Why do newsreaders speak RP?

A discussion of the norm concept in relation to Received Pronunciation

This paper discusses the widespread use of Received Pronunciation (RP) in news broadcasting in light of the linguistic norm concept. My own empirical study of broadcast speech, based on observations of a large number of newsreaders, shows that the great majority of presenters speak RP or modify their accent in the direction of RP. This uniformity in linguistic behaviour is indicative of a common norm.

Norms represent a form of consensus which governs social behaviour. Language is regulated by both prescribed and internalised norms. The latter are often a result of the individual’s beliefs about the community’s expectations. These are in turn shaped by our social surroundings, evaluative judgements and stereotypical views about language. Newsreaders are not required to speak RP, and the broadcasting companies officially embrace regional accents. The motivation to use RP therefore presumably comes from the presenters themselves as the result of an internalised norm. I will discuss the factors which may influence the newsreaders’ pronunciation and the reasons why RP is still so prevalent in newscasts. The discussion is supplemented with the results from a small-scale study of norms conducted among a group of BBC newsreaders.