually termed 'Received Pronunciation' or 'RP' by

linguists. That label will be used here in preference to ‘SSBE’. It is regarded as the appropriate pronunciation model to be used in teaching English as a foreign language in those parts of the world where British rather than American English is traditionally taught. Although it is sometimes associated with the way educated people in the south-east of England speak, RP is generally considered to be “neutral”: it is not an accent of any particular geographical region in Britain, and can be heard anywhere in the country. A linguistic variable in phonology can be explained as followed. In northern England, the vowel in the word ‘cut’ is an example. Some speakers use a high back vowel here while others have a lower vowel and maintain a distinction between the vowels in words like but [bʌt] and bush [bʊʃ]. In London, users of conversational speech have a glottal stop for intervocalic /t/ in a word like butter whereas others maintain the [t] pronunciation in all positions (McMahon’s, 2002).

In America, General American and Network American English are the two most common dialects. General American is spoken widely by the majority of Americans, including many in the North-East and South and by most US radio and TV announcers. The southern United States has a unique quality as the English characteristic of this area is found typically among the African American areas of the community. The label “General American” covers a range of accents which don’t exhibit any Eastern or Southern local colouring. These are the issues of the slaves originally imported into the Caribbean area, chiefly by the English from the 16th century onwards. Their English is quite different from that of the rest of the United States and has far more in common with that of the various Anglophone Caribbean islands. Thomas Low Nichols, a nineteenth-century commentator on American English, speculates that ‘I know of no physiological reason why a Yankee should talk through his nose, unless he got in the habit of shutting his mouth to keep out the cold fogs and drizzling north-easters of Massachusetts Bay’. There is a natural tendency for geographically distant accents to become more different in the U.S (Giegerich, 1992, Cutler, Cecelia, 2010)).

Various social external factors can increase the process of language change. One powerful motivation is that individuals would like to make their speech more like that of a group they aspire to. The CAT or Communication Accommodation Theory of Giles (Giles and Noels, 2007) connects spoken style to the identity of the person with whom they are contacting with. It is derived from psychological study that concerns with similarity-attraction which people tends to adjust their styles with others: therefore; similarities are increased and dissimilarities are lessened. When members of two cultural groups come together, they often have to make choices about whose communication system to use and how much to accommodate each other. This style shift reason is to gain social approval (Gibson, 2015). Typically, this could involve a higher social class, an urban dialect (Hickey, 2010) over rural one, the language of a powerful neighbour over a smaller country. Changing one’s language to make it more like that of another group is called accommodation in order to mainly develop their acceptance by the group whose language features are being adopted. Communication accommodation can be short-term or long-term which can lead to language change. In case of accommodation speakers are normally

not aware of the alterations to their language which they make. Additional factors are the degree of literacy in a community, the influence of current language, the 'prestige' of speakers on new styles, etc. Trudgill (1983)'s study on linguistics motivations for singing style modification of British pop songs has been well-known even he disagrees with the theory of CAT as being not directly relevant to pop-song language but limited to spoken speech. He introduces the framework of Act of Conflicting Identity dealing with 'rules' or 'tendencies' concerning the way in which the words of these British rock and pop songs are pronounced. He proposes that singers of this form of music use different accents when singing from when they are speaking. This phenomenon of using a neutralized pronunciation seems to have been in progress in popular music for some decades, probably since the 1920s, and has involved a number of different genres. It became, however, especially obvious in the late 1950s with the introduction of rock-and-roll and the pop-music (Act of conflicting (Konert-Panek, 2017).

III. METHODOLOGY

The method used in this research is comparative whose data have been collected through ten the 90's Britpop songs. Comparative method is a linguistic method used to compare and contrast two or more languages. In this research, the phonetic differences between these two English varieties have been analyzed in terms of their vowels (including monophthongs and diphthongs). The obtained result is based on the comparison between British and American pronunciation. In This research, the phonetic differences between these two English varieties have been analyzed in terms of their vowels (including monophthongs and diphthongs). The Well's Standard Lexical Sets (1982a) have been modified and used for comparison since vowels are considered prone to distinguish the variations based on the keywords given.

Figure 1
Well's Standard Lexical Sets (1982a)

(50) The standard lexical sets

	RP	GenAm	keyword		RP	GenAm	keyword
1.	ɪ	ɪ	KIT	13.	ɔ:	ɔ	THOUGHT
2.	e	ɛ	DRESS	14.	əʊ	o	GOAT
3.	æ	æ	TRAP	15.	u:	u	GOOSE
4.	ɒ	ɑ	LOT	16.	aɪ	aɪ	PRICE
5.	ʌ	ʌ	STRUT	17.	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	CHOICE
6.	ʊ	ʊ	FOOT	18.	aʊ	aʊ	MOUTH
7.	ɑ:	æ	BATH	19.	ɪə ¹	ɪr	NEAR
8.	ɒ	ɔ	CLOTH	20.	ɛə ¹	ɛr	SQUARE
9.	ɜ: ¹	ɜr	NURSE	21.	ɑ: ¹	ɑr	START
10.	i:	i	FLEECE	22.	ɔ: ¹	ɔr	NORTH
11.	eɪ	eɪ	FACE	23.	ɔ: ¹	ɔr	FORCE
12.	ɑ:	ɑ	PALM	24.	ʊə ¹	ʊr	CURE

¹ with /r/ following before a vowel only.

After collecting necessary data about phonological varieties of vowels concerning British and American English pronunciation from the sample songs, the author has used the comparative method between them. In each table, a set of neutralized words found in the songs has been shown based on standard lexical sets of Wells 1982a. Lexical set consists of a group of words all of which have the same pronunciation for a certain sound in a given variety. The original group of lexical sets was presented in John Wells' three volume work *Accents of English*. These were intended to cover the vowels of Received Pronunciation and their realisations in accents of English throughout the world. The 90's Britpop songs sung by the British singers from 1994-1998 released both in the Britain and the U.S.A, which is viewed as a popularity peak age of music are selected to obtain sound data for this study.

IV. Results

Most British pop singers sing with an Americanised accent which is different from their spoken language. There are different numbers of vowel sounds as it is revealed in Trudgill's discussion (1983) that it is obvious that singers are modifying their linguistic style for the purposes of singing. Trudgill sees this as the rules and tendencies when singing pop music. This is agreed with Drummond and Carrie, 2017 that one of the main factors that are likely to make the British singers accent neutralized is social expectation. It is believed that popular music will be sung based on these defaulted rules of genre style. Linguists Andy Gibson also noted a similar phenomenon in New Zealand and suggested that it should be called "pop music accent" Linguistically, the process of singing has an accent-neutralising effect according to Drummond and Carrie, 2017. Pronunciation variations are mostly affected by vowel and some consonant phonetic features. Accents of English differ mainly in terms of their vowel and consonant systems as well as in the phonetic realisations of vowel phonemes. So, we will discuss about this.

Table 1
Accent neutralization in the 90's Britpop songs by comparison of vowel phonemes

Songs (Artist)	Words	Keywords of Standard Lexical Sets	Original vowels of British English	Modified vowels to American English (Neutralization)
1. Everything my heart desired (Adam Rickitt)	Heart, Part, Far	BATH	[a:]	[a:r]
2. Let's dance (FIVE)	Dance, Can't	BATH	[a:]	[æ]
3. M.F.E.O (Kavana)	Got	LOT	[ɒ]	[a]

4. 2 become 1 (Spice girls)	Little	-	[th] or [ʔ] voiceless stop consonant /t/ when occurring inter or before a lateral approximant	[ɾ]
5. Back for good (Take That)	My, Mind, Side	PRICE	[aɪ]	[a]
6. Love me for a reason	Girl	-	[gɜ:l]	[gɜ:rɪ]
7. Whole again (Atomic kitten)	Go, Whole, don't	GOAT	[əʊ]	[oʊ]
8. Something deep inside (Billie Piper)	Love	STRUT	[ʌ]	[ə]
9. Day and Night (Billie Piper)	Not	LOT	[ɒ]	[a]
10. Same old brand new you (A1)	Turn	-	[tɜ:n]	[tɜ:rn]

V. Conclusion

The main research aim was to assess the role of vowel and consonant quality effects in singing accent neutralization or Americanisation. This style-shifting can be seen mostly in vowel phoneme features such as unrounded vowel or monophthongisation (Konert-Panek, M., 2018). Moreover, All GA vowels are characterized by r-insertion when they are followed by the letter r in the spelling, e.g., car, park while British Pronunciation has a tendency to drop /r/ from the speech (Hosseinzadeh, N., et al., 2015). The possible reasons are that when singing, syllables, to be precise, and vowels are lengthened, air flow is enhanced, speech organs or articulators is less fixed so the sounds produced will be more neutralized which share some phonetic features with American English pronunciation (Drummond and Carrie, 2017) and when singing, a person shift their language form since he or she requires more conscious and more pitch changes which unavoidably lead to vowel and consonant quality change (Gibson, 2015). Trudgill, 1983 points out that no single British variety has all these features and the majority of singers who use these forms when singing do not do so when speaking. The differences may include phonotactics – the positions in the word and the syllable in which the phonemes of a language can occur, patterns of word stress, rhythm and intonation. For further studies, we may consider the

reverse topic of Britishness since it seems to be minor that most American singers tend to sing with a British accent. Moreover, there is a challenge to decide if a singer will sing one own's regional dialect to present ethnic identity or use the appropriate singing style to the genre.

References

- Cutler, Cecelia, (2010), □ Hip-Hop, White Immigrant Youth, and African American Vernacular English: Accommodation as an Identity Choice, *Journal of English Linguistics* , Vol. 38(3). Pp. 248-269.
- Drummond, Rob and Carrie, Erin (2017), □ Why so many singers sound American but British grime artists are bucking the trend, The Conversation: Manchester Metropolitan University□, URL: <https://theconversation.com/why-so-many-singers-sound-american-but-british-grime-artists-are-bucking-the-trend-72328>
- Fromkin, Victoria, Rodman Robert and Hyams Nina (2011) , □ An Introduction to Language, Ninth Edition, Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, Canada, Pp. 226-476.
- Gibson, Ryan Markus (2015), □ The Role of Acent in Popular Music: An Interdisciplinary Approach□, *University of Huddersfield*, UK.
- Giegerich, Heinz (1992), □ English Phonology : an introduction, *The Press Syndicate of The University of Cambridge*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Pp. 31-60.
- Giles, H., & Noels, K.A (2007), □ Communication accommodation in intercultural encounters. Reprinted in L. Chen (Ed.), *Culture, cultures and intercultural communication: A cross disciplinary reader*, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Chapter 15, Pp.139-142.
- Halima, Benzoukh, (2012), □ Basic Concepts in Sociolinguistics, *Depot institutionnel de l'Universite Kasdi Merbah Ouargla UKMO*, Vol. 10, No. 13, Pp. 11-16.
- Hickey, Raymond (2010), □ Language and Society. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford.
- Hosseinzadeh, Naghme Mirzaie, Kord, Zafaranlu Kambuziya Aliyeh and Mansour Shariati, (2015), □ British and American Phonetic Varieties, *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Pp. 647-655.
- Konert-Panek, Monika, (2018), □ SINGING ACCENT AMERICANISATION IN THE LIGHT OF FREQUENCY EFFECTS: LOT UNROUNDING AND PRICE MONOPHTHONGISATION IN FOCUS, *Research in Language*, Vol. 16:2, Pp. 155-168.
- Konert-Panek, Monika, (2017), □ OVERSHOOTING AMERICANISATION. ACCENT STYLISATION IN POP SINGING - ACOUSTIC PROPERTIES OF THE BATH AND TRAP VOWELS IN FOCUS, *Research in Language*, Vol. 15:4, Pp.371-383.
- McMahon, April (2002), □ An Introduction to English Phonology, Editor: Heinz Giegerich, *Edinburgh Textbooks on the English Language*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Trudgill, P. (1997), □ Acts of Conflicting Identity: The Sociolinguistics of British Pop-song Pronunciation. In: Coupland N., Jaworski A. (eds) *Sociolinguistics. Modern Linguistics Series, Palgrave, London*, London, Pp. 251-265.
- Trudgill, P (1983), □ Acts of Conflicting Identity: The Sociolinguistics of British Pop-song Pronunciation on, On Dialect: Social and Geographical Perspectives, *Basil Blackwell*, New York University Press, Oxford and New York, Pp. 141-60.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald (2006), □ An Introduction to Sociolinguistics FIFTH EDITION, *Blackwell Publishing*, U.S.A., Pp. 133-191.
- Wardhaugh, R and Fuller, J.M (2015), □ An introduction to sociolinguistics, *Blackwell Publishers Ltd*, Wiley Blackwell, UK.
- Yordchim S., Anugkakul G. and Gibbs T., (2015), □ English Classroom for SLA of Students and Small and Medium Entrepreneurs in Thailand, *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology International Journal of Social, Behavioral, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering* Vol:9, No. 3, Pp.856.