

## What is Modern RP?

I use the term ‘modern RP’ as a term distinct from the by-now well known Estuary English, because I regard RP as a speech variety which is central to the linguistic praxis of several socially-defined groups who can be said to be generational successors to the speakers described by earlier authors of works on RP (Daniel Jones, A.C. Gimson). In the variable praxis which is evident when observing its speakers, RP displays both generational continuity and generational change. If we start using a completely new label, we lose the link with past forms of the variety. My opinion is that there is still enough generational continuity to warrant the same name, but, just as scholars debate whether ‘Cockney’ still exists, we have to be constantly on the lookout for RP’s ‘point of no return’; that is, the point past which it no longer makes sense to distinguish it by that label. Some linguists think we have reached that point, but I am not yet convinced. Part of the reason lies in the continuing social divisions in England (whether we use the label ‘social class’ or not), which as far as I can see bring about a difference in linguistic practice which also continues to the present day. To take one accessible example, just observe the speech of the child actors in the recent movie *Narnia*.

I should say at the outset that rather than just seeing RP as an abstract phonetic/ phonological construct, or, as some people tend to do, as an ideal model which perhaps doesn’t really exist, I regard it as part of the sociolinguistic landscape of the UK, and in constant interaction with other variable socially or regionally delimited forms of linguistic praxis. That is, RP has a group of native speakers, and for them it is their vernacular. My aim then is ultimately to document the synchronic variation and diachronic change in that vernacular through time.

Aside from that, there is a linguistic ideology around RP and around the notion of standard language, but this is really a separate thing from the linguistic praxis of those who grow up speaking RP as their first dialect, or who acquire it at some point during their education. In past publications and in talks at conferences I have separated the two into **native RP (the praxis)** and **construct RP (the ideology)**, and maintained that the two notions must be kept firmly distinct, or we start to run into confusion. For example, change happens to both native RP (sociolinguistic change familiar from other settings) and construct RP (such as in notions of what is ‘correct’: for example, not all speakers agree any longer that the distinction between *which* and *witch* matters). I am interested in the social and psychological processes that are involved in standardisation practice, and I am also interested in exploring how language ideology and praxis is being influenced by postmodern processes (but this remains a project for the future...).

I also want to stress that I do **NOT** see RP in a prescriptive light as the “one true” form of English, and I would in NO way advocate that position. I study RP from a sociolinguistic descriptive point of view, and I am interested in examining its variational and attitudinal ebbs and flows in the English/British sociolinguistic landscape. My aim is to chart variation and sociolinguistic ‘status’/ ‘stigma’ in various ways, both micro-linguistically (by looking at fine-grained phonetic variation) and macro-linguistically (through language attitudes expressed in the wider society, such as through the media).