RIP RP: In Search of a More Pragmatic Model for Pronunciation Teaching in the Indian Context

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Abstract

With the growth in the use of English the world over, and a subsequent increase in the number of English speakers whose first language is not English, the pronunciation needs and goals of learners have undergone great changes. This is true of the Indian scenario as well, where the acquisition of 'native-like' pronunciation does not seem to be a hallowed aim any longer. What most learners are striving for is a kind of 'neutral' intelligible English pronunciation, free from those influences of their first language that hamper clarity when they speak English. However, when it comes to teaching pronunciation the Indian teacher willy-nilly has to follow the Received Pronunciation or R.P., a model which is waning in influence even in its birth place, England. One reason for this, of course, is that this variety is described well in various textbooks and pronouncing dictionaries. This paper would delve into and examine this dichotomous situation of the 'model' to follow in the Indian context, and drawing on research on pronunciation and pronunciation teaching would try to show why Standard Indian English Pronunciation (SIEP) could be considered a more viable model than RP.

Keywords: Received Pronunciation (RP), Standard Indian English Pronunciation (SIEP), model, intelligibility, native speaker, non-native speaker

With the exponential spread and growth of English in the last several decades, leading to the development of Englishes in different sociolinguistic situations across the world, several hitherto-considered givens in teaching in English as Second Language (ESL)/ English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts have been questioned and debated upon. One such

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question pertains to the issue of the so-called 'native speaker' pronunciation norms in the ESL/EFL contexts. In the Indian context, there has been an insistence on the persistent use of Received Pronunciation (RP) as the norm despite there being numerous reasons for not remaining tied to it. This paper, prompted mainly by the reaction of a friend of mine, an English teacher in an Indian university, who not only turned his nose up at my suggestion that a pronunciation model based on the proficient Indian English user could be a possibility in the Indian classroom but also belligerently dismissed any attempts to dent the image of the hallowed RP, would essentially deal with the following two issues:

1.   The model of English pronunciation which could/should be presented to English language learners in the Indian context in general.

2.   The implications of the choice of the model mentioned above.

The paper will, of course, attempt to show an awareness that a discussion of the two issues entails bringing in a host of other concomitant issues like the ownership of English, the relevance of the 'native speaker', the issue of standard, the notion of intelligibility, and so on and so forth. It is also pertinent to mention here perhaps that the paper will not focus on the 'how' aspect of pronunciation but rather on the 'what' aspect. In other words, the paper does not intend to focus on the methodological aspects of pronunciation pedagogy nor does it intend to engage in the debate about whether pronunciation should be or could be taught or not. This paper, as has already been pointed out earlier, has been occasioned primarily by the views of a friend, an English teacher, who shares the strain of thought expressed by Mohan when the latter says that "in the midst of multitudinous languages coupled with dialectal variations, in India, it is difficult to arrive at a single acceptable model of pronunciation like RIP (Received Indian Pronunciation)" (174). Mohan (175-176) further goes on to list the features which he thinks "may affect 'intelligibility' of India English at an international

level", expressing his apprehension that "if there are too many differences, English will not be English but Tanglish or Hinglish or sometimes half-baked English", before pronouncing in no uncertain terms that "it is not feasible to replace RP in the Indian context here and now."

It is clear that however much we profess in the academia today that there is an urgent need to celebrate diversity and pluricentricity in English language pedagogy, there is a strong centripetal force in operation which apprehends a kind of linguistic anarchy in the wake of the growth of different World Englishes and, therefore, seeks some kind of stability by clinging on to any of the established standard varieties of the 'centre' nations like the UK or the USA. It is this centripetal force that seems to underlie the arguments of my friend and Mohan. In the process of discounting my friend's and Mohan's arguments, which at times unfortunately seem to be influenced too much by commonsense judgements rather than by the theoretical underpinnings and data of current research, it must be pointed out that many of their views are in the shape of sweeping generalizations like the following:

> Indians are so fond of /r/ that they tend to pronounce /r/ wherever and whenever they come across the sound. (Mohan 175)

A statement like the one above does not take into account at all the findings of a comprehensive current research carried out by Pingali, who has stressed the existence of a standard in English pronunciation that "cuts across the country and is usually free of regional features that mark the speech of most Indians" (18). Pingali goes on to point out that in this standard form, which she calls "Standard Indian English Pronunciation" (SIEP), non-rhoticity, i.e., the non-pronunciation of the /r/ sound in words like *card* and *park*, where it occurs before consonant sounds, is an important feature (19).

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One of the problems with Mohan's arguments is that he treats Indian English as a monolithic entity, failing to realise that "a cline of pronunciation exists that sets the standard variety at one end and the markedly regional varieties at the other end" (Pingali 18). Moreover, Mohan's pronouncement at the end of his article that it is not feasible to replace RP in India for now is reminiscent of the purist position of Quirk who stressed "the importance of maintaining the standard language" (143). Other purists, like Prator and Chevillet, have used an acerbic tone in dismissing the possibility of using any non-Anglo English variety for pedagogical purposes. Prator, for instance, has the following to say:

> …the heretical tenet I feel I must take exception to is the idea that it is best,
> in a country where English is not spoken natively but is widely used as the
> medium of instruction, to set up the local variety of English as the ultimate
> model to be imitated by those learning the language. (459)

Chevillet in a far more caustic manner dismisses the non-Anglo Englishes as inferior varieties which ought not to be standardized:

> Foreigners often wreak havoc on the stress pattern of English polysyllables,
> they stress personal pronouns which shouldn't be emphasised, and they use
> strong forms instead of weak forms, thereby jeopardising communication.
> Should such a thing be institutionalised or codified? (33)

For someone working within the world Englishes paradigm, it is difficult, if not impossible, to think of accepting any of these viewpoints. However, one could understand why Mohan is so ebullient in singing the paeans of praise for RP that he does since, as Scheuer (141) says, even in the context of the use of English across the world, "traditional reference accents like RP or General American still remain the only standards that can be

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applied in the L2 English classroom with a fair degree of confidence or consistency...." For one thing, there are numerous pronouncing dictionaries available in the market which come readily accompanied with CDs, making their use very convenient. However, the bizarre thing about this whole affair is that neither the teachers in the classroom in the second and foreign language contexts (unless the teacher is a 'native' speaker, of course) nor people in the community in general use the so-called 'native' variety. Moreover, since one's accent is inextricably linked to one's social and individual identity, and since there is always an ardent desire to safeguard the local identity, there obviously would be a desire to preclude RP or General American from being adopted as the norm (Rajadurai 4). Why then do we still hear voices expecting people to cling to the pronunciation norms of a group to which they do not and cannot belong? It is more pragmatic perhaps to focus on the endonormative standards developed by the proficient language users in specific sociolinguistic contexts in line with the argument put forward by Bhatia (318):

> ... it is necessary to recognise nativised norms for international functions within specific speech communities, and then to build a norm for international use on such models, rather than enforcing or creating a different norm in addition to that.

Traditionally, however, the use of English by second and foreign language users has always been judged by how it approximates native language use, with every deviation from the native speaker norm labelled as a mistake or an error, and frowned upon using the alibi of intelligibility. But the question that arises is why intelligibility should be thought of as a one-way traffic. As Kubota (50) argues, "in communication between inner circle mainstream English speakers and other WE speakers, the accommodation should be mutual with both parties exploring ways to establish communication." In the context of this, why should the so-called 'native speaker' of English not appreciate the phonological deviations in the other

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established varieties? It is pertinent to point here what Kachru (62) has to say about deviations:

> A deviation has the following characteristics: it is different from the norm in the sense that it is the result of the new 'un-English' linguistic and cultural setting in which the English language is used; it is the result of a productive process which marks the typical variety-specific features, and it is systematic within a variety, and not idiosyncratic.

Hence, deviations in pronunciation should not be stigmatised but celebrated as differences and innovations. Of course, there are several factors for deciding on the status of an innovation. Bamgbose (3) mentions the following five factors: demographic (i.e., the number of users), geographical (i.e., the spread of the innovation), authoritative (i.e., the actual use or approval of an innovation by writers, teachers, et al.), codification (i.e., putting the innovation into a written form in a pronunciation dictionary, etc.) and acceptability of the innovation. However, the concern about whether with all these innovations in non-Anglo Englishes people can communicate with one another with "perfect intelligibility" remains a pertinent one although Smith (75), pointing out that this issue is not a current one, says that "...for at least the last two hundred years there have been English-speaking people in some parts of the world who have not been intelligible to other English-speaking people in other parts of the world." Making a reasoned exploration on the issue, Smith and Nelson (429) argue very convincingly that "those who have traditionally been called 'native speakers' are not the sole judges of what is intelligible, nor are they always more intelligible than 'non-native' speakers." The crux of the matter is that "intelligibility" which, in the broad sense, means "understanding", but which Smith and Nelson (429) divide into three categories of "intelligibility" (word/utterance recognition), "comprehensibility" (word/utterance meaning)

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and "interpretability" (meaning behind word/utterance), should not be thought of as solely speaker- or listener-centred but should be considered as an interactional phenomenon between speaker and listener. The onus of understanding a word, therefore, does not lie solely on the so-called "non-native" speaker. Whether a speaker is 'native' or 'non-native', a familiarity with different varieties will enable him or her to negotiate meaning in an international interactional setting.

Another issue which is of importance is to appreciate the fact that the users of English in India use English more for intra-national communication than for inter-national communication. In this regard, shouldn't we worry more about intra-variety intelligibility? In the context of intra-variety intelligibility, Smith and Nelson (429) give empirical evidence from a situation where Indian speakers of English have been found to converse quite freely amongst themselves without being bothered about whether people belonging to other countries like, say the Philippines, would be able to understand them or not. However, as Deterding (365) says, "international communication is becoming increasingly important in the modern world." But does it mean that using established 'native speaker' accents like RP or GA (General American) will ensure international intelligibility? In an early empirical study on the issue, Smith and Rafiqzad found, quite contrary to their expectations, General American to be less mutually intelligible internationally than the educated varieties spoken by users of English of countries like India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Japan. In fact, the educated Indian variety topped the list as far as the parameter of "understanding" was concerned, prompting Smith and Rafiqzad (380) to come to a conclusion that since "native speaker phonology doesn't appear to be more intelligible than non-native phonology, there seems to be no reason to insist that the performance target in the English classroom be a native speaker." In another study, Smith and Bisazza (269) come to the following conclusion:

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... one's English is more comprehensibile to those people who have had active exposure to it. Nowadays, with English being used frequently by non-native speakers to communicate with other non-native speakers, this study gives evidence of a need for students of English to have greater exposure to non-native varieties of English.

There are several other issues upon which we need to ponder before we can proclaim like Mohan (174) does when he says that "replacing RP with any other single indigenous English model at this point is a risky proposition." First, we must understand that the number of RP speakers even in its originating home, the United Kingdom, is dwindling by the day. An estimate puts the current number of speakers of RP in Britain to be around "3% of the population and declining" (Kelly 14). Moreover, RP, like any other accent, has also been ever-changing, although many of its die-hard admirers across the world who advocate its use in the English classroom might not be aware of this fact. In this context, Deterding (367) points out how in RP in Britain the triphthongs /aɪə/ and /aʊə/ in words like *fire* and *hour* are undergoing "a process of smoothing in which the middle element is omitted so both of these vowels may be [aə]", resulting in the two words becoming homophones. Then there is the diphthong /ʊə/, the use of which is becoming increasingly rare in RP, with people substituting it by the vowel /ɔ:/. The question that arises then is this: should we in the Indian context, because of our unflinching love for RP, continue to ignore a variety like SIEP which maintains these contrasts and, therefore, might be more intelligible than varieties like RP which don't? Also, wouldn't SIEP appear to be more achievable to our learners since we have proficient SIEP speakers amongst us? Both current thinking and research on pronunciation teaching tend to make us believe that the answer to the first question is a loud 'no' and the one to the second question is a loud 'yes'.

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In the final analysis, then, it is more pragmatic perhaps to take a pluricentric view of English and give the developing national varieties, primarily the acrolectal forms of these varieties, like SIEP, for instance, some legitimate space in the pedagogical domain rather than bullishly cling on to the established varieties of the 'centre' countries like the UK or the US.

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