The "vivid sociolinguistic profiling" of Received Pronunciation: analyzing responses to "dialect in discourse"

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This paper presents results from an investigation into the social evaluation of Received Pronunciation, conducted in March 2002. The study presented samples of modern RP and regional British speech to adolescent judges in York, UK, who filled out a response questionnaire eliciting quantitative and qualitative data. The two RP speakers were both judged to have high socioeconomic status, but were otherwise differentiated markedly: the female RP speaker was judged far more favourably than the male speaker on all dimensions (status, sociability and dynamism).

In order to explain the "vivid stereotypic sociolinguistic profiling" (Garrett, Coupland and Williams 2003:222) of male and female RP speakers given by the subjects in their qualitative responses, the paper discusses recent sociological analyses of class and social status in Britain (Savage 2000). It explores the idea that a new form of individualized and reflexive middle-class consciousness, with its firm rejection of class hierarchy, can be seen to have had repercussions not least for the sociolinguistic status of accents and dialects. It is suggested furthermore that the decline in status for RP is particularly "male-focussed", and that female speakers of RP do not signal "class hierarchy" in quite the same manner, and so can still gain advantages in social evaluation through use of RP. The paper therefore attempts to provide a basis for an empirically-grounded explanation for the decline of RP, recently reported anxiously in the media and in sociolinguistic discussion (e.g. Trudgill 2001).


